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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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## Report Summary: Indigenizing the Co-operative Model

*By James Thunder and Mark Intertas. Summary by Kerniel Aasland.*

### Introduction

*Indigenizing the Co-operative Model* by James Thunder and Mark Intertas begins with a delineation of the diversity and complexity of Indigenous peoples and their distinct cultures and history. The authors summarize four broad stages of Indigenous history and contemporary reality to foreground the exploration of Indigenizing co-operatives. Thunder and Intertas present key elements of Indigenous governance, spirituality, and contemporary context which are compared to the Rochdale Co-operative principles and the Neechi Community Economic Development (CED) principles. A literature review, key person interviews and an Indigenous design workshop further explore what Indigenizing the co-operative model can mean.

### Indigenous Peoples

The authors note the term Indigenous is a broad collective term that includes First Nation, Inuit and Metis peoples. Indigenous cultures “must be appreciated for their complexities contributing to their diversity. Each Indigenous nation adapted to the environmental and social demands of their land and evolved unique ways of life and traditions.” (p.7) This foundational understanding is necessary to appreciate the diversity of the origins of Indigenous peoples in Manitoba and Winnipeg, which in turn affects the exploration of Indigenous co-operatives. The authors provide a brief summary of the territory, history

and significant cultural elements of the Metis, the Inuit, First Nations and their main groupings: the Nehetho (Cree), the Anishinabe (Ojibwe), the Anishinawak (Oji-Cree), the Oyate (Dakota), and the Denesuline (Dene).

The authors present critical dimensions of current Indigenous governance structures and organizations, recognizing the tension between culturally-based governing models and governance systems imposed by Canadian state. This includes the very real constraints imposed by the Indian Act, Aboriginal Affairs and the Department of Indigenous Services Canada. The Indigenous right to vote granted in the 1960’s fueled Indigenous existing resistance and self-determination movements which paralleled the slowly diminishing regulation of Indigenous people imposed through the Indian Act. This period saw the rise of many new governance structures. In Manitoba this includes tribal councils, Political Territorial Organizations such as Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO), the Southern Chiefs Organization (SCO), the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC), and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

### Indigenous Cultures and History

Thunder and Intertas explore spiritual influences in the context of the sig-

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nificant cultural and spiritual diversity found in Winnipeg's urban Indigenous communities. The authors briefly outline the significance of Indigenous myth, legend, ceremony and concepts of circular time to contrast with Western models.

The authors summarize the four broad stages of shared history between Indigenous people and what is now called Canada, as outlined by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP):

1. **Separate worlds:** recognizing that Indigenous peoples lived in fully developed nations prior to contact with European nations.
2. **Nation-to-Nation relations:** where Indigenous nations formed trade and other agreements with European Nations. This phase was marked, in some ways, by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 issued by King George III, which recognized Indigenous title to lands and that Indigenous nations were sovereign.
3. **Assimilation:** marked initially by the British North America Act (BNA Act) of 1867, numbered treaties and later the Indian Act, this period was one of control and colonial imposition. This included: defining who was a status Indian, imposing the reserve system, draconian controls over Indigenous spiritual, cultural, economic, educational affairs and the imposition of a band-and-council system of governance. Indigenous people were granted the right to vote in 1960 and continued organizing for self-determination and self-sufficiency. These policies galvanized political, cultural, educational and sovereignty-based resistance and counter-pressure from Indigenous people that continues today.

**4. Reconciliation:** ongoing efforts to build bridges and understanding between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. Influence and efforts have come from the Idle No More movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and many ongoing initiatives.

This outline of Indigenous history and current reality foregrounds and informs the authors' work in exploring the Indigenization of co-operative models. It simultaneously provides indicators for this effort to be effective. "An 'Indigenous' co-operative will be one that is reflective of this fight for reconciliation, self-expression, self-government, and for economic self-determination." (p. 17).

### Understanding Co-operatives

Thunder and Intertas present the seven Rochdale Co-op Principles and the eleven Neechi CED principles shown below in Table 1. These are compared to each other and become benchmarks of comparative analysis for Indigenizing co-operatives.

Thunder and Intertas briefly explore the scope and scale of the co-op movement in Canada along with challenges to the model that come from more widespread use of partnerships and investor based business models. The authors note the ongoing tension between cultural development and preservation in the face of both business and co-operative development.

The authors then present Salway Black's The Elements of Development Model (Salway Black, 1994) with four primary elements of Red Capitalism: the Control of Assets, Spirituality, Kinship, and Personal

Table 1

#### Rochdale Co-op Principles

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Financial or economic participation by members
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, information for members
6. Co-operation with other co-operatives
7. Concern for the community

#### Neechi CED principles

- A. Use of locally produced goods and services
- B. Production of goods and services for local use
- C. Local reinvestment of profits
- D. Long-term employment of residents
- E. Local skills development
- F. Local decision-making
- G. Public health
- H. Physical environment
- I. Neighborhood stability
- J. Human dignity
- K. Support for other CED initiatives

Efficacy, shown below in Table 2.

These four primary elements are then compared with the Rochdale and the Neechi principles, to explore their overlap and compatibility. Diagrams 1, 2, 3 and 4 found at the end of this document summarize this discussion and “shows the potential for the co-operative model to be compatible with Indigenous development models” (p. 30)

The discussion finds a high degree of conceptual overlap and compatibility, with all of the 4 primary elements and fifteen of the sixteen sub-elements of Black’s Elements of Development model. This further suggests that additional explorations of co-operative models to address specific challenges with distinct Indigenous peoples is worth additional study and implementation.

### **What Makes an Indigenous Co-operative**

Thunder and Intertas draw on the literature to argue that an Indigenous Co-operative must have at least one of the following characteristics:

- it is located in a predominantly Indigenous community;
- Indigenous people mostly control or own the co-operative;
- Its membership or customer base is predominantly Indigenous.

The authors note that this contrasts somewhat with the Government of Canada definition of fifty percent plus one Indigenous ownership. Acknowledging these differ-

ences, the authors then present statistical and economic data demonstrating the scope and scale of co-operative economy activity in Western Canada with some national numbers for context. The authors track a decline in the number of cooperatives while noting relatively stable employment figures and a growing volume of business.

With this statistical backdrop, the authors mention key differences between Western business models and co-operative business models with examples of Arctic Co-op in the north, casino development in Canada and the US and resource management agreements with Saskatchewan White Bear First Nation. The authors use these examples to argue that “co-operatives allow better cultural preservation while improving living conditions” (p. 36) a key ongoing consideration for Indigenous development.

### **Interviews and Indigenous Design Workshop**

Key person interviews conducted by the authors included elders Norman Meade and Kathy Mallet, community activists, government representatives, lawyers, co-operative managers and developers. Commentary and analysis from the interviews highlight many of the strengths and benefits of Indigenous co-operatives. They are “means of creating meaningful employment while providing a needed service to the community. The co-operative is also seen as a means of engaging the untapped Indigenous labour force.” (p. 41) The equal voting power promotes communication and engagement which “paves the way for member development and continuous capacity building” (p. 42) as well as succession planning.

Table 2

<b>Control of Assets</b>	<b>Spirituality</b>	<b>Kinship</b>	<b>Personal Efficacy</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowerment through use of assets in wealth creation</li> <li>• Environmental Balance</li> <li>• Hope &amp; Future Orientation</li> <li>• Choices/Vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Indigenous vision of oneself</li> <li>• Understanding of place in the community</li> <li>• Understanding of place in creation</li> <li>• Cultural Integrity</li> <li>• Social Respect</li> <li>• Political &amp; Civic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledgement of a system of giving, sharing, and reciprocity that exists within Indigenous communities</li> <li>• Health &amp; Safety</li> <li>• Responsibilities &amp; Consequences</li> <li>• Vibrant Initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal growth and development for the purpose of benefiting others</li> <li>• Productivity Skills</li> <li>• Income</li> <li>• Trade &amp; Exchange</li> </ul>

Interviewees commented on the similarity between the co-operative model and how Indigenous people tend to operate businesses and governance through some band councils. One interviewee noted that co-operatives in the North are essential and that personal survival “may be difficult if people did not work together.” (p. 43), emphasizing the collaborative nature of co-operatives. The interviews explored how leadership arises and is necessary for the success of any movement. They also discuss how people’s values can be expressed through choices and decisions made by a co-operative, from choosing which products to sell to how forestry management should be conducted.

One interview highlighted how familiarity and success with the co-op model in one setting can be leveraged into solutions in new contexts. The people of Matheson Island “already had experience using the co-op model to help them with bringing their fish to market and decided to use that model to solve the housing problem as well.” (p. 48). Thunder and Intertas’ research also highlights the converse of this: A basic lack of awareness of the co-operative model hinders development. Venues for education, promotion and training activities are limited, as are channels for gaining skills and expertise. One interviewee noted that “co-operative development is not regularly taught in law school” (p. 52). The Indigenous Design Workshop reinforced these findings, emphasizing the importance of inclusive governance and suggesting the possibility of embedding the seven sacred teachings into co-operative structures and operations, all of which can be done with the co-operative model.

Throughout the interviews and the Indigenous design workshop, the challenges to establishing Indigenous co-operatives were reiterated. Historical and ongoing racism limits Indigenous opportunities, access to start up funding is difficult, and different cultural backgrounds exacerbate these challenges. The lack of widespread education, promotion and understanding of co-operative models is a recurring challenge to Indigenous co-operative development.

One interviewee noted that “What makes Indigenous owned co-ops different than non-Indigenous owned co-ops is that all the decisions related to how it functions and operates are reflections of the Indigenous people who own it.” (p. 49). Interviewees’ comments highlight Indigenous peoples push for democratic government, autonomy, self-determination, gender equality, and education, all of which implicitly overlap with many co-operative principles.

## **Conclusions**

Elder Norman Meade noted that “when we are speaking of Indigenous culture we need to acknowledge the land, the water, and the air we breathe as the source of culture. Culture in that sense is how we interact with all creation.” (p. 48) At the same time it is essential to recognize that a multitude of different Indigenous peoples and cultures exist and that Indigenizing co-operative models successfully means tailoring the model to each specific situation, challenge and opportunity. In Indigenizing the Co-operative Model, Thunder and Intertas effectively demonstrate that the co-operative principles can and do align with Indigenous principles, values, spirituality, and self-determination. Indigenized co-operatives can help tackle immediate needs as well as larger societal issues, including the process of reconciliation.

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Diagram 1 Control of Assets

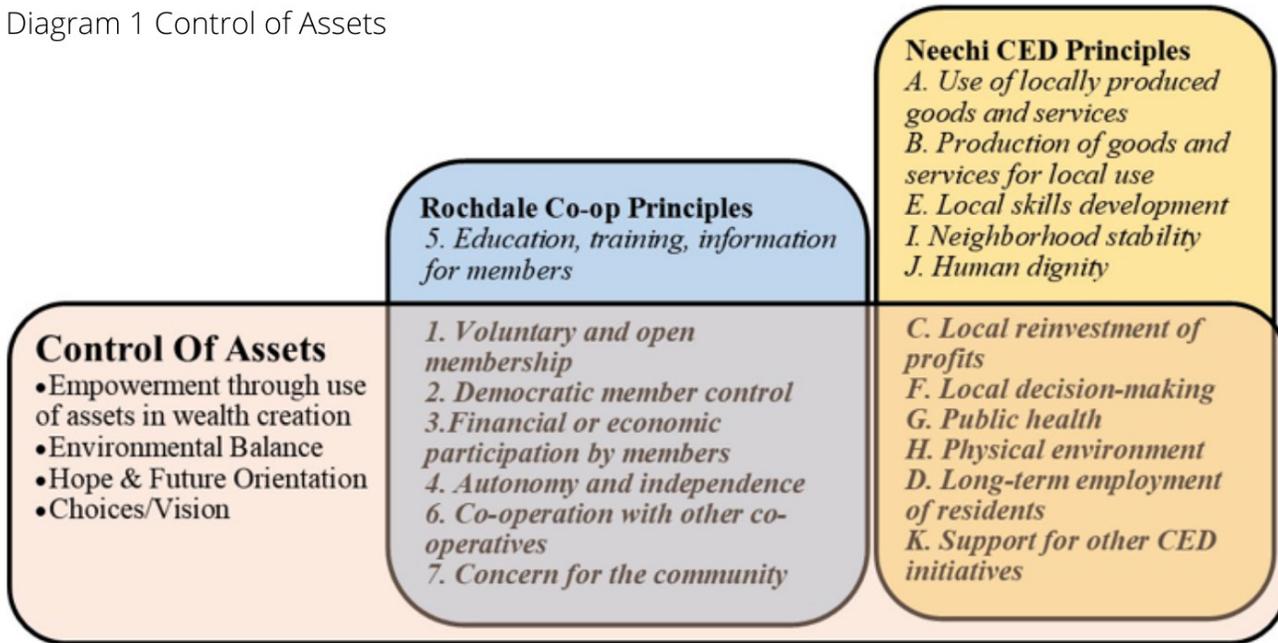


Diagram 2 Spirituality

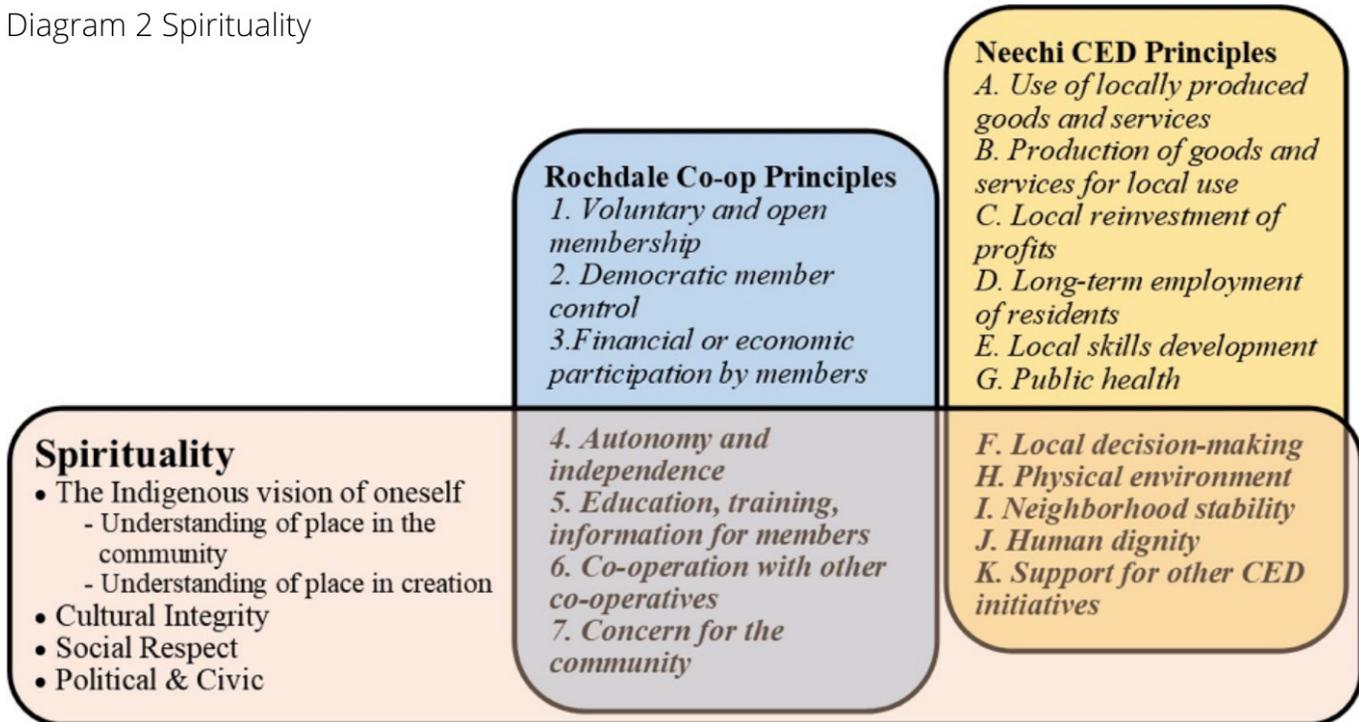


Diagram 3 Kinship

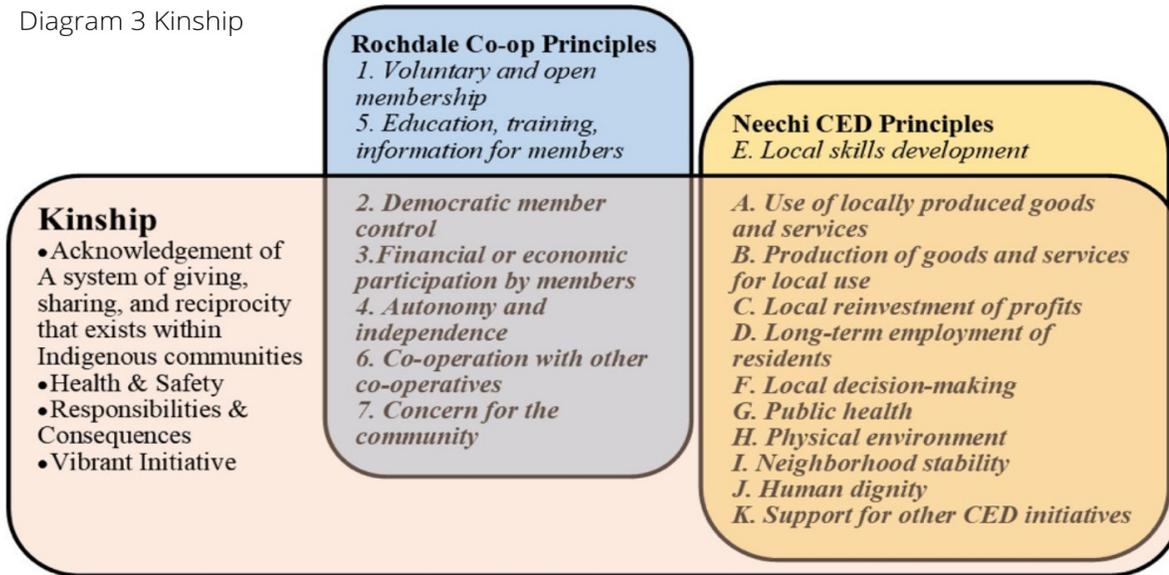
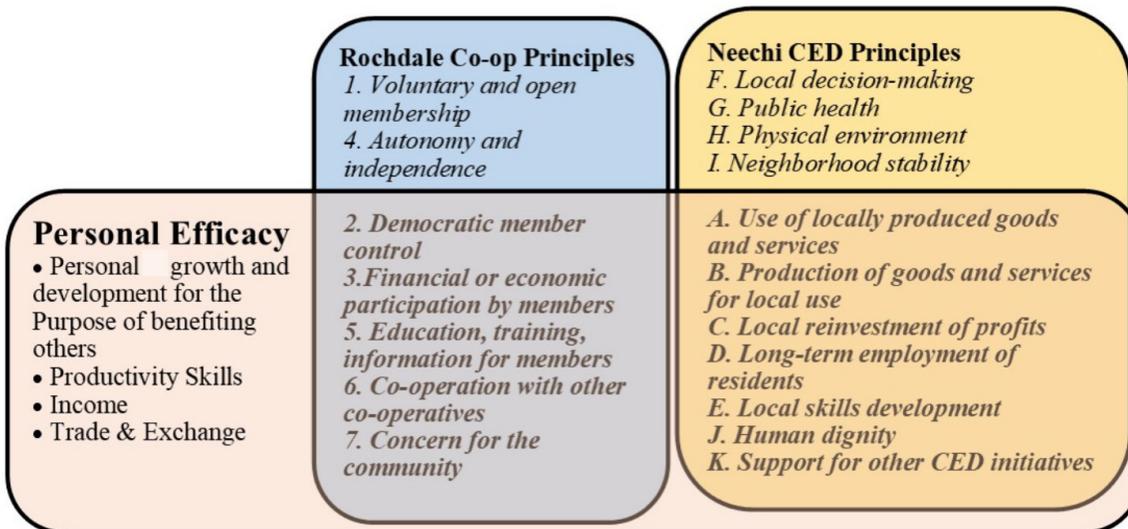


Diagram 4 Personal Efficacy



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