

Beyond Policy “Lock-In”? The Social Economy and Bottom-Up Sustainability

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Abstract

Social economy innovation in sustainability is altering policy environments. The activities of green social organizations combine social and ecological missions in ways that pose new questions across sometimes discrete policy silos and levels, identify emergent policy problems and solutions, and generate new alliances of social actors who pressure for ecologically sound and socially “just” change. In this paper we analyze a series of green social economy organizations that integrate social concerns with climate and ecological concerns. In our analysis we discuss their efforts at “bottom-up” social innovation and policy development. We conclude with a critique of the ways in which the culture of policy-making acts as an obstacle to the transition towards a greater sustainable future.

Résumé

L'innovation de l'économie sociale en matière de durabilité transforme les cadres politiques. En combinant une mission sociale et une mission écologique, les activités menées par les organismes d'économie sociale verte soulèvent de nouvelles questions au sein de structures et de niveaux politiques parfois cloisonnés. De plus, ces activités mettent en évidence des problèmes politiques imminents ainsi que des solutions, et engendrent de nouvelles alliances entre des acteurs sociaux qui font pression pour que se produise un changement écologiquement rationnel et socialement juste. Dans cet article, nous analysons plusieurs organismes d'économie sociale verte qui assimilent les problématiques d'ordre social, climatique et environnemental. Nous y discutons des efforts déployés en faveur d'une approche « ascendante » de l'innovation sociale et de l'élaboration de politiques. Nous terminons par une critique des différents obstacles que la culture d'élaboration des politiques oppose à la transition vers un avenir durable meilleur.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, various “green” social economy organizations have established innovative approaches to a range of social policy problems by bringing together ecological and social justice concerns. We present a perspective that demonstrates how these social economy actors have been changing social policy environments in urban transport, energy, efficient housing, and jobs and

training for youth and marginal groups based on integrating a sustainability ethos into practice.¹ Sustainability here means creating low-carbon, low-growth eco-social economic systems, with the added challenge of moving forward in an ecologically sound and socially fair way (Jackson, 2009).

In this article we focus on the role that the social economy, with its ethos of social equality, can play in integrating the social and the environmental for the purpose of guiding public policy towards a “fair” transition to sustainability. Linked into regional, national, and even global networks, social economy organizations provide unique ways and means for advancing the theory and practice of eco-social innovation that blends ecological thinking into a more humanized, just, and people-centered economy. In particular, social economy innovations in ownership, social and co-operative enterprise development, social procurement, networking and federation building offer strong platforms for promoting and accelerating the social transformations required to address climate change, energy uncertainty, and associated social inequalities (AtKisson, 2010). That said, a number of barriers stand in the way of these changes. The social economy in Canada suffers from poor recognition by government and public policy makers, who especially undervalue the sector as a source of social policy innovation (Amyot, Downing & Tremblay, 2010). Whether green social economy innovations can shift the paradigm of policy thinking and become more widely appropriated by the Canadian public, depends upon whether policy communities overcome what Bergman, Markusson, Connor, Middlemiss & Ricci (2010) describe as a “lock-in” mindset that favours technological over social innovation, and assumes bottom-up social innovations as limited, localized, and context dependent.

Background

Many scholars and practitioners have identified a strong social transformative response by the social economy to the weak social ethos of the capitalist economy (Bouchard, 2009; Lewis, 2007; McMurtry, 2010; Neamtan, 2002; Quarter, Mook & Armstrong, 2009; Restakis, 2010). Far less attention has been focused on the social economy as a response to capitalism’s comparable disregard for ecological issues. While social economy practitioners might be skeptical of adding environmental concerns to their overburdened and cash-strapped policy portfolios of poverty alleviation, affordable housing, food provision, job creation, social services, and community finances, some key movement leaders have nevertheless identified the need to engage in the convergence of social and environmental sustainability policy and practice (Amyot, Downing & Tremblay, 2010; Lewis & Conaty, 2012). Nancy Neamtan, a leader of the *Chantier de l’économie sociale du Québec*, argues that “the social economy has grown into a global movement that not only is responding to the negative impacts of repetitive crises, but is proposing a broad vision of a pluralist and inclusive economy within a sustainable development framework” (2009, p.1). Encouraged by innovations in the social economy, researchers and activists for sustainability have called for efforts to “social-economize” sustainability policy in order to scale up and scale out green practices (Connelly, Markey & Roseland, 2011). It is fair to say that while practitioners from both groups have known and respected each other for decades,

¹ For the purposes of this paper we focus on these four policy areas. We explore issues of local food, finance, heritage conservation, sustainable tourism, affordable housing and more in M. Beckie, S. Connelly, M. Gismondi, S. Markey, Mark Roseland, Editors. *Seeds of Transition: The Social Economy and Sustainability*. Athabasca: Athabasca University Press. 2013.

and have occasionally worked on projects together, something new is afoot that is driving a convergence of thought and practice.²

In part, the current global context of climate change, peak oil, and financial crises account for the increased attention to the interconnections between social economy, justice, and the environment. The vulnerability of the poor and the working poor, two target groups often served by the social economy, to climate change and energy issues has deepened the attention of social economy actors to the environment. Energy cost spikes and supply uncertainties have caused price increases, resulting in what some call “fuel poverty” for large parts of society. When the percentage of household income spent on utilities like cooling and heating, light, water, and waste removal increases, the money left for basic needs decreases. As shipping and agricultural costs escalate with energy costs, food prices also rise and further exacerbate the vulnerability of the poorest classes. Ironically, these social groups often have the lowest ecological footprints, yet remain most vulnerable. In reaction to macro pressures, some social economy actors are working with communities and municipalities at practical steps in local energy conservation, the improvement of housing envelopes, support for local food and farmers’ markets, and the redesign of private and public transport networks, among others (Gismondi, 2011; Lewis & Conaty, 2012; Restakis, 2011; Wittman, Beckie & Hergesheimer, 2012).

Despite some success at local or small-scale green and social economy innovations, policy specialists appear wary of their relevance as sources of “bottom-up” policy development. Van der Horst (2008) found that policymakers tend to believe larger firms are more likely sources of sustainability innovation, leading to the assumption that large-scale change requires a “top-down” process, led by large private firms. Social economy or third sector actors are often seen as playing a gap-filling role by addressing the shortcomings of the capitalist marketplace or an absence of state services, and as such, are incapable of transforming larger structures like markets, government programs and codes, the practices of financial institutions, or the habits of regional socio-economic planners. Van der Horst (2008) argues that even privately-owned local or small business success is downplayed as a source of social learning or social innovation. Community or cooperative energy sources, shared municipal / community forestry operations, or socially infused organizations like bike and carshare cooperatives are considered unlikely catalysts to spark widespread behavioral changes, let alone transformations in overarching structures, business procedures, codes, practices, law, and policy (Bergman et al., 2010; Brock & Bulpitt, 2007).

Bergman et al. (2010) found that policy specialists tend to privilege technological over social innovation in part due to the difficulty of measuring social goals. It is difficult, for instance, to measure the benefits of not-for-profit ownership on better quality employment for marginal groups, social inclusion, community cohesion, resilience, carbon reduction, increased social capital, and reciprocity in the clear-cut statistical manner increasingly favored by policymakers. Castellacci, Grodal, Mendonca, and Wibe (in Bergman et al., 2010, p. 7) put it this way when addressing socio-economic innovation: “it is hard to quantify the effects of a phenomenon that is not standardized or traded and which might include potentially nebulous outcomes.” The argument is further complicated, as Bergman et al. (2010) note, when attempting to measure low-carbon social practices (like those of bicycle co-ops and carshares). The multiple ways in which they benefit the health of an urban living environment are even harder to measure,

² We do not want to suggest that either the social economy or sustainability movement is entirely cohesive and unproblematic in its views on capitalism and transformation. See McMurtry (2010) on social economy, and the critique of sustainability by Block 1912 Collective, (2007).

they are less visible and “emerge in localized niches like communities and workplaces” distant from government power, and take a form “which fits less well with mainstream, market-oriented ways of diffusing novelty cross society” (Bergman et al., 2010, p. 2). Such concerns, however, are debatable.

Both sustainability and social economy sectors have developed advanced social accounting and indicator systems including ways to measure different kinds of capital (social, cultural, ecological, and economic), their impacts, and progress (Mook & Sumner, 2010; Sustainable Calgary, 2004). And much innovative sustainability policy and indicator practice is now implemented at the city or municipal level. For instance, researchers at Sustainable Calgary group indicators into community, economic, education, natural environment, resource use, and wellness, with five or six measures under each index, ranging from safety of streets, adult literacy, and daycare worker turnover, to domestic waste, energy use, food produced locally and transit usage for trips to work.

Regarding whether and how bottom-up green enterprises might reshape policy debate, critics suggest examining the culture of policymaking itself. Like all complex systems, the culture and structures of mainstream policy development can become set in ways that prevent social innovation and reject alternatives consciously or because of implicit assumptions embedded in policy approaches and processes. British policy analysts, for example, have noted that sustainability policymaking tends to be informed by the assumptions that people are naturally rational self-maximizers and individualistic. The British debate has focused on the influence of mainstream economic and psychological thinking on this point, noting that the majority of policy approaches are imbued with assumptions (i.e. the individual as the unit of analysis, rational choice theory) contained within these two strands of thought. They argue that this is counterproductive because it frames policy inertia as largely a problem of individual behavior like “‘internal barriers’ to change such as (lack of or inappropriate) knowledge” or individual psychology including “attitudes, values, motivation, emotions, personal habits and routines as well as self-efficacy (self-perception of the ability to change)” (Büchs, Smith & Edwards, 2011, p. 3).

Another consequence of making the individual the unit of analysis and assuming all individuals are driven to act more or less in accordance with the precepts of rational choice theory, is that “successful” low-carbon initiatives are determined by counting how many people alter behavior. The policy bias is thus a focus on changing individual behaviour, as opposed to altering social and economic practices that shape behaviour. This will require a shift away from thinking about the individual as explanation of behaviour, to examining how socio-political and socio-technical infrastructures reproduce unsustainable practices, including the “systems of provision” like the law or professional codes and policies that “play a crucial role in establishing, stabilizing and transforming practices” (Shove, 2010, p. 203). Social change requires social innovation.

Sociologist Elizabeth Shove understands social practices as “routine types of activity or recurring ‘doings and sayings’ [...] from the common everyday (e.g. eating, travelling, cleaning, etc.) to more complex practices (e.g. business, farming, political practices, etc.)” (Büchs et al., 2011, p. 5). Shove’s (2003a) historical survey of changing attitudes about “normal inside home climate” found that cultural notions of “normal” ambient air temperatures have crept upwards among those of us living in cold climates, altering day-to-day social practices of heating, which has had huge impacts on energy use. Similar cultural patterns are found with cooling in warmer climates, and the temperature of water preferred for laundry and personal washing. In both cases,

technological diffusion (forced-air heating or air conditioning and water heaters) has been accompanied if not driven by changes in social practices. It is the sociology of the diffusion of those practices that interests her. An effective example from Shove explores showering as a resource-intensive routine. She argues that daily showering (or power showering one or more times a day) has displaced the social practice of the weekly bath, and that acceptance of showering frequency was partly accelerated by multiple, overlapping changes in cultural theories and attitudes about bodies and cleanliness, in aesthetics and design features of technological artifacts such as shower systems, and even in ideas about pleasure and duty (2003b). Together, these sociotechnical and symbolic factors drove consumer appetites and status goals, which in turn drove provision and influenced attitudes and practices in cleanliness, and even in bathroom construction and expectations in real estate. The end result has been a significant increase in overall water and energy consumption.

Practice theorists argue that the “provision of a range of services such as energy and water, waste disposal, communication and transport can lead to ‘lock-in’” and that “changing practices may require significant changes to large scale technical networks, which are themselves maintained and reinforced by aspects of social structure (be it government policy, social norms, etc.)” (Büchs et al., 2011, p. 7). Understanding and challenging social forces maintaining unsustainable practices is the focus of the green social economy actors that we present here. For the most part actors focus their efforts on disrupting “group think” about practices in an effort to alter different aspects of policy environments (i.e. norms, codes, and conventional ways of doing things). Practices are not singular in nature. Büchs et al. (2011) identify five different levels that comprise a practice: (1) meaning of what we are doing; (2) competence about a technology or know-how; (3) the technology or artifact itself; (4) social structures which includes codes, conventions of professions, trades and related infrastructural practices (financial, policy, legal, systems of provision, taxes); and, (5) environmental contexts of resources (flows of energy, water, soil, climatic conditions). Büchs et al. urge us to examine how different policy actions might enable or thwart social innovation aimed at changing one or more aspects of an unsustainable practice.

To understand how some bottom-up grassroots efforts are challenging the dialectic between policy networks and unsustainable practices, we examined a small number of green social economy organizations operating in western Canada, as they appeared to embody the integration of both ecological and social sustainability efforts. How did we find these groups? Most of them emerged during a survey between 2008 and 2011 that we conducted as part of a larger social economy mapping research program examining the role of social economy organizations across British Columbia and Alberta (Gismondi, Ross, Affolderbach, Soots, & Marois, 2012). To our surprise, 26% of our survey respondents (124/478 (26%) of total; 47/159 (30%) of AB organizations; 77/319 (24%) of BC organizations)³ indicated that they had both a social and an environmental mission.

We conducted follow-up interviews with some of the directors of these organizations, especially those that had well-developed green mission statements and appeared (as expressed on their websites and in annual reports) to operate with a triple bottom line – meaning a commitment to a social mission, environmental sustainability, and financial self-sufficiency. Our argument is that the cross fertilization of social economy and sustainability in different policy sectors is new. These organizations address social and ecological issues in ways that disrupt both social practices and policy environments. They pose new questions and identify new problems;

³ Overall 124 of 478 social economy survey respondents indicated an environmental mission (26%) of total; by province 47/159 (30%) of AB organizations; 77/319 (24%) of BC organizations).

they generate new alliances among social actors and work on different scales to connect across previously discrete policy silos and create civic pressure for change.

Analysis

In this section we focus on how green social economy organizations and others like them across Canada are playing a role in altering policy development and discourse. The work explores a handful of cases, but as Flyvberg (2006) suggests, the issue is not whether we have enough cases to make generalizations (the empiricist critique of the case studies approach), but rather whether the handful of cases or even the single case can provoke a critical rethinking or paradigmatic shift in thinking and practice. In the conclusion, we further discuss the implication of our research for policy. In the following examples we note how a social economy organization alters one or more of the five aspects of unsustainable practices introduced above. For ease of explanation and to illustrate some of the patterns across the findings, we developed two charts. In each we introduce one or two organizations from every one of our four key policy areas: transportation, sustainable housing, employment of target groups, and eco-social advocacy.⁴ Table 1 identifies the sector, the group, the form of ownership, the activity and how it combines ecological and social sustainability, and names the kinds of social justice or social inclusion patterns each section addresses. This table summarizes the ecological and social economy focus of each organization. The narrative following the table assesses each organization's efforts at integrating the ecological and the social equity issues and policy implications.

Transportation

In light of increasing costs associated with car ownership and concern about the environmental impact of vehicle-use, carsharing has emerged as a world-wide alternative transportation movement (Carsharing Association, www.carsharing.org). Western Canada is no exception, and various not-for-profit co-operative organizations dedicated to carsharing are currently operating in major centers such as Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria. Western Canada is also home to two of the few carshares in North America operating in a rural region: The Kootenay Carshare Co-op (www.carsharecoop.ca), servicing the communities of Nelson, Fernie, Kaslo, Kimberely and Revelstoke, and the GO₂ Carshare Cooperative (www.onesky.ca/go2carshare) servicing residents of Smithers and the Bulkley Valley. Some carshares are entirely volunteer-run (i.e. Calgary Carshare, calgarycarshare.ca), while others have a few (i.e. Kootenay Carshare) or several (i.e. Vancouver's Modo, www.modo.coop) paid employees. Modo – one of the largest carshares in Canada – has approximately 7, 800 members and a fleet of 250 cars (as of August 2011). In order to meet the various transportation needs of its members, Modo's fleet includes cars, trucks, minivans, and hybrids.

⁴ We are limited by space in the range of case examples and brevity of narrative; each sector, however, is recognized as key in Integrated Community Sustainability Planning in Canada. ISPs have been developed across Canada as a funding condition of the 2004 Federal Government *New Deal for Cities and Communities*. An initiative that emerged during Prime Minister Paul Martin's Government alongside other urban initiatives (Canadian Policy Research Network, 2007), the "New Deal" recycled the federal gas tax back to local governments to green their communities, on the condition that they developed and adopted an ISP. Alberta further linked provincial infrastructure funding to the development of sustainable municipal infrastructure plans and funds for BC's climate change initiative are also linked to such planning. Our research suggests increased attention to practices and the role for social economy innovation in such sustainability plans.

Table 1: Integrating Social and Ecological Missions

Sector	Type of organization	Form of social ownership	Eco-social focus	Social inequality inclusiveness focus
Transportation	Carshares	Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower pollution • Reduce consumerism • Linked to car retirement program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alter automobile culture • Affordable; increase disposable cash
	Community bike shops	Social enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower pollution • Reduce bikes taken to the landfill • Promote repair and reuse culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make bikes, parts, repairs available to all regardless of social status • Empower people to do own repairs • Queer only workshops • Women only workshops
Sustainable Housing	Lighthouse Sustainable Building Centre	Not for profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Project management and facilitation • Green ratings and construction audits • Changing commercial institutional, and residential building practices and codes • Life cycle analysis of building efficiency and carbon footprint • Material sourcing • Waste reduction and reuse • Move design from building focus to neighbourhood and larger urban scales; eco-industrial parks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community energy planning • Business engagement • Home renovation Guides • Acknowledge and include active role of construction workers’ knowledge in achieving sustainability
Employment of Target Groups	Cleaning Solution	Social enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green cleaning products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce access • Training for marginal employment groups • Employ people with mental health challenges
	Free Geeks		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-waste recycling; • Tackling “digital divide” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make computers and computer literacy available to all regardless of social status • Worker managed workplace • Social procurement
Eco-social Advocacy	Pembina Institute	Not for profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy research • Leadership and education on: climate change, energy issues, green economics, energy efficiency, renewable energy and environmental governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable consulting services for municipal, community and not for profit sectors • Practical solutions in the public interest

Car culture often assumes individual car ownership. Carshares enable collective access and cooperative ownership of vehicles and seek to reduce consumerism and greenhouse gas emissions, and frame motorized transportation as functional, rather than recreational (meaning). Kootney Carshares (www.carsharecoop.ca) estimates that each cooperative carshare vehicle eliminates five personal cars on the road. Government spending devoted to car infrastructure including highways and bridges, parking, urban roads, street signs, and maintenance could be reduced and redirected if social policy increased the scale of innovative carshares. Recently, the B.C. car share movement collaborated with British Columbia Government B.C. Scrap-IT Program to promote voluntary early retirement of older vehicles, offering car sharing memberships as an incentive (<http://www.scrapit.ca/>).

Between the initial purchase or financing of a vehicle and gas, insurance, registration, maintenance, and repairs, car ownership is no small investment. Carshares can free up a significant – approximately \$8-12,000 per year by some estimates – portion of disposable income that might otherwise have been directed towards the costs of owning a car (Victoria CarShare, victoriacarshare.ca/drupal-6.2/). These savings could in turn be put towards public transit passes, rent or better housing, or to increase funds available for household costs for lower income families. The linkage between affordable housing and smart transportation is one where social economy and sustainability actors could lead the co-construction of an enabling policy framework.

Similarly, from St. John's to Victoria, community bike shops have been cropping up throughout Canadian urban centers (Edmonton Bicycle Commuters, www.edmontonbikes.ca/bikeworks; Goodlifebikes.ca, www.goodlifebikes.ca; Edmonton Spokes, www.ordinaryspokes.org; Pedal Power, www.pedalpower.org). Although the structure and goals of these shops varies, most are driven by concern for the environment (clean transportation), social justice, and urban sustainability (Recyclistas, www.recyclistas.ca). Community bike shops are generally non-profit co-operatives and are mostly – if not entirely – run by volunteers. The bike shop allows members (and sometimes non-members) to fix their own bicycle. They have most bike tools, many used parts stripped from donated bicycles as part of their recycling initiative, and there are on-site bike mechanics (volunteers) to help cyclists with their projects. Many shops have explicit zero-tolerance for discrimination policies in place – such as Vancouver-based Our Community Bikes' "Ten Commandments" – and attempt to make their services accessible to all by keeping prices-low, offering free services, and/or accepting non-monetary forms of payment. Increasingly, community bike shops are encouraging use of their services by historically marginalized groups by offering monthly women-only and queer-only workshops. One best known program is downtown Toronto's Wrenches with Wrenches program run by the not-for-profit Community Bicycle Network (www.communitybicyclenetwork.org/wrenches-with-wrenches) to develop women's bike repair skills.

Bike shops are benefitting from hikes in gas prices over the past few years, concerns about widespread physical inactivity, and the galvanizing of the green movement, by offering a low-cost, healthy, and environmentally-friendly alternative. Bike coops are highly networked, and have created a lobby that not only focuses on individuals taking up riding, but also on challenging the road and transit bylaw structures fashioned by the long-dominant car lobby (changes in structures and institutions). Unlike the automobile lobby, which is comprised mainly of the middle class and elite, the bike lobby is often intentionally more grassroots and inclusive. Many of the bike shops practice "radical inclusion" and address a number of current social

policy preoccupations such as creating community, reaching out to youth, quieting downtowns, increasing access to mobility, challenging the association of masculinity and biking, and more.

In Canada, links between bicycle culture and use of public transit have strengthened at the municipal level. While the bike lobby is an older social movement, it has benefitted from developing synergies with a series of federal and provincial municipal sustainability planning and infrastructure funding programs that emerged over the last decade (i.e. Federal Gas Tax rebate). Aligning older strategies of critical mass actions by bike riders to close roadways and bridges with the larger urban sustainability framework and its movement have raised issues beyond the instrumental solutions of bike lanes to larger questions of mobilities and transport disadvantage, about the embeddedness of automobile culture in municipal planning (practices), and prodding the City Hall planners to rethink transport and lifestyle, parking, noise, zoning and development plans and to elevate public transit, walking, biking, and carshares alongside climate change and mobility justice priorities (Grieco & Urry, 2012).

Sustainable Housing

As utility costs increase, household budgets are redirected to gas, water, and electricity bills and away from food or other social provisioning, causing increased instances of utilities’ poverty or fuel poverty. Retrofitting older homes and improving the insulation envelop and system design in new homes reduces income directed at rising utility costs, while at the same time reducing ecological footprint. Some promising Canadian policy and programming has focused on reducing household energy footprints for a number of years, such as Natural Resources Canada (<http://oee.nrcan.gc.ca/residential/17617>), but despite these government programs, set ways of municipal land use planning, construction and trades conventions, and real estate and financial practices often combine to undermine sustainability initiatives.

The Lighthouse Sustainable Building Centre (www.sustainablebuildingcentre.com) in Vancouver is trying to alter the lock-in of that complex structure of rules, practices, and groupthink. They have been working nationally, provincially, and municipally to influence government and professional building codes and construction practices to try and convince government and the real estate and construction industries of the importance of sustainability in all aspects of housing and commercial building provision. The staff work to alter the policy landscape through advocacy and social marketing (meaning), a permanent green technology trade show (competency), consulting services (expertise), and direct work with construction unions and real estate developers (altering work practices and design and basic construction conventions).

At the policy level, Lighthouse networks with different levels of government, and financial and construction industries (rules, codes, lending policy) to meet new demands for financing green building, timely and adequate supply of green products, and competent trades and labour (social structure, infrastructure, and artifacts). The Lighthouse’s strategic collaboration with the real estate and construction industries, financial institutions like VanCity, and municipal government contributes to shifting the policy environment, educating construction firms, trades and planners as well as buyers and sellers, and even lenders, in the market. Once we understand policy as occurring in complex networks of recurring practices, then the advocacy and educational work of Lighthouse is fundamental to influencing social practices as they relate to every stage of building construction, municipal planning, and sustainable infrastructure (design, finance, planning, construction practices, sales and marketing).

Employment of Target Groups

The social economy has had a long engagement with social justice and equity issues. The Cleaning Solution is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to employing locals who have experienced mental illness and are now ready to re-enter the work force. Successfully integrating its social mission with environmental goals, it provides environmentally friendly cleaning services for medium-sized businesses, office buildings, strata and apartment buildings, organizations (e.g. schools, churches, etc.) and government buildings (The Cleaning Solution, www.cleaningsolution.ca). As of 2009, the organization employed 20 staff (up from five in 2004) between 10 to 12 hours per week (Lee, 2009). Allen et al. (2009, pp. 69-70) note the company has a truly 'triple bottom-line' mission of fulfilling the three blended goals of long-term financial stability, the use of 'green-only' cleaning practices, and a social-goal of returning as many as possible 'work-ready' people struggling with mental illness back into the workplace.

The Cleaning Solution has benefited from a strong "incubating" relationship with a larger organization: The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

CMHA used a grant provided by Western Economic Diversification to help the company purchase start-up equipment (Allen et al., 2009). Today, the Cleaning Solution derives the bulk of its revenue from sales of services priced at upper-middle market rates in the industry (Allen et al., 2009). Thus, the organization differs from a for-profit company in that it prioritizes the employment of as many people as possible over efficiency. One could also argue that the organization creates its own customer market by raising awareness about the obstacles confronting people with mental illness and challenging common stereotypes. Lee (2009) notes that the Cleaning Solution's dual social and environmental commitments likely allows the organization to "fill a niche market at a time when social [and environmental] procurement is sought after by many businesses...in line with the growing popularity of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)" (p. 7).

Free Geeks (www.freegeek.org) approaches the social inclusion question from a different angle. They highlight the negative side of rapid technological development and the "digital divide" between those who have access to computers and training (a prerequisite for many jobs or even schooling today) and those who do not. However, the Geeks do not tackle this divide by simply giving computers to marginalized groups. They provide capacity building among marginal groups, including jobs and skills in the use and repair of computers, as well as address the global side of the divide, such as mass technological consumption in the global North and a corresponding mass amount of often toxic e-waste shipped to the global South. The Geeks change how we see these problems by re-using or ethically recycling e-waste, and doing so in accordance with the Basel Convention (see Free Geek Vancouver, freegeekvancouver.org). Since the founding of Free Geek Portland (www.freegeek.org) in 2000, a dozen similar organizations have sprung up in other American centers as well as Canada's Vancouver and Toronto (Johnson, 2009). Free Geek Toronto (www.freegeektoronto.org) trains people to use Ubuntu Linux software on their computers, a move by the Geeks to connect the needy to the global Open Source movement and its sharing practices.

Most readers might identify similar stand-alone or networked social enterprises in their locales that also have a blended return on investment. David LePage and Enterprising Non Profits (2009) take us to the next level of the social economy intermediary actors. ENP's political and lobbying work on behalf of the sector to increase social procurement and "intentional demand," introduces a way to scale up social economy supplier activities through an

enabling policy framework of social purchasing. The policy requires that at least a portion of purchases by private consumers and corporations, institutions, and governments include labour, products, and services from social enterprises that blend financial, environmental, and social values. In a unique innovation, ENP also lobbied for event-based social purchasing targets at the Commonwealth Games in Toronto and the Vancouver and London Olympics.

Eco-social Advocacy

The Pembina Institute was established by a small group of local Albertans in 1985 after a deadly sour gas accident left two dead in Northern Alberta. Today, Pembina Institute is recognized across Canada, and pushes for sustainable policies (meaning) at all three levels of government, sells consulting services to “NGOs, government, communities and corporate clients” and works on public opinion to increase pressure for change (The Pembina Institute, 2009, p. 20). The Pembina institute has established an extensive network of partners including government, private firms, and other non-profit organizations. Some examples include TELUS, Oxford Properties, Global Energy, TD Bank, VanCity Credit Union, and the University of Calgary (Lee, 2009; The Pembina Institute, 2009). Pembina seems to take up the role of connector of organizations; they are a resource for other organizations to draw upon, diminishing the overall research costs to the social/green economy, and a leader of collaborative projects.

Some of the Institute’s past activities include: advocacy work with the Canadian Coalition on Climate Change and Developments, the development of wind-farming in the Northwest Territories, the design and implementation of more sustainable housing in aboriginal communities, the development of more sustainable municipal policies on energy, and the writing of publications on sustainable communities and sustainable energy. The Pembina Institute is a non-profit organization that derives the bulk of its revenue from project-specific grants (47.7%) and fee-for service contracts (41.1%).

Like many green or environmental social-economy actors, Pembina employs progressive market-based economic practices to fund their organization, at the same time as engaging the challenges of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Social marketing is another key to their diffusing policy ideas and influencing uptake. The Pembina Institute, attentive to the linkages between economic policy and sustainability policy, uses the Internet and social networking software to provide counterpoints to government and corporate discourses.

In Table 2 we summarize how and where the various green social economy organizations from Table 1 are exerting pressure on policy environments, list various aspects of practices they are addressing, identify cross-sector work, and name any direct efforts to catalyze policy changes. We discuss the implications for policy development in the concluding section.

Table 2: Catalyzing Policy Change from Below

Sectors	Organization	Change Policy Environment	Policy Change
Transportation	Carshares	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate carshare/bike/pedestrian; reduce need for parking • Link affordable housing and transportation (via freed-up disposable income) • Reaching out to youth • Links improving community health to biking • Lobby for improved bike infrastructure as an urban transport option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General municipal plans/bylaws • Increase bike/public transit links • Quieting downtowns • Increasing access to mobility
	Bike Coops		
Sustainable Housing	Lighthouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage real estate industry with seminars about smart housing • Promote integrated design of homes & neighbourhoods to planners • Demonstration centre/trade fair for green products; includes education • Building “green guide” for construction workers/trades education • Increase consumer demand for low carbon real estate via awareness • Develop accounting tools for measuring ecological/sustainability progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National & provincial building codes • National, provincial & municipal green building incentives • Link into municipal sustainability plans; provincial and national codes & standards • Banking & finance policy • Real estate & construction policy
Employment of Target Groups	Cleaning Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change attitudes towards mental illness and employment • Collaboration with Canadian Mental Health Association and Western Economic diversification • Link organization’s financial self sustainability to green initiatives and recycling jobs • Global E-waste awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link Mental Health supports and funding to Federal green jobs training and employment support • Influence granting and funding formulas
Eco-Social Advocacy	Pembina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & education • Promote alternative energy and climate change policy options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link environmental policy to social and economic policy • Develop policy arguments linked across multiple scales – household, municipal, regional & national

Conclusion

Based on our reading of a small sample of green social enterprises, there is not a linear relationship between policy and the spread or learning of sustainability practices (in the sense that policy change necessarily comes first). Instead, we see their relationship as much more dynamic, where policy can block or enable social innovation, or both. The evidence does echo a literature that suggests, however, “an important source of [policy regime] change may be external niches, which pioneer new ways of constituting and satisfying a social and economic demand” (Smith, Stirling & Berhout, 2005, p. 1496). In this instance, policy change can be co-constructed from below to spread change to other communities, to other regions, or the country. We have chosen to describe this change as a shift in the policy environment that raises crosscutting policy questions and brings together policy actors from various sectors in new ways. Smith et al. (2005, p. 1496) note that niche actors, like our green social economy actors, wishing to alter “the dominance of an incumbent [policy] regime” should exert both “selection pressure” and simultaneously offer the “the resources to respond to this pressure.” This focus on the demand for and provision of socially just sustainability alternatives is present in different degrees in each of the social economy examples that we explored. The trick is to develop policy that enables more scaling up and out.

In a related argument, Bulkeley (2006, p. 1029) reminds us that real policy learning occurs in the public discussion about appropriateness of new practices for local contexts. Debate about alternatives can result in unique policy directions because oftentimes “the nature and interpretation of the policy problem itself” changes in discussion. We see the intervention by the green social economy actors in our study as shifting the definitions of sustainability in a paradigmatic way, introducing a combined ethos alongside a blended return on investment, placing the focus on deeper social transformation, which generates new questions at the grassroots and civic levels and suggests alternate policy directions for governments and institutions.

Schmidt (2011, p. 108) points out “that policy analysts have long tended to portray policy ideas as changing rapidly” especially in response to crises, which create “windows of opportunity.” However, he turns this truism on its head by pointing out that “one could just as well argue that new ideas ‘open windows,’ creating new opportunities for change.” In our opinion, this observation speaks to the catalytic role that green social economy organizations can play at opening windows by changing policy environments and co-constructing policy aimed at scaling-up and out sustainable practices (Parrish, 2008; Parrish & Foxon, 2009). Nobody can predict where the sustainability transition will come from or where it will go; however, our examination of only a handful of bottom-up green social economy initiatives, while exploratory, suggests that the sector and its organizational forms and ethos, merits serious national policy attention. In the end, any intentional transition to sustainability will require a breakthrough against the strong policy “lock in” or mindset that assumes bottom-up local initiatives cannot lead to strategic structural innovation.

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