

## EMPOWERMENT: FROM NOISE TO VOICE

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Simply stated, the term empowerment refers to gaining or recovering one's own power or to giving power to someone else. Empowerment has its roots in anarchism, Marxism and Jeffersonian democracy; it speaks to "people as active subjects of their own history" (Friedman, 1992: vi). It was the objective of political struggles such as the civil rights movement in the US, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and feminist struggles and student protest movements in more recent history. Today, empowerment refers both to mobilized opposition that contests the system from the outside as well as to groups, associations and movements that are inventing and constructing participatory alternatives from the inside, often in partnership or by forming alliances with various social actors, including the state.

There is a revival of interest in civil society, associations and "community" across the political spectrum, from the right in its call for renewed civic commitment to replace public sector welfare provision, to more progressive action by groups that are in many ways reinventing the welfare state to correspond with new realities in which the community, associations or civil society play an integral part. Others remind us that community matters but that its efforts are often compromised within a dominant paradigm that relegates community to the margins: "...community development has been just about the only strategy of empowerment attempted, however half-heartedly and sometimes (sic) with a view to disempowerment rather than empowerment in the whole repertoire of anti-exclusion policy" (Byrne, 1999: 19). Empowerment in any sense that really matters must result in a substantive transfer of resources; the presence of new actors on the scene contributing to a cacophony of voices generating noise, while important as a sociological phenomenon, is not in and of itself empowering.

Collective action has resulted in reclaiming economic resources in many parts of the world, contributing to a new paradigm that challenges prevailing views on the allocation and distribution of resources. This is occurring in new public spaces, in which the democratic re-appropriation of resources by groups, associations and movements, in collaboration with other social actors, is a *social activity*, as citizens negotiate new and hybrid economic arrangements to correspond to the needs and desires of their environments, radically contesting the nature and determinants of wealth creation through practice, and through lived experiences (Laville, 2005).

The construction of public spaces, of many publics, represents the institutionalization of new practices of political action, of empowered associational activity, that are transforming collective action into political action, as newly empowered actors influence the allocation of resources through negotiated strategies of socio-economic

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development. For these to influence public policy, multiple “publics” must be coordinated into structured and hybrid meso and macro institutional settings.

Any significant meaning ascribed to empowerment that goes beyond the increasing numbers of citizen-based movements present on the political scene and the important noise they generate, must result in the construction of democratic economic alternatives. The many places where this is occurring is the result of collective action, of solidarity-based initiatives that have been undertaken by groups, associations and movements abandoned by a hegemonic discourse and practice that considered their hard luck as primarily an information and coordination problem to be resolved by market forces. With time, notwithstanding an intransigent commitment to this discourse, policy makers are recognizing the capacity of civil society to contest this paradigm through practice, as innovative community-based socio-economic strategies multiply and produce visible results. While some progressive critics remain disturbed by the need for negotiated strategies involving all local actors - the business community and all levels of government - others recognize that for these democratically based initiatives to work, they must have broad support and penetrate the so-called mainstream (Friedman, 1992). Building civic organizations is itself an empowering social process, but the reality of civil society is to recognize its diversity. The political challenge has been to negotiate strategies that speak to this diversity, while at the same time remaining committed to an alternative and democratic development strategy. For this to succeed, the support of the middle class is crucial (ivi, 161-152). “To create a modern sense of community we need to open up public spaces where people with diverse interests, skills and resources can meet, debate, listen and cooperate to find common purpose and develop shared values” (Leadbeater, 1997: 12).

On a larger scale and more conceptually, these place-based alternative strategies are contributing to a theoretical reflection on the economy that has yet to take place in any coherent manner. There is certainly a legacy of writings to draw upon that spans the utopians, Austro-marxists, guild socialists, the socialist pricing debates in the 1920’s, the economic planning debates of the 1930’s that challenged both market liberalism and central planning, to name but a few (Mendell, 1990). Not surprisingly, many writers refer to the work of Karl Polanyi (1944; 1977) as an important reference and inspiration. Contemporary economist Pat Devine (1988) demonstrates that democracy and planning are not incompatible in his proposed model of negotiated planning, drawing on some of this legacy to construct a new paradigm for a democratic economy. The concept of a negotiated economy captures the practices we are describing. In his most recent book, Jean Louis Laville (2005) writes that this process of democratizing the economy is under-researched. It is a process of empowerment. Community-based initiatives are often interpreted as responding to market failure, a means to resolve externalities, to generate employment and enterprise development. While these objectives are foremost and critical for socio-economic revitalization, the development of solidarity through economic activity is rarely addressed.

Collective action has given rise to a plethora of innovative transformative strategies in the North and in the South, especially in the last 30 years. But the solidarity (often fragile as it may involve competing groups) underlying these initiatives has generated broader mobilization that, as we noted, is indispensable to the consolidation of these initiatives. The script for re-embedding the economy is being written by citizens with intimate knowledge of their own communities. In so doing, they are contributing to a

broad process of social learning, a radical cognitive process that moves from individual spatial settings to new political spaces that institutionalize these processes. How this occurs is not yet well understood. The work of researchers empirically documenting these experiences is a critical first step. Emergent practices are only evaluated on the basis of results and not on process. They remain under analyzed and under theorized.

How are public spaces constructed? Why? Do actors come together only to resolve crises? Do they come together to collaborate in developing alternative socio-economic development strategies in which the stakes are much broader, requiring a commitment of a different nature? Does empowerment occur only when there is also a transfer of resources to communities, to associations, to numerous “publics” associated with civil society initiatives? (Friedman, 1992 Laville, 2005) What are the links between the political and economic dimensions of collective action, of “empowered participation”, in a larger sense? This needs to be explored sociologically to identify the many emergent publics and those structured public spaces where debate takes place (Laville, 2005: 12). To address the question of empowerment, these larger issues need to be raised so as to move forward from telling important stories to evaluating their larger impact on societal transformation, however slow and incremental this may be.

In their book, *Civic Innovation in America*, Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland (2001: 261) conclude as follows: “The choice to build a nonpartisan movement committed to learning openly and self-critically from a pluralistic array of civic practices and models is, in our opinion, strategically wise and politically principled”. Sirianni and Friedland do not minimize the complexity of designing new organizational and institutional capacities for collaborative problem solving and democratic learning.

Does the institutionalization of movements, associations, groups, diminish their capacity for innovation in policy design? We must ask how realistic it is to assume (hope) that they can have an impact on institutional transformation, and that what we are observing is not merely contingent. What processes and mechanisms can civil society organizations influence? They may in fact initiate both incorporation (institutionalization) and transformation (some aspects of existing social and political system). While I believe these processes are actually occurring in some parts of the world such as Quebec and Canada, I recognize their fragility; hence the urgency for this research that is ultimately political (Giugni, McAdam and Tilly, 1998: 15).

In this reflection on empowerment, I am inspired by a number of authors who address empowerment implicitly or explicitly in their analysis of the transformative role of civil society organizations today, in particular, by the work of Erik Olin Wright and Archon Fung, in which they explore new and hybrid institutional spaces of governance designed by citizens in collaboration with the state, in both the North and in the South (Fung and Wright, 2003; Fung, 2004). More than a wider representation on existing local bodies of governance, citizens are successfully designing institutional intermediaries of co-regulation. Wright and Fung’s analysis is extremely useful in capturing the growing number of emergent intermediary spaces in which citizens are not only represented but are spearheading strategic plans on issues of general interest, be it public safety, protecting endangered species, schooling or municipal budgets. One could expand the case studies presented by Fung and Wright to include many additional examples of innovative initiatives that are not necessarily designed to solve immediate problems but rather to build capacity within communities to better engage with policy on a broader

front. The resultant ecologies of local organizations would consist of an array of citizen movements engaged in activities ranging from advocacy to comprehensive community development strategies. The question raised increasingly by researchers in different countries is how to leverage social activism. “Community building alone will not revitalize distressed communities [for example], but no initiative will succeed without it” (Sirianni, Friedland 2001: 84). Moreover, the state needs new sources of legitimation; the consequences of state action are harder to predict. Such a framework of co-regulation is in the interest of the state that can more easily acquire information and knowledge needed for policy formulation by collaborating with actors. The resulting “conflictual collaboration” that most frequently characterizes these relations appears to some as a “seat of the pants” or crisis management strategy that has no inherent logic or basis in public administration or civic action. But this is a limited reading of a complex and evolving process of governance. To better understand these situated experiences, a “sustained public conversation” and a common language across networks and policy arenas are needed. For citizen groups, it involves “reconstructing identities and reframing scope and meaning of civic action” (ivi: 234). For an analytical framework that captures this process, one must move out of a localized spatialized and sometimes sectoral focus, towards a political economy of citizenship that addresses the productive roles of democratic citizens in creating private and public wealth (ivi: 236).

This provides the link to the useful framework of empowered deliberative democracy or empowered participatory governance provided by Fung and Wright in addressing the issue of empowerment in its specificity as linked to particular struggles and locations, and in its universality as it also questions how civic organizations, social movements, associations, groups can coalesce around larger issues of political economy and claim access to socio-economic resources, not by lobbying for additional programs and funding (though this must never stop) but by leveraging the capacity of citizens to construct collaborative alternative development strategies with private and public sector actors. This process of reframing incorporates innovations in community-based social service provision, job creation, the development of new sectors of activity, generic tools of development such as finance, training, research, an information commons, and so on.

### **Empowered participatory governance**

The framework presented by Fung and Wright is based on extensive empirical research. The case studies are highly descriptive, documenting the processes underlying institutional design in each case. In their theoretical essay, Fung and Wright address the feasibility of the normative principles underlying their model, not the least of which are the usual principal-agency dilemmas. But most important in this regard is their insistence on the continued presence of countervailing power in these new institutional settings, that is, an adversarial organization and culture that identify the initial struggles. Countervailing power is critical to maintain the robust democracy that underlies collaborative governance, empowering those involved to resist deregulation, state shrinking and cooptation of oppositional forces that become neutralized in what can become top-down collaborative governance (Fung and Wright 2003:264). These are challenges that such political and institutional innovations face in an environment that favors decentralization and localism for entirely different reasons but that said, it is also true that “empowered participatory governance” as envisioned by Fung and Wright, is increasingly recognized by governments as a means to address a large number of issues

in different institutional contexts. As such, this instrumentalization of democratic practices can also be the source for a rupture with existing state practices.

Empowered participation means results; challenging the dominant paradigm through practice is the result of negotiation and patience. Activists are playing a double role of interlocutors of governments to initiate change, first and foremost in perceptions and then in laws and practices that incorporate a new vocabulary and policy discourse familiar to activists. It requires moving off the streets and into offices and corridors where negotiations take place and power is brokered (Sen, 2004:15-16).

Fung and Wright provide a blueprint for institutional transformation in which citizens participate in designing public policy in the public interest and actively shape “transformative democratic strategies” through collective action and deliberation (Fung and Wright, 2003: 5). I find their focus on empowered participation extremely useful as it evaluates the impact of participation on institutional reform, hence on deepening or democratizing democracy. This calls for extensive empirical research in different settings to document a growing number of comprehensive strategies that are based in civil society.

Common to the experiences they describe is a concern with a concrete public issue that is resolved through a process of “reasoned deliberation” between empowered ordinary citizens and concerned officials, generally at the local level (ivi: 22). It is in this sense that empowerment is meaningful. More than an oppositional voice, citizens initiate a process of transformation in which they play a vital role. Their intimate knowledge of the issue is recognized by authorities as invaluable to the process. But this is not enough. Citizens are not empowered if they are simply consulted, however important this may be. These are one-off invitations to participate in public debate that leave citizens on the outside and powerless to participate directly in the political process. A form of elite accommodation to democracy is not empowering. The importance of the experiences described in the book by Fung and Wright and the conceptual framework that the authors construct, take us beyond buzzwords such as empowerment or many other synonyms (such as capacity building, community action, community innovation, to name but a few). Rather, the ultimate goal must be institutional reform that creates new political spaces occupied by citizens with genuine decision-making capacity.

The question we are left with is how to convert social or collective action into political action. What are the preconditions for empowerment? Fung and Wright recognize the need for recombinant linkages between local institutional innovation and state institutions. While this may be seen as less radical than seizing power, actions taken by citizens can colonize state power and transform formal governance institutions, thereby institutionalizing the participation of citizens to advance public interest more effectively through alternative institutional arrangements. If these experiments in democratic renewal succeed, empowerment takes on a wider meaning as it challenges prevailing regimes of governance. Situated experiences become the basis for wider experimentation and learning by citizens groups and state authorities that recognize the value of combining decentralized “empowered deliberation” with centralized coordination and feedback. As such, citizens engaged in empowered participatory initiatives are, in fact, democratizing democracy or designing a model of radical democracy (ivi: 29).



## Citizen Engagement

Citizens are increasingly solicited to express their views on policy issues in a variety of ways that include polling, forums, consultations and in a growing number of so-called policy dialogues or through citizen engagement. In different settings, citizens are confirming the need for democratic renewal, for public institutions to undergo a self-reflexive process so as to resituate the role of government in a changing socio-economic environment and to explore new and expanded models of deliberative governance with broad citizen participation. “Citizens have a democratic right to be engaged in policy”; there is growing pressure for the public policy process to be stakeholder driven. (MacKinnon, 2004: 2)

What is meant by citizen engagement? What is its relationship to empowerment, to empowered participation and ultimately to empowered participatory governance? For example, citizen engagement processes in Canada correspond with an adapted deliberative dialogue methodology that emphasizes social learning, as citizens are convened to explore issues on which they do not necessarily hold firm opinions. The purpose is to move beyond cataloguing public opinion on policy, towards a collective and interactive learning process in which issues are examined and discussed in great detail to better inform citizens on policy orientation (ivi: 3). The purpose of social learning and dialogue is to develop a more educated and empowered citizenry enabled by this process to collectively influence the policy agenda. In some instances, citizens are convened to participate directly in policy development as in the case of community-based poverty reduction strategies, a framework that combines public policy and community-based approaches (Torjman, 1998: 1). In others, they are asked to deliberate on issues from the outside, so to speak, to come up with policy recommendations that reflect extensive analysis, debate and dialogue. These can be at the invitation of government or the initiative of civil society. In all cases, the object of these social dialogues and active learning strategies (Torjman, 2003) is to engage citizens in policy design.

A cynical reading would dismiss this process as a theatre for democracy or window dressing, with little if any impact on *realpolitik*. This is too easy, as it denies the importance of process. But there is the reality of dialogue fatigue. Must people participate in endless forums before they have any role in policy making? Will people remain available and committed to this process if change comes too slowly or worse still, not at all? Why would they? In Canada, the evaluation of citizen dialogues across the country concluded that while participants do appreciate their involvement, there is a need to institutionalize these processes, to create a space for citizens to have voice in policy design, thereby reinforcing our view that empowered participation requires institutionalization. Engaging citizens in a “deliberative process that defines the policy parameters acceptable in society”, therefore, requires an institutional context to legitimize this process. It requires a public space in which citizens are present and participate in policy dialogues where this matters, not only on the outside generating noise.

### **From Civic to Economic Empowerment: From Noise to Voice**

Individuals are agents of social change; they are not passive actors constrained by their institutional settings. Today's reality increasingly confirms this as new institutional arrangements emerge and become part of a complex and interwoven institutional order. It features a great deal of experimentation "with old and new forms of politico-economic rearrangement" that cannot easily be reduced to any simple notion of transition (Amin, Palan, 2001: 570). This is true whether we consider institutional change at local, national or international levels (Mendell, 2005: 2).

There are numerous examples of institutional experimentation that are replacing hierarchical forms of governance with deliberative processes, in which representatives from the private, public and popular or community-based sector participate in negotiating socio-economic strategies, especially in regions of economic decline. In Canada and most notably in the province of Quebec, these institutional arrangements have multiplied over the last twenty years and have had an impact on public policy at both the provincial and federal levels of government. As emergent sub-systems of regulation or sub-altern publics (Amin, Palan, 2001), these institutional arrangements are disturbing established patterns of governance as they are transmitted horizontally across sub-systems and vertically to macro or governing institutions. Given their diversity, the picture they paint appears incoherent, a patchwork of place-based strategies on the margins of prevailing patterns of societal governance, with little if any links between them, with little if any impact on prevailing institutions. However, documenting these processes and the institutional rearrangements they inspire, fits "patterned forms of disorder" (Hollingsworth, 2000: 613) or "disorder within order" (Amin, Palan, 2001: 567) that more accurately describes the institutional complexity of contemporary society. It is the processes underlying these institutional designs that we wish to address, as the resulting new institutional sub-systems displace existing structures and modes of governance. These processes confirm, in the words of Karl Polanyi, "the role of deliberate change in human institutions" of the "freedom to change institutions", of voice in policy design. They are forms of resistance that move beyond claims for resources and political space, beyond a politics of contestation to negotiate new social arrangements within a plurality of institutions that intersect and overlap and in so doing, increasingly blur the boundaries between civil society and governing institutions.

These institutional settings are the result of a process of co-evolution, a combination of learning, resilience and cultural adaptation as those more accustomed to confrontational or adversarial relationships establish collaborative partnerships to reach shared objectives. Experiences have shown that incorporation of groups, movements, associations into institutional spaces in which they co-habit and work in partnership, facilitates the transformation towards more democratic forms of governance. Institutionalization of these practices and processes further facilitates their integration into the public agenda. Conscious of its limits, the state turns to non-institutional actors and participates in institutional innovation by initiating processes of co-regulation, especially when citizen-based socio-economic initiatives succeed where strategies adopted by government have failed.

Local actors are transforming their communities by reclaiming knowledge, by denying the narratives of inevitability through practice in an institutional context in which

dialogue and negotiation are transforming regimes of governance, shaking the unchallenged authority of the state. Citizens' organizations, movements, associations, are the architects of new sub-systems of participatory governance. They are instituting processes of economic democratization, re-embedding the economy in social contexts, designing sustainable approaches to development that correspond with the needs and desires of communities and developing the appropriate tools to achieve this. Processes of economic democratization are under way that are re-embedding the economy in social contexts include community and local economic development, the social economy, new instruments of capital accumulation and norms of social accounting and legislative reform. Collective ownership, social entrepreneurship and social investment compete effectively with private ownership and individual profit.

### **Comprehensive Community Initiatives: some examples from Quebec**

Comprehensive Community Initiatives are community-based approaches to social, economic and environmental problems. They are multi-stakeholder processes of participatory governance, involving organizations, sectors of activity, citizens and government, drawing on local experience, expertise and knowledge and bringing new resources to strategic decision making at the local level (Torjman, Levitan-Reid and Cabaj, 2004). Unlike citizen engagement, these are not broad-based consultations; comprehensive community initiatives require institutional settings to negotiate, debate and draft socio-economic development strategies reflecting the needs of local communities. They require institutional innovation. This approach challenges prevailing theories of wealth creation that consider resource allocation as the job of the market and social provision as the obligation of a thin state. It demonstrates the transformative capacity of collaboration and partnership among citizens.

Many of the comprehensive community initiatives across Canada have been inspired by experiences in Quebec. An example is community economic development that was first introduced in Quebec in the wake of the economic crisis in the early 1980's. Social activists pioneered citizen-based socio-economic development strategies in low income neighborhoods hard hit by widespread unemployment and poverty in the same way as they had pioneered social initiatives in the 1960's, that have shaped health and social service delivery in Quebec since. Economic intervention was new for those who led the movement; yet transforming an adversarial relationship with business and government to one of collaboration was possible because militants took the lead. It was in the collective interest to work together to devise a strategy for the community, and they were the architects. This was also possible in a political climate that invited collaboration on a larger scale between major players in Quebec society - business, labour and government- in the so-called Quebec model of "concertation".

The direct involvement of community actors in economic revitalization of low-income neighborhoods and regions in the 1980's marks the beginning of a process of institutional innovation, of the construction of political spaces for social and economic change. Comprehensive community initiatives that were developed as urgent and pragmatic responses to crisis became embedded institutional sub-systems of empowered participatory governance in Quebec society.

Inspired by the Community Development Corporations established in the U.S. 1960's, citizens established the first community economic development corporation (CDEC) in



1984 in Pointe Ste. Charles in the southwest district of Montreal, the cradle of industrialization in Canada, that now shared the fate of similar urban neighborhoods across North America devastated by economic restructuring and the crisis of the 1980's, and a model of state intervention that no longer corresponded with social and economic reality. These neighborhoods were transformed into images of corrosion and decay as one after the other, plants were closed and massive industrial sites were abandoned and left to rot. For those living in these communities and for the businesses that remained, working together with activists and the labour movement (most of the industries were unionized) was the only option. All three levels of government participated in establishing this first CDEC. Two more were created in the following two years.

Today, there are 15 CDECs within Quebec that are coordinated by two networks that effectively lobby to promote community economic development, Inter-CDEC for the Montreal region and the Regroupement des CDEC du Québec for the province. CDECs in Quebec established linkages with municipal, provincial and federal levels of government from the outset, distinguishing this experience from most other community economic development initiatives in Canada that, more often than not, have been subject to contingent participation of government. While community initiatives always struggle to maintain government programs and funding and lobby for additional support in Quebec as well, all three levels of government were involved as architects of the CDEC model, a hybrid and participatory institutional intermediary between the state and civil society, but in which both were present from the start, along with labour and business. The institutionalization of this relationship for more than two decades makes it difficult to dismantle these structures to conform with changing political tides, not to mention that their achievements also make it harder to justify such action, whatever the underlying rationale. Establishing recombinant linkages from the beginning was critical to consolidate what might otherwise have been fragile initiatives that risked marginalization.

As an organizational model of participatory governance and as an institutional model that invites wide public engagement, the CDECs throughout Quebec are powerful examples of deliberative and participatory democracy. They are institutional sub-systems of empowered participatory governance that make political claims on economic resources. The development of the neighborhoods in which CDECs are located is debated and negotiated in the same manner today as it was in the 1980's and 1990's under very different conditions. And the many social services to assist the poor as well as the innovative economic tools and instruments to develop alternative strategies developed early on by the CDECs, such as community-based finance, training businesses, promoting community business and the social economy, mentoring, to name a few, remain the bedrock of these community economic development corporations. The local community is now experiencing the second transformation of southwest Montreal as empowered citizens participating in negotiating this process, and not as victims of gentrification and exclusion. This would not be possible without its legacy of countervail. The CDEC in Pointe Ste. Charles (now "RESO") remains an important story to follow closely as CED initiatives in urban settings multiply across the country.

Comprehensive community initiatives are mobilizing "the imaginations of people so that they believe that change is possible". This is sufficient reason to believe that these experiences are not ephemeral either because government or funders or both will back off, or because the larger policy agenda that privileges market driven objectives will

transform them, stripping them of their intrinsic value as socio-economic strategies. Staying the course and developing policy capacity is critical at this time. The lessons from the numerous comprehensive community initiatives across the country have identified what is missing to move these experiences forward as viable strategies of alternative democratic development. Policy integration is on the political horizon for the first time in a coherent manner. This, too, is a collaborative process in which leaders from the Quebec community movement are playing a central role.

### **Chantier de l'économie sociale**

In 1996, the Government of Quebec invited the participation of representatives of community and social movements to strategic planning meetings on economic development and job creation in Quebec, along with leaders from the business community and the labour movement. This resulted in the creation of the [Chantier de l'économie sociale](#) which became an independent non-profit organization in 1999. A network of networks, it represents social movements, community organizations, the cooperative sector, local and regional development organizations and social enterprises that integrate social and economic objectives. The Chantier has also created labour market and financial tools designed to serve and promote the development of the social economy.

Collective enterprise as defined by the Chantier is not only about ownership. The laws governing cooperatives apply to social economy enterprises with the addition of a commitment to participatory and democratic governance. The experience of the CDECs, the intelligent negotiating capacity of the actors involved, the commitment to democratizing the economy, to creating collective environments to produce goods and services, to innovate, to educate and to empower the community are articulated in this new and innovative network. But unlike the CDECs, the Chantier is an independent organization, a *public space* that negotiates *political place* as it lobbies government on behalf of its members. The Chantier plays an increasingly important mentoring and political role across Canada and internationally, sharing its expertise in the development of social economy initiatives and influencing policy at home and abroad.

As an institutional innovation, the Chantier has developed a deliberative and participatory structure of horizontal governance across sectors and activities and, most recently, a vertical structure of regional nodes to reinforce the democratic and participatory governance to which it is committed. As a provincial organization, it represents actors throughout the province, but it is the regions that together debate priorities that become the basis for coordinated policy development that reflects the regional diversity of Quebec. This presents a complex inter-sectoral and inter-territorial structure committed to participatory governance.

A significant turning point was the commitment made by the Prime Minister of Canada to the social economy in his Throne Speech in 2003 and the appointment of a Secretary to the Minister of Social Development with special emphasis on the social economy and targeted funding in the 2004 federal Budget. This followed extensive dialogue between the Prime Minister's office and social economy actors to develop an enabling policy agenda. It also followed several years of participatory action research in which practitioners and researchers collaborated in building a research agenda that would serve the needs of social economy actors and provide a strong analytical and conceptual

basis for their work. It also followed a difficult transition to a new government in Quebec not interested in the social economy but unable to ignore it because of its visibility and legitimacy in Quebec society. The federal initiative came at a crucial time forcing the government of Quebec to join the chorus and for the first time since its election, confirm its commitment as well. While the federal initiative was abandoned by the Conservative government elected in 2006 and currently in power, the commitment of the government of Quebec is firm even if there are challenges for more extensive policy innovation and implementation.

The social economy has moved beyond situated initiatives to design an integrated multi-sectoral and inter-spatial network of networks of civil society actors empowered to influence policy at provincial and federal levels of government. It is not just economic activity with social objectives. For this to be effective, institutional spaces were required. The social economy is a laboratory of social innovation that horizontally links networks and makes the vertical links with different levels of government, piercing through existing institutions to create new and hybrid public places of horizontal and distributed governance within state institutions. Actors are participating in designing a policy framework, in the co-production of public policy.

## Conclusion

A thorough reflection on empowerment should carefully distinguish citizen engagement from comprehensive community initiatives as sources of empowerment, as we have defined this term. Both are important expressions of democracy; however, the former is not transformative, and is not empowering. What we also discover in this exploration is the critical need for networking, for creating learning environments, for participatory action research, for policy innovation and institutional change. Institutional change comes slowly; it is resisted, not always because of opposition, but because of institutional isomorphism that blocks change. And so a breakthrough in institutional innovation poses theoretical questions on how institutions change. Even if this is an incremental process, these innovations are spearheading institutional reconfiguration. For this to occur, the innovations must themselves be engaged in a political project to develop the transformative capacity of what are otherwise pragmatic responses to social change. Many pragmatic approaches have begun to translate experience into laws, theory and concepts for negotiation. They have introduced new clear and unambiguous vocabulary into policy circles to replace the often ambivalent meanings associated with “community-based or civil society initiatives”, showing that these pragmatic approaches are constructing an alternative paradigm.

Alternative development is a process of social and political empowerment as those involved move from struggles to meet basic needs to political claims. (Friedman, 1992: 31) What simply appear as pragmatic approaches begin to contest prevailing doctrine. “Although mainstream as a doctrine continues to prevail, it is being challenged. In truly dialectical fashion, the counter-hegemonic model must work its way into the mainstream and then begin the long process of transforming both the mainstream and itself” (ivi:165-6). This is a long and incremental process, but one that is difficult to reverse once it is under way. On a practical level, governments are learning from these experiences about the capacity of citizens to create productive spaces of employment and economic vitality embedded in innovative institutional settings that blur the

boundaries between civil society and governing institutions and that they must be partners in this evolving institutional transformation.

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