

Saskatchewan's Advantage: Co-operation ... Now More than Ever!

Brett Fairbairn, Saskatoon *Free Press*, 12 October 1997

Around the world, economies are in transition.

Markets and institutions are changing, and people's lives are changing along with them. In the midst of all this change, Saskatchewan is one of the places people come from around the world to find solutions.

In the last few months, delegations from Sweden, Ukraine, and China have come to Saskatoon to study how people here are coping with economic and social change.

They came from half-way around the world to study our co-operatives, particularly those in agriculture, retailing, credit, and health care — because co-operatives are a tool Saskatchewan people have used, and used well, to convert challenges into advantages.

Here in Saskatchewan, we're often used to thinking about the problems and the challenges we face: climate, distance from markets, loss of young people. But Saskatchewan people are good at responding to challenges. When other people come to learn from us, it's a reminder of how much we've accomplished here, and it's a reminder that — no matter how great the problems we still face — we know something about how to find solutions.

Rural co-operatives were created in Saskatchewan to help people cope with unpredictable international markets and poor rural services. By dealing with these problems through co-operatives, Saskatchewan people created modern, efficient institutions that have remained permanently based in Saskatchewan.

Co-operatives have kept savings and control in the hands of local people in Saskatchewan communities. They have strengthened and helped preserve communities, even while assisting producers and consumers to adapt to change.

This rural co-operative tradition has given Saskatchewan people expertise in co-operatives: a resource of "social capital" that consists of knowing how to work together, how to build organizations, how to get things done. When a community project needs doing, people who have gained experience and learned to work together in co-ops are often there to do it.

Today, urban co-operatives are building this heritage to address today's challenges — and to create tomorrow's advantages. Inner-city co-operative projects like those of Quint Development Corporation on the west side of Saskatoon are assisted by community credit unions and co-operatives. Credit unions are also investigating new possibilities for social investment and for showing leadership in financing social and economic improvement.

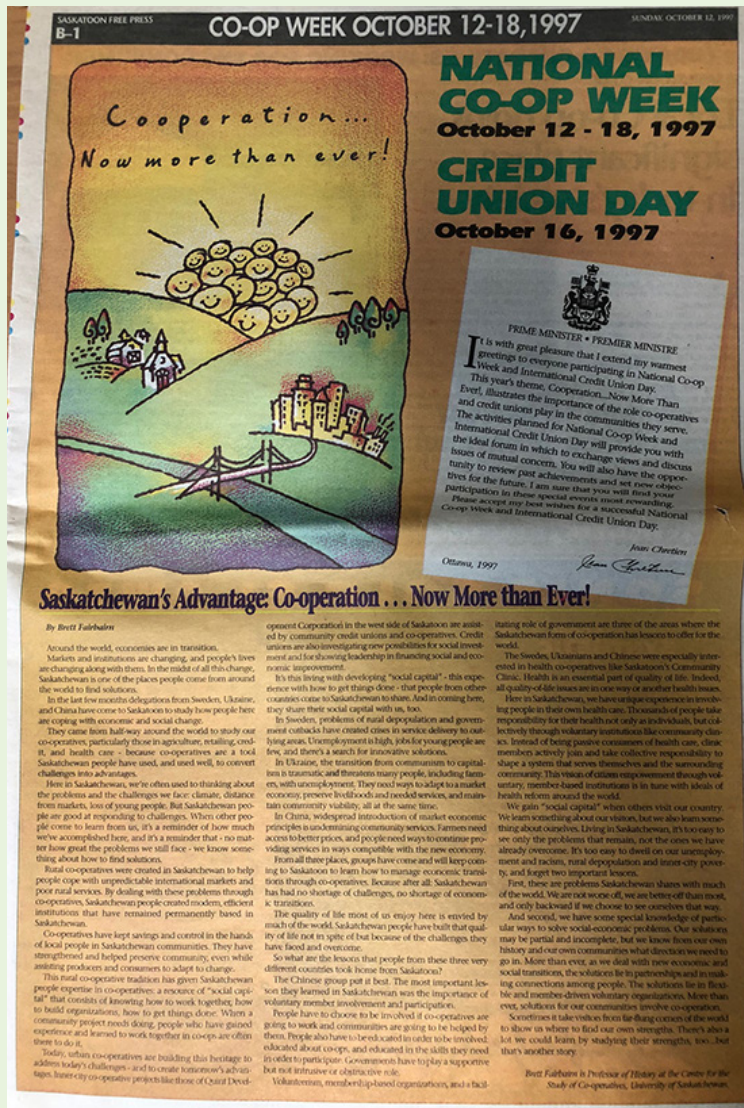
It's this living with developing "social capital" — this experience with how to get things done — that people from other countries come to Saskatchewan to share. And in coming here, they share their social capital with us, too.

In Sweden, problems of rural depopulation and government cutbacks have created crises in service delivery to outlying areas. Unemployment is high, jobs for young people are few, and there's a search for innovative solutions.

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They need ways to adapt to a market economy, preserve livelihoods and needed services, and maintain community viability, all at the same time.

In China, the widespread introduction of market economic principles is undermining community services. Farmers need access to better prices, and people need ways to continue providing services in ways compatible with the new economy.

From all three places, groups have come and will keep coming to Saskatoon to learn how to manage economic transitions through co-operatives. Because after all, Saskatchewan has had no shortage of challenges, no shortage of economic transitions.

The quality of life most of us enjoy here is envied by much of the world. Saskatchewan people have built that quality of life not in spite of but because of the challenges they have faced and overcome.

So what are the lessons that people from these three very different countries took home from Saskatoon?

The Chinese group put it best. The most significant lesson they learned in Saskatchewan was the importance of voluntary member involvement and participation.

People have to choose to be involved if co-ops are going to work and communities are going to be helped by them. People also have to be educated in order to be involved — educated about co-ops, and educated in the skills they need

In Ukraine, the transition from communism to capitalism is traumatic and threatens many people, including farmers, with unemployment.

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in order to participate. Governments have to play a supportive but not intrusive or obstructive role.

Volunteerism, membership-based organizations, and a facilitating role of government are three of the areas where the Saskatchewan form of co-operation has lessons to offer the world.

The Swedes, Ukrainians, and Chinese were especially interested in health co-operatives such as Saskatoon's Community Clinic. Health is an essential part of quality of life. Indeed, all quality-of-life issues are in one way or another a health issue.

Here in Saskatchewan, we have unique experiences in involving people in their own health care. Thousands of people take responsibility for their health not only as individuals, but collectively, through voluntary institutions like community clinics. Instead of being passive consumers of health care, clinic members actively join and take collective responsibility to shape a system that services themselves and the surrounding community. This vision of citizen empowerment through voluntary, member-based institutions is in tune with ideals of health reform around the world.

We gain "social capital" when others visit our country. We learn something about our visitors,

but we also learn something about ourselves. Living in Saskatchewan, it's too easy to see only the problems that remain, not the ones that we have already overcome. It's too easy to dwell on our unemployment and racism, rural depopulation and inner-city poverty, and forget two important lessons.

First, these are problems Saskatchewan shares with much of the world. We are not worse off; we are better off than most, and only backward if we choose to see ourselves that way.

And second, we have some special knowledge of particular ways to solve social-economic problems. Our solutions may be partial and incomplete, but we know from our own history and our own communities what direction we need to take. More than ever, as we deal with new economic and social transitions, the solutions lie in partnerships and in making connections among people. The solutions lie in flexible and member-driven voluntary organizations. More than ever, solutions for our communities involve co-operation.

Sometimes it takes visitors from far-flung corners of the world to show us where to find our own strengths. We could learn a lot by studying their strengths too ... but that's another story.

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