

CO-OPERATIVE INNOVATION PROJECT



Co-op Knowledge in western Canada

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project

What is a co-operative? Do you know? We asked over 2000 people in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada that very question. The results? Surprising.

What is a co-op?

A co-operative is, quite simply, a way to do work together. Through co-operation (sometimes called 'mutual self-help') a group of people pool their skills and ideas to solve a problem. A co-operative can build a business, a non-profit, or a charity to address a need.

The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project, looking into the possibilities of co-operative development in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

Through on-line and telephone surveys and open events in rural and Aboriginal communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, the Co-operative Innovation Project asked: what are the needs in your community? And, what do you know about co-ops?

What we found

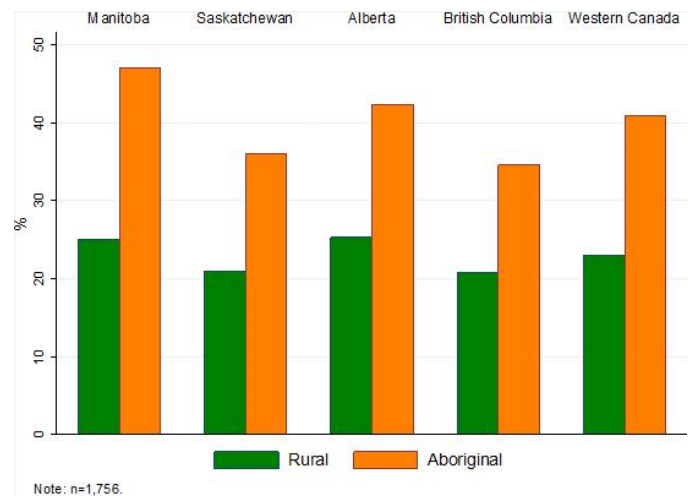
People in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada have some knowledge of co-operatives, but that knowledge varies – a lot. In some places, co-operative knowledge is deep and active, motivating community members to work together.

In other places, people would point to co-op grocery stores, gas stations, and credit unions, but couldn't give other examples. In other words, for many, a co-op has become a recognizable institution, but not necessarily as a new solution to meet a current need.

Knowledge on how to use the co-operative model to solve different problems and create different kinds of businesses appears to be waning.

Further proof

One of the questions in our telephone survey was "Do you know what a co-operative is?" While the majority of people indicated yes, there was a surprisingly strong number who indicated a definite 'no'. And that number differed significantly between rural and Aboriginal respondents.



Rural residents had a slightly better knowledge of co-operatives, but a full 23% still declared no knowledge of co-ops.

On the other hand, 41% of Aboriginal respondents said that they had no knowledge of co-ops. Given the projected growth in Aboriginal populations, those who work in co-operative development are concerned. Co-ops are a valued business model around the world, and may be an excellent vehicle for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities to use to solve local concerns. However, it will first be neces-

sary to support western Canada’s Aboriginal communities in growing co-op knowledge.

The provincial story

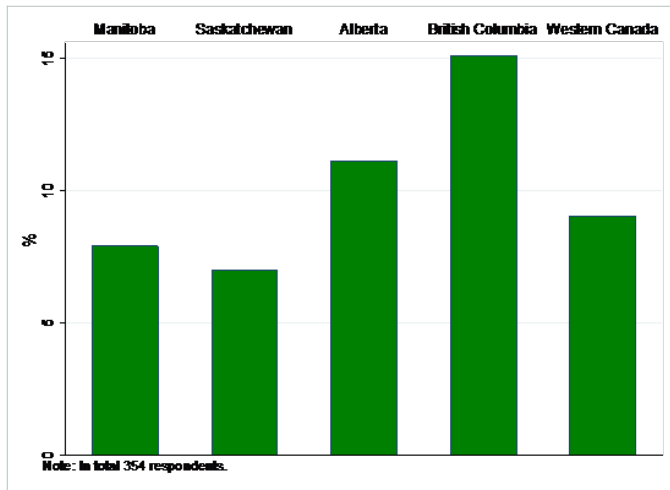
There are differences between the provinces, as well. Rural knowledge is, overall, very similar, with about 21% declaring no co-op knowledge in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, rising to about one quarter of rural residents in Manitoba and Alberta.

The picture in western Canada’s Aboriginal communities shows some differences. In British Columbia and Saskatchewan, co-op knowledge is somewhat better, hovering around 35% who said no, 65% who said yes, they know what a co-operative is. Alberta mirrors the overall western Canadian story but in Manitoba, the numbers are a bit bleak: almost half of Aboriginal respondents to our survey said that they had no knowledge of co-ops.

What about the leaders?

In our web-based survey, we asked municipal and band council leaders – which could include mayors, administrators, chiefs, or other similar community leaders – to answer "Do you know what a co-operative is?" Their knowledge is much higher. Overall, 91% of administrators across western Canada said yes, they know what is a co-operative.

It didn’t matter who we asked, either: both rural and Aboriginal administrative leaders had similar knowledge of co-operatives across western Canada.

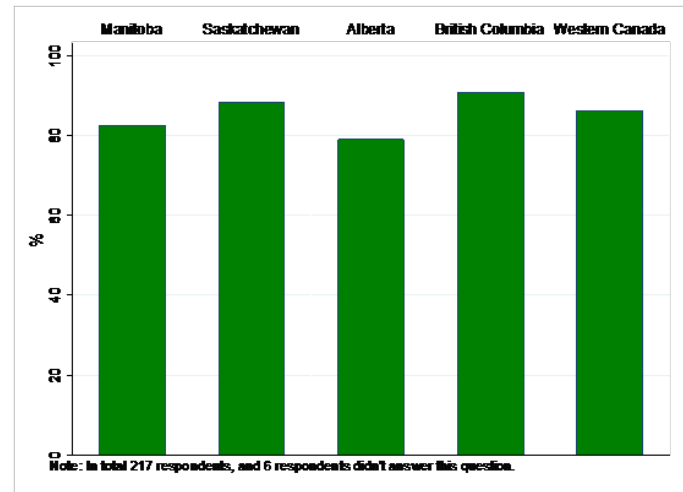


Where there were differences was at the provincial level. Saskatchewan once again displayed the most co-op knowledge. But, administrators in British Columbia displayed

the least: a full 15% of survey respondents reported no knowledge of co-operatives. Since British Columbia’s overall rural and Aboriginal population scored well in its co-op knowledge, this was an interesting finding.

Are there co-ops in your community?

As a follow-up question in the web survey, we asked administrative leaders: are there any existing co-ops in your community? While about 75% of rural communities said they had at least one co-op, it was a different story in Aboriginal communities. Well over 80% of western Canada’s Aboriginal communities reported no co-ops in their communities.



Why co-ops work – and why we need more of them

Co-ops are often more sustainable and resilient than entrepreneur-based businesses. Built by and for communities, they allow for a larger measure of self-reliance and local power than other business models.

In an era when government is moving toward locally-based solutions that build communities, the co-op model is a great fit. The next step is to find new ways to halt the decline of rural co-op knowledge, and to inspire Aboriginal communities in western Canada to explore the co-operative model as a locally-owned solution.



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