

Les arrangements institutionnels entre l'État québécois et les entreprises d'économie sociale en aide domestique : Une analyse sociopolitique de l'économie sociale dans les services de soutien à domicile.

By Yves Vaillancourt and Christian Jetté (with the assistance of Philippe Leclerc).

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Catherine Leviten-Reid

CAN THE SOCIAL ECONOMY CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF PUBLIC policy? This question is at the heart of a 2009 book by Yves Vaillancourt and Christian Jetté (with the assistance of Philippe Leclerc); they answer it by exploring the evolution of public policy in the home support sector in Québec from 2003 to 2008. The book is a follow-up to a 2003 publication on home support services edited by Vaillancourt, Jetté, and Aubry called *L'économie sociale dans les services à domicile*.

The focus of the authors is on the democratic co-construction of public policy, meaning a process through which stakeholders, such as social economy organizations, participate meaningfully and at every step of the policy process. One alternative to democratic co-construction – one we typically see when we look at the relationship between government and the social economy – is co-production, meaning that the social economy is shaped and constrained by public policy, but that it is not involved, except for perhaps in token ways, in its development. A second alternative is corporatist co-construction, where only certain stakeholders are involved in the policy process alongside government.

The emphasis of this book is on the 101 Québec nonprofit and co-operative organizations that deliver home support services such as housecleaning, meal preparation, running errands, yard work, and light maintenance. The vast majority of these organizations were incorporated in the late 1990s as a response to a new program providing financial assistance to Québec residents so that they could purchase these services through the social economy. Introduced in 1997, this program provides financial support to individuals and families that varies depending on household income and the recipient's health status and age. For seniors at least 65 years of age, and for individuals younger than 65 who have a referral from a local health agency, these services help recipients live independently in their own homes. For younger households whose members are in good health, these services contribute to the work/life balance of families.

To demonstrate whether the 2003-to-2008 period was one in which home support policy was co-constructed in the province, the authors go back to the origins of the program in 1997, arguing that it began as a true example of democratic co-construction. They explain that a "1996 consensus" on home support grew out of the Summit on Jobs and the Economy, which brought together a wide range of actors from the state and civil society to discuss the parameters and overall objectives of a new policy for this type of social care service. Together, they established that the new home support program

CATHERINE LEVITEN-REID is an assistant professor in the Masters in Community Economic Development Program in the Shannon School of Business, Cape Breton University. She currently does research on organizational form and social care. Email: catherine_leviten-reid@cbu.ca .

would create long-term and good-quality jobs; it would complement, rather than compete with, home care services already offered through public sector workers employed by local health centres; it would provide financial assistance to consumers so they could purchase services exclusively from social economy organizations; and its creation would counter work of this nature being done under the table by self-employed individuals.

Vaillancourt, Jetté, and Leclerc juxtapose this 1996 consensus to more recent experiences of these organizations in their relationship with government and argue that the 2003-to-2008 period cannot be characterized by co-construction. For one thing, the financial support provided to consumers did not increase over this period (in fact, it has not increased since the program was established in 1997). This has had a number of implications in terms of meeting the original objectives of the program that were agreed upon by government and civil society. Social economy organizations have been struggling with higher operating costs, but at the same time, when they raise their hourly fees, households find it more cost effective to purchase services under the table. Financial difficulties have also meant that workers' wages are low (approximately \$10/hour), opportunities for advancement are few, and turnover is high.

In terms of funding, it is worth noting the provincial government did agree, starting in 2006, to provide some core funding to these organizations and did so through a dialogue with certain affected nonprofits and co-operatives. However, the authors assess this was not truly a democratic process, since many of the social economy organizations involved did not have a voice at the table. Vaillancourt, Jetté, and Leclerc refer to this unrepresentative form of involvement as corporatist co-construction.

There are other indicators that this period witnessed a mostly co-productive process. One is that the provincial government began publicly questioning whether purchasing services exclusively through the social economy made sense compared to, for example, allowing consumers to choose their preferred type of provider, be it a for-profit or a nonprofit. In addition, the government unilaterally expanded the envelope of services these social economy organizations could provide to include some personal care services, such as assistance with bathing. Ironically, however, the cost of these services is not covered through the provincial government program but rather through agreements these social economy organizations may enter with local health authorities. As a result, public sector employees have questioned whether these social economy organizations are in fact complementing or competing with their work.

There are three particularly interesting dimensions to this well-written book. One is that the authors not only examine the nature of the policy process but also assess why these social economy organizations struggled to maintain a relationship of democratic co-construction. This, I think, is of particular value to practitioners in the community sector who search for ways to work closely with government. One issue mentioned by the authors is that these social economy organizations have weak ties to other civil society actors with which they should be aligned, including those in the disabilities movement. But Vaillancourt, Jetté, and Leclerc point particularly to the fragmented nature of the networks of home support organizations in the province (indeed, within this sector, the province features a network of social economy organizations that are primarily non-profit, a network of home support organizations that are incorporated as co-operatives

and that are associated with other types of health co-operatives in Québec, a network of rural organizations, and organizations that are not part of any network at all).

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The authors also point to the fragmentation of second-tier social economy organizations. Specifically, the Chantier de l'Économie Sociale and the Conseil de la coopération et de la mutualité du Québec both have disparate opinions on how to strengthen these social economy organizations and how to communicate these different messages to government.

The second dimension is the nature of the research process between the authors and the participants. Two of the authors have been interviewing key informants and gathering documents related to home support for over a decade. More importantly, though, is that this book serves as an example of good community-based research. The research question was driven by organizations in the sector, and the authors describe how social economy organizations were involved in reflecting upon and discussing the findings at various stages in the research process.

The third dimension is that the authors make an articulate argument for why the social economy should participate fully in policy development. Full participation is not only about obtaining adequate funding and jointly agreeing on what conditions best meet the needs of workers and users in the community. At the heart of the matter, the democratic co-construction of public policy is about bringing actors to the table that are focused on the common good.

This French-language book is recommended for undergraduate and graduate students in voluntary sector or public policy studies, as well as for practitioners.

