

TALKING THE TALK: CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVES AND SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING ^[1]

Fiona Duguid, PhD

Co-operative research consultant, Chelsea, Quebec

Donna Balkan, BA, BJ

Co-operative communications consultant, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

ABSTRACT

Sustainability – social, economic and environmental – is one of the five key themes of the Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, an International Co-operative Alliance strategy document aimed at making co-operatives the world’s fastest-growing form of enterprise by the year 2020. With the Blueprint’s objective as a backdrop, this research aims to determine whether sustainability is a top of mind issue for Canadian co-operatives, co-op federations and umbrella organizations. Rather than look at actual sustainability practices, it explores whether Canadian co-ops “talk the talk”: that is, whether they report on sustainability-related activities and issues and/or communicate concepts related to sustainability through their websites and publicly-posted reports. The researchers analyzed the websites of 118 organizations, looking at Annual Reports, other types of reports (such as Sustainability Reports or Social Responsibility Reports) and other website content to determine how sustainability was communicated to members, customers, stakeholders and the broader public.

KEY WORDS

Sustainability, social, environment, community

*Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,*

*Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.*

- Mahatma Gandhi

^[1] Funding for this research was provided by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Measuring the Co-operative Difference Network and the Centre for Excellence in Accounting and Reporting of Co-operatives (CEARC). Additional thanks to Tony Birch, MBA student at Saint Mary’s University, for his support in data collection and analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, organizational structures of all types – from not-for-profits to multinational organizations – have taken a growing interest in sustainability. In the business world, sustainability is increasingly viewed as a kind of holy grail, a quest to be pursued (or at least talked about) regardless of whether it is ever achieved.

This is particularly true in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, which has often been described as a “crisis of unsustainability”.

Investor-owned business models currently suffer from a crisis of unsustainability, in economic, social and environmental terms. The financial crisis has been an epic example of the perils of valuing very short-term gain over longer-term viability. (International Co-operative Alliance, 2013, p.14) ^[2]

More than any other organizational structure, co-operatives have particular reasons to concern themselves with sustainability. Co-operatives and the concept of sustainability have an interconnected and long history, and notion of sustainability is deeply rooted in their guiding principles and values. The International Co-operative Alliance (The Alliance) defines a co-operative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise...” (The Alliance, 2016). In this definition, we can see matters related to sustainability, but as Carruso identifies, “we can see them more clearly in the co-operative values specification” (2007): “co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in “the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.”

Carruso continues, stating that these values are summed up in seven co-operative principles, three of which remind us very explicitly of matters relating to sustainability (2007). The fifth principle – Education, Training and Information – directs co-operatives to provide education to their members and workers. The sixth principle – Co-operation among Co-operatives – says that co-operatives serve their members as efficiently as possible, working in local, regional, national and international structures. The seventh and last principle – concern for the community – encourages co-operatives to work for the sustainable development of their communities, through policies approved by their members (Carruso, 2007).

While many definitions of sustainability have been put forward, the most widely accepted definition can be found in *Our Common Future*, the report of the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), often referred to as the Brundtland Report after the Commission’s chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland. The WCED report defines sustainable

^[2] For example, in their study of Spanish corporations, Garcia-Benau et al (2013) found that the number of companies issuing Corporate Social Responsibility reports (a concept closely related to, but not necessarily interchangeable with sustainability) increased significantly following the financial crisis, another indication that that the business world viewed what happened in 2008-09 as a failure of sustainability.

development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, 15). It is also generally accepted that sustainability has three interconnected dimensions – economic sustainability, social sustainability and environmental sustainability. As Brundtland made clear in her introduction to the WCED report, “What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable” (WCED, 1987, 7).

All three dimensions of sustainability – economic, social and environmental – have an enhanced significance in the co-operative context. While economic sustainability is crucial to any business model, it is a particular challenge for co-operatives because they depend on the economic participation of their members (the Third Co-operative Principle) and have a harder time accessing capital than investor-owned businesses. Throughout the history of the co-operative movement, co-ops have been a vehicle for promoting social sustainability: the social role of agricultural co-ops, housing co-ops and credit unions has been well-documented.^[3] Alphonse Desjardins, the father of the North American credit union movement, said in 1912 that the credit union “is an extension of the parish,”^[4] just one more indication that the early co-operative pioneers viewed their movement as having a social as well as an economic mission.

The link between sustainability and co-operatives has been further reinforced by the Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, a global strategy for co-operatives developed by the Alliance in conjunction with the 2012 UN International Year of Co-operatives. The plan elaborated in the Blueprint – referred to by the Alliance as the “2020 vision” is aimed at making the co-operative form of business “the acknowledged leader in economic, social and environmental sustainability by 2020 (The Alliance, 2013, p.3).”

Sustainability is one of the Blueprint’s five key themes, together with Participation, Identity, Legal Framework and (access to) Capital.

Quite simply, a co-operative is a collective pursuit of sustainability. Co-operatives seek to ‘optimise’ outcomes for a range of stakeholders, without seeking to ‘maximise’ the benefit for any single stakeholder. Building economic, social and environmental sustainability should therefore be one of the over-arching motivations and justifications for a growing co-operative sector. It offers an answer to the question of why co-operatives are necessary and beneficial, at this historical juncture.” (The Alliance, 2013, p. 14)

At the same time, the Blueprint acknowledges that “although there are some local exceptions, at present sustainability is not a term that is universally associated with co-operatives.” (The Alliance, 2013, p. 15)

^[3] For example, Ian MacPherson (2009, Chapter 3) writes extensively about the historical relationship between the social life of Canadian rural communities and the development of agricultural co-ops.

^[4] <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/biography/biographi255e.shtml>

“This is what needs to change by 2020 – to position co-operatives as builders of sustainability. The co-operative sector needs to demonstrate convincingly that sustainability is in the intrinsic nature of co-operatives, and that co-operative enterprise makes a positive contribution to sustainability...” (The Alliance, 2013, p. 15)

The aim of this research is to use a snapshot in time of Canadian co-operatives’ online presence – including electronic versions of annual reports, website content and other reports – to assess how they are talking about sustainability. This is not a formal sustainability impact assessment or an assessment of sustainability reporting tools. This is also not a study of sustainability practices. This research is about how co-operatives are reporting on and talking about sustainability. For the purposes of this research, we are interested in the sustainability priorities that are communicated to members and the public and how these communications reflect or are used as a way of reflecting actions regarding sustainability. This research provides a foundation from which recommendations can be made to Canadian co-operatives, co-operative associations and federations to enhance their sustainable actions, measurement and reporting.

This paper looks at two different indicators of the extent to which Canadian co-operatives are “talking the talk”. The first relates to formal sustainability reporting: co-operatives which actually issue sustainability and/or social responsibility reports, use recognized sustainability reporting tools, or include specific reports on sustainability practices in their Annual Reports. Since many Canadian co-operatives do not use formal reporting tools (Ragainis, 2015) the second indicator relates to the communication of sustainability *concepts* through their websites (including online Annual Reports), which was determined through a content analysis using specific keywords related to sustainability. The criteria for identifying sustainability concepts will be discussed in the framework and methodology sections of this paper.

SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING

Reporting on sustainability is part of a series of related, but not identical, activities reflecting a growing interest in social responsibility reporting by corporations and co-operatives alike. While a number of authors have made a clear distinction between sustainability reporting and social responsibility reporting (for example, Bansal and DesJardine, 2014), the differences are not as relevant in the co-operative context as they are when dealing with investor-owned companies (IOCs). As Bansal and DesJardine (2014) point out, sustainability “balances resource usage over time”, whereas in the IOC context, corporate social responsibility focuses on “balancing current stakeholder interests.” Since co-operatives are generally values-driven rather than profit-driven, they are more likely to make people a priority and take a long-term view of business decisions. With this in mind, concepts related to co-operative social responsibility, as well as publications referred to specifically as social responsibility reports, are included within the scope of our research.

Sustainability reporting is generally defined as the process through which organizations communicate the social and environmental effects of their economic actions to stakeholder

groups within society and to society at large (Gray et al., 1996). It signifies the recognition that consumers and shareholders want to patronize or invest in companies that care about more than the financial bottom line – a trend which was exacerbated by the financial downturn of 2008-09 and the growing interest in the future of the planet. Stakeholders from all business sectors are increasingly looking to businesses to address pressing social and/or environmental issues (Adams, 2004; Knox, Maklan and French, 2005; Adams and Frost, 2006; Gao and Zhang, 2006; Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008). Indeed, there is more pressure than ever to provide stakeholders with non-financial information concerning an organization's performance, including reporting on sustainability, social and environmental indicators.

Non-financial aspects of business performance and sustainability indicators are increasing of importance. In their book, *Mismeasuring Our Lives*, Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi state, “for a long time there have been concerns about the adequacy of current measures of economic performance” (2010, 3). They and others (Panno, Coleman et al, 2009) are concerned that economic measurements such as GDP at the nation level or profit margins at the individual business level do not capture such important factors such as the well-being of humans or sustainability of the environment. Helliwell, Layard and Sachs's research on happiness is yet another example (2013). As are corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks that involve awareness of and support of environmental practices and ethical labour practices or different forms of philanthropy such as donations given to non-profit organizations with causes aligned with the enterprise making the donation. Thus, relying solely on financial performance does not provide a complete picture of an organization's prospects (Gazdar, 2007, Global Alliance for Banking on Values, 2014). Additionally, measuring performance based on economic measurements alone are not conducive to the need to be transparent and accountable to a range of stakeholders including governments, employees, customers, communities and NGOs (Gazdar, 2007). This can also be said for co-operatives (Uzea and Duguid, 2015). Indeed, as far back as 1991, there have been calls for non-financial performance information (Eccles, 1991).

While financial reporting is guided by accounting standards, there is no universally-accepted model or guidelines for non-financial reporting. However, there are a number of popular reporting and measurement tools being used. For example, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) encourages sustainability reporting in all types of organizational structures. GRI produces a comprehensive Sustainability Reporting Framework that is widely used around the world to enable greater organizational transparency www.globalreporting.org/reporting/reporting-framework-overview/Pages/default.aspx (2015).

Another tool used is AccountAbility's AA1000 series (AccountAbility, 1999). These are principles-based standards to help organizations become more accountable, responsible and sustainable. They address issues affecting governance, business models and organizational strategy, as well as providing operational guidance on sustainability assurance and stakeholder engagement. And finally, the International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC) is an international cross-section of leaders from the corporate, investment, accounting and scholarly sectors. Its mission is to create a voluntary globally acceptable integrated reporting framework that incorporates financial, environmental, social and governance information (IIRC, 2011). Integrated reporting is defined as a way to provide information about an organization's strategy,

governance, performance and prospects in a manner that reflects the commercial, social and environmental context in which it operates (ibid).

Understanding more about co-operatives' social and environmental impact as well as sustainability practices will help to demonstrate their specific value proposition. It is important to make this distinction because co-operatives are increasingly using indicators that are reflective of **IOCs**. As Duguid (2015a) has found, globally co-operatives are using IOC-defined indexes such as the ones discussed above or simply are not using any sort of sustainability reporting tool at all. Very few co-operatives are using a co-operative-defined sustainability tool (Duguid, 2015a). Additionally, as Rixon (2013a and b) and Beaubien and Rixon (2012) found, financial services co-operatives struggled to find appropriate industry benchmarks indicators to evaluate their performance as a co-operative.

The Certified General Accountants of Canada 2005 report summarizes the growing desire and need for sustainability reporting practices to become the norm.

As the public appetite for increased transparency and accountability continues to gain momentum, companies will be challenged to find new ways of demonstrating and communicating that they are successfully managing all corporate risks, including those prompted by social and environmental concerns. Intuitively or forcibly motivated, companies are ascribing to the heightened level of transparency commanded by the markets as they gravitate to the renewed standard that is required to gain the requisite and interdependent confidence of investors, governments, regulators, and the public. (CGA-Canada, 2005)

SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING AND CO-OPERATIVES

If the values-driven nature of co-operative enterprise is what demonstrates the co-operative difference, one would expect co-ops to use sustainability and other non-financial indicators to demonstrate their value. There is an understanding within the co-operative movement that because of the seven underlying principles there should be observable and predictable outcomes that differ from outcomes observed in other corporate forms (Birchall, 1998, 2005, Co-operatives UK, 2006, Fairbairn, 2004). As Server and Capo (2011) state referencing CSR in particular:

“Co-operative companies, because of their social nature, their commitment to the development of society and the integration of stakeholders in their management, can be referenced for the integration of CSR in companies”.

Co-operatives provide goods and services in almost every sector in Canada (MacPherson, 2009) and play an important role in Canada's economy (Karaphillis, Lake and Duguid, 2016, forthcoming), and yet, very little is known or understood about their social or environmental impact or sustainability indicators.

Studies have shown that when it comes to using formal tools and techniques to measure and report on sustainability co-operatives come second to their corporate counterparts. This is confirmed by Duguid (2015a and b). She presented findings from a study, of a similar methodology to this one, of co-operatives around the world comparing them to similar IOCs. Fewer co-operatives are reporting the use of sustainability frameworks, measurement tools, indexes or indicators than IOCs (Duguid, 2015a and b). Co-operatives that do measure sustainability are turning to use IOC-designed sustainability reporting tools, measurement indexes and indicators and none are reporting to use a co-operative-specific sustainability tool (Duguid, 2015a). According to a study conducted by Ragainis (2015), here in Canada, only a handful of co-operatives, including Desjardins, Vancity and The Co-operators, are using the Global Reporting Initiative (CGI) as a social accounting tool. Ragainis' survey of co-operatives in Ontario showed that only 11% of the co-ops which responded use any form of social or sustainability accounting tool, 33% said they have considered but have not implemented it and 56% have neither implemented nor considered social/sustainability accounting (Ragainis, 2015, p.41).

In the first study of its kind, Bollas-Araya et al (2014) looked specifically at sustainability reporting in European co-operative banks, finding that traditional banks were more likely to produce formal sustainability reports than co-operative banks. Only nine co-operative banks (from Spain, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Switzerland and Italy) produced sustainability reports in 2012 (Bollas-Araya 2014, p. 46). Despite this, they also found that co-operative banks stand out in the use of latest standards, integrated reporting and best application levels and that they provide more on social issues than economic or environmental issues (Bollas-Araya, 2014). In another study, Rixon found that financial services co-operatives reported a minimal number of indicators that reflect social and environmental performance, but overall they did not use this information to reflect the seven principles of co-operatives and to differentiate from IOCs (2013a and b). This reflects similar findings of Brown and Hicks (2007) and Novkovic (2006).

An array of tools has been developed specifically for co-operatives and other social enterprises. For example, in the book *What Counts: Social Accounting for Nonprofits and Cooperatives*, by Jack Quarter, Laurie Mook and Betty Jane Richmond (2007) the authors outline how co-operatives can account for indicators of a more social nature such as volunteer work. In 2014, Saint Mary's University hosted a global conference on tools to measure co-operative impact and performance (McNamara, 2014). At this conference and in the resulting book (Brown, Carini et al., 2015), a number of tools, indexes, indicators and procedures were discussed including the Co-operative Sustainability and Planning Scorecard (Hicks, Brown et al, 2015), the Co-operative Sustainability Scorecard (Christianson, 2015) and the Co-op Index (Hough, 2015).

TALKING THE TALK

If the majority of co-operatives are not actually using tools for measuring sustainability, how does one determine whether they actually “talk the talk,” much less “walk the walk?” A content analysis of how co-operatives communicate sustainability concepts to their members and the

broader public can build on our understanding of how co-ops talk about sustainability, even if they do not use formal tools or issue formal sustainability reports.

This was the approach used by the Alliance researchers in a companion piece to the Blueprint entitled *Co-operatives and Sustainability: an investigation into the relationship* (Dale et al, 2013). Researchers looked at the content of co-operative websites and Annual Reports from around the world to determine the extent to which the co-operatives and associations communicated sustainability concepts. An analysis of the content determined that the concept of “community” was the sustainability concept most frequently mentioned by both the co-operatives and associations sampled, with significantly less emphasis on environmental and economic sustainability concepts. Infographics (word clouds) indicating the frequency of the sustainability concepts mentioned showed that for both groups – co-ops and associations – even the word “sustainability” did not figure prominently in their Annual Reports and websites.

In preparing their sustainability scan, the Alliance researchers analyzed Annual Reports and websites from co-operatives around the world. The purpose of our current research is to determine whether Canadian co-operatives “talk the talk” about sustainability to the same extent and in the same way as their global counterparts, or alternatively, whether there are elements of that “talk” that are unique to Canada.

We are interested in how are co-operatives are *positioning themselves as builders of sustainability* through what they report to their members and the broader public.

As in the Alliance sustainability scan, this paper uses a content analysis approach to sustainability reporting. Rather than look specifically about what co-operatives *do* around sustainability, we are looking at what co-operatives *say*, by analyzing their online content and identifying efforts to communicate sustainability concepts. For example, while a traditional sustainability scan would look at what a co-operative is doing to reduce its carbon footprint, this research would look at whether reducing the carbon footprint (or any other measure of sustainability) is even on their radar in terms of what they communicate. We concur with Server and Capo, “In order to inform society of the socially responsible behaviour of cooperative enterprises, it will be necessary to properly publicize their sustainability reports’ publications, which must show the application of CSR [or other sustainability measurement tools] measures.” (2011).

If, as Mahatma Gandhi suggested, “your words become your actions”, the use of words related to sustainability could be viewed as a precursor of whether those co-operatives will put those sustainability concepts into practice. In other words, if they talk the talk, they will eventually walk the walk.

With that in mind, the guiding research question for this study is: what does the relationship between sustainability and Canadian co-operatives look like? If we understand sustainability is part of the nature of co-operatives, then how are Canadian co-operatives reflecting this in their discourse and communicating this to the broader community and membership? Does this

discourse indicate that sustainability is indeed a predominant value for Canadian co-ops? And if so, what are they saying?

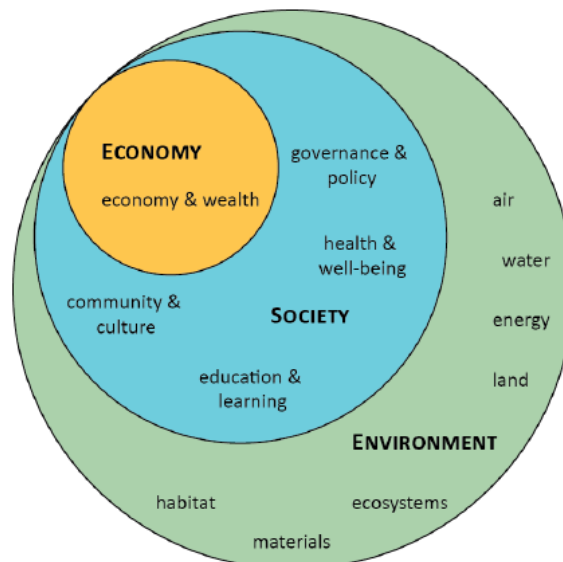
FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVES AND SUSTAINABILITY

In order to understand how co-operatives are talking about sustainability, we designed a framework that began with the framework created for the Alliance sustainability scan (Dale et al, 2013; Newell et al, 2015). The framework makes an effort to identify what is understood by sustainability, while acknowledging the challenges of this multi-faceted and complex domain of inquiry that has different perspectives and disciplinary lenses (Vos, 2007).

As outlined in the Alliance report, the concept of sustainability “accepts the idea of absolute biophysical limits. Further, human systems cannot recreate the ecological systems that are required to sustain human life. They are fundamentally dependent upon them for all their resources, and natural capital is non-substitutable, regardless of ingenuity” (Dale et al, 2013).

The Alliance report eloquently defines sustainability as being divided into its three dimensions or imperatives, thus creating a series of circles or nests (Figure One), with each senior level transcending but embracing its juniors (Dale et al, 2013). “In this description, the economy is embedded within a society or cultural sphere, which, in turn, is embedded within the ecological or ecosystem sphere—the ultimate limiting factor for all human activities. The ecosystem is the all-encompassing sphere, of which human society is but a subset. In its turn, the economy is a subset of society, a sub-subset, as it were, of the ecosystem” (Dale et al, 2013).

FIGURE ONE: EMBEDDED DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY



Source: www.ssg.coop

Another related concept is sustainable development, which is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs (CCSOR, 2016).^[5] This common understanding stems from the work of the Brundtland Commission in 1986 where it was argued that ecological and social issues are inextricably intertwined, that poverty and environmental degradation cannot be addressed in isolation, that sustainability and human development must go together, not just as a moral imperative but also for the survival of the human species (CCSOR, 2016).

For the purposes of the Alliance sustainability scan and for this research about Canadian co-operatives, the foundational understanding of sustainability (and sustainable development) became the springboard for developing the framework. The three embedded concepts – economic, social, environmental – formed categories of related terms and phrases in addition to the overarching category sustainability. From this, a series of iterative analyzes of the sustainability and sustainable development literature was conducted alongside the co-operative literature to create a list of the most common terms and phrases within the literature. Interestingly, one of the main findings of the Alliance sustainability scan was how much the co-operative and sustainability concepts overlapped (Dale et al, 2013; Newell et al, 2015).

The Alliance sustainability scan research produced a long list of terms associated to sustainability. For the purposes of the Canadian co-operatives sustainability scan a short list was created by whittling down terms to the top 20 for each category. We then created word families to cut down on replication and sorted them based on frequency (Figure Two). This short list of key terms formed the framework for understanding how Canadian co-operatives are talking about sustainability and the key terms by which the Canadian co-operatives’ sources (i.e. website, annual reports, reports etc.) were analyzed.

FIGURE TWO: CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVES SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERMS

1	Environment	Environmental	Environmentally	
2	Sustainable	Sustains	Sustaining	Sustainability
3	Economic	Economics		
4	Social	Socially		
5	Change	Changing		
6	Community	Communities		
7	Develop	Develops	Development	
8	Ecology			
9	Global	Globalization	Globally	
10	Human	Humans		
11	Managing			
12	Nature			
13	Policy			
14	Resources			
15	Systems			

^[5] CCSOR is the Canadian Consortium for Sustainable Development Research.

16	Adapts			
17	Climate	Climatic		
18	Local			
19	New			
20	Plan	Planning		
21	World	Worlds		
22	Commons			
23	Corporations			
24	Energy			
25	Growth			
26	Institutions			
27	Issues			
28	Level			
29	People			
30	Property			
31	Public			
32	Research			
33	Sciences			
34	Urban			

And finally, because we wanted to have an enabling framework, we also allowed for the emergence of any other codes related to sustainability and co-operatives that may emerge when analyzing the sources. The framework was developed based on sustainability, sustainable development and co-operative literature, but was not so rigid as to allow findings to emerge from doing the analysis that may not have been anticipated.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a content analysis approach to understanding how Canadian co-operatives are discussing sustainability. The organizational websites that were analyzed include all of Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada's (CMC) members (2015), as well as CMC itself. These include primary co-operatives, secondary co-operatives, co-operative federations representing specific sectors and multi-sectoral umbrella organizations like CMC and provincial co-operative associations. There were also several other types of related organizations, such as co-operative research centres that are members of CMC, whose sites were also analyzed.

Since many large Canadian non-financial co-operatives – and virtually all Canadian credit unions – are represented within CMC only through their associations and federations, we added co-operatives listed in was Canada's Top 50 Non-Financial Co-operatives in Canada (2011) ^[6] that are not direct CMC members. We also used the Top 20 Credit Unions in Canada (2015) list compiled by Credit Union Central of Canada was used to provide a more complete picture of the

^[6] This was the most recent list at the point of data collection.

financial co-operative sector. Appendix A provides a list of all co-operatives, credit unions and mutual that were looked at for this study.

For the purposes of this research, categories were created based on the similarity of organizational structure, sector and purpose, dividing organizations into non-financial co-operatives, financial co-operatives (including The Co-operators, CUMIS, Concentra and Desjardins), sectoral federations (including credit union centrals because they do not directly provide financial services for individual members but serve and represent credit unions), umbrella organizations (which are multi-sectoral associations as opposed to those representing specific co-operative sectors) and other CMC members (but mostly co-operative research centres).

While there are many potential sources that can reflect how co-operatives communicate with their stakeholders and the public, we focused our analysis on websites, including both content created specifically for the web and Annual Reports and other documents reproduced for electronic distribution via their websites. The content of Canadian co-operative websites is a research topic that has been virtually untapped; an exception was Balkan's paper *Co-op Identity 2.0* (2014), in which she measured the way in which Canadian co-ops reflected their co-operative identity through their web content. An assumption underlying both that paper – and this research – is that a website is a “means of projecting an organization's vision, mission and values to a broad public audience as well as its own particular stakeholders.” (Balkan, 2014, p. 72)

“Notwithstanding the ongoing debate as to whether the relevance of corporate websites has diminished with the rise of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, the website remains an important component of any organization's communications strategy and is a reflection of the extent to which the co-operative perceives an advantage in communicating the co-operative difference. (ibid) “

In total, the websites of 118 co-operatives and co-operative organizations were analyzed, of which 18 were in French and 100 in English. In many cases online sources were written in both French and English, in which case the English versions were analyzed. The French-only sources were analyzed using a translated version of the framework described above.

Data collection from the sample was done during the summer and fall of 2015. The timeframe is important because in today's age of instant online updates, a website is a snapshot in time, and changes to the source websites may have occurred since the data was collected.

Two software tools were used for the analysis: Excel and NVivo. Excels spreadsheets of all of the co-operatives, credit unions and mutual were created. These were used to collect the examples of content of a sustainability nature, as well as to conduct high level analysis. NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, was also used because it excels at deep levels of analysis on large amounts of data. The framework described above was inputted into NVivo for a complete analysis of the sustainability content emerging from Canadian co-operatives.

Using this methodology, what has emerged is an understanding of Canadian co-operatives talk about sustainability.

ANALYSIS

The first part of analysis focuses on the co-operatives and their sources to gain an understanding of the landscape. The second part focuses on the application of the framework to the sources, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of how co-operatives are taking about the concept of sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING – SOURCES

In total 118 co-operatives and organizations were part of the population as discussed above. Of this, 77 per cent of the co-operatives or associations had sources that talked about sustainability somewhere within them. Those that did not were often sector federations, research centres, umbrella organizations and even some co-operatives themselves.

From the 118 of co-operatives that did have sources that communicated sustainability concepts the total number of sources was 163. That is because we looked at Annual Reports and other reports (usually posted online in .pdf format) separately from actual web pages, so one co-operative might have more than one source for the purposes of this research.^[7] For example, The Co-operators talks about different aspects of sustainability in various pages of its website, in their Annual Report and in their Corporate Social Responsibility Report. Some talked about sustainability only on their website, others only in their Annual Report and others, but fewer, had some form of sustainability report, which we will speak about shortly. Figure Four gives a breakdown of the sources found that talked about sustainability.

FIGURE THREE: TYPE AND NUMBER OF SOURCES THAT TALKED ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

	Type of Source	Tally
	Web pages ^[8]	107
	Annual Report	33
Other Types of Reports		
	Governance	5
	Corporate Social Responsibility	5
	Community Report	5
	Accountability	2
	Financial Statements	2
	Social and Co-operative Report	1
	Sustainability	3

^[7] Of the 118 co-operatives, 41 did not have an Annual Report online.

^[8] This includes multiple pages where sustainability is talked about within one website. Therefore, the number of pages and reports identified exceeds the number of organization studied.

The numbers of sources in Figure Three take into account that some co-operatives talked about sustainability on more than one page of their website. Like all organizational websites, co-operative websites serve more than one function: they can be used to present basic information they want to make public – such as financial statements, activities, events and recent news – and they can market a product, image and/or brand. From looking at websites for the presence of sustainability concepts, we can see that co-operatives are doing both – presenting information about their sustainability practices and taking advantage of the marketing opportunities that having a “sustainability look and feel” can have. At the same time, there were many co-operatives that did not talk about sustainability at all, either on their website or in their Annual Report.

The Annual Report is a document that can take many different forms and can be defined in terms of look and content by the co-operative itself. Similar to the website, co-operatives are using the Annual Report as a tool for informing and marketing their “sustainability-ness”. Out of the 118 co-operatives, 52 had Annual Reports online, and 33 were found to have sustainability concepts embedded in them. This means that 63 per cent of Annual Reports found online spoke about sustainability. A note on this figure, in many cases the co-operatives that had published their Annual Reports online, also had published other types of reports including sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and community reports, which may have been serving the purpose of reporting on many of the sustainability framework codes we are looking for and therefore were not in the Annual Report content.

In regards to the numbers and types of other reports that co-operatives have produced in order to best convey messages they felt important, we found a wide range of different types of reports that relate to sustainability (see Figure 4). Similar to the Annual Report, there is no “one size fits all” for co-operative sustainability reporting. We found reports titled Corporate Social Responsibility Report, Community Report, Governance Report, and Accountability Report that all spoke about sustainability as per the framework. Surprisingly only three specifically used the title “Sustainability Report”. These reports covered a wide range of sustainability concepts including community donations, events and investment, volunteer hours donated, waste, energy and paper reduction practices, employee diversity programs, and enhancing democracy through the co-operative model.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

Through the application of the framework key terms to the websites, Annual Reports, and other reports of the sample population, we found that most of the key terms identified in the sustainability framework are not used or used infrequently by co-operatives. Out of the 34 key terms, 18 were not used in the sources. These are for the most part, terms that were located lower in the framework of key terms. For example, the key terms system (systems), adapt (adaptation), corporation, property, and science (sciences) were not coded for either English- or French-language sources.

Six of the key terms were most frequently used: community (communities), economic, social (socially), sustainable (sustainability) development (develop), and environment (environmental) (See Figure Four).

FIGURE FOUR: MOST FREQUENTLY CODED SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK KEY TERMS

	Number of sources
Community, communities	98
Economic	90
Social, socially	63
Sustainability, sustainable	60
Development, develop	53
Environment, environmental	50

Although there are considerably more references within the sources to “community” and “economic” than to “environment”, the fact that the three embedded concepts of sustainability – environment, social and economic – are present speaks to co-operatives’ connection to sustainability. How co-operatives are talking about these six key terms of the sustainability framework will now be explored.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #1: “COMMUNITY” (INCLUDES “COMMUNITIES”)

Given Principle Seven – Concern for Community, it is not surprising to find “community” as the most frequently referenced key term. There are basically two broad categories of community involvement that are referenced: philanthropic and mutually beneficial.

The aspect of community involvement most often referenced was donations – primarily financial – to community and charitable organizations. Sometimes co-operatives reflected this as a dollar amount and sometimes it was a percentage of surplus revenue before tax. This money was donated for the most part to non-profit organizations, United Way campaigns, community foundations, charitable events, and fundraisers organized by a third party.

Co-operatives are also reporting other types of community donations, including office space, printing, advertisement space, and/or training. Co-operatives also report on being official sponsors of events, campaigns, or activities such as picnics for charities, sporting events, community concerts, educational programs for marginalized people, and shelters for women. They are also reporting employee-based community connections, for example, programs for encouraging their employees to be involved in the community or counting the hours employees already donate to community volunteer work, as well as volunteer recognition awards for employees.

Co-operatives also reported scholarships and continuing education opportunities as part of their community involvement. These can be for youth to pursue post-secondary education sometimes

specifically related to the industry in which the co-operative works. This can also include lifelong learning opportunities for members, employees or employees' children or anyone, and other times it is targeted specifically for marginalized people.

The community connection can also take the form of products directly related to the co-op's business activities that support the community and/or allow the membership to support the community. For example, many credit unions waive services fees for non-profit organizations, provide low interest loans to other co-operatives, offer grants for non-profit organizations, and/or offer a percentage of donations based on credit card purchases.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #2: "ECONOMIC"

The second most common key term was "economic." The terms "economic" and "community" often appear in the same context: for example, reporting on co-operative-managed funds and foundations to support community activities, initiatives, individuals or community itself. Some co-operatives have their own foundation or charity that collects donations and disperses it based on the mission and mandate of the foundation or charity. These causes can include local business development, supporting marginalized people to go to school, providing support to marginalized populations within the community to develop businesses, or supporting co-operative development in the community.

Not surprisingly, these types of activities were most often reported by larger co-operatives and mainly financial co-operatives. Other examples of co-operatives talking about economic sustainability is in the context of Fair Trade programs and policies, upgrades in infrastructure that save them money while reducing their environmental footprint, financial support of co-operative research, financial support of international development activities, and the development of funds to support co-operative development and growth.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #3: SOCIAL (INCLUDES "SOCIALLY")

The "social" key term was the next most frequently coded aspect of the sustainability framework. Within this key term, one of the themes most frequently reported related to employment. Co-operatives are talking about providing good employment and good workplaces, in some cases, they cited employee surveys or internal satisfaction indexes. Other employment-related "social" references included diversity policies for management and directors, policies to hire locally as much as possible, education opportunities for employees and directors, and policies that encourage work/life balance. The sources also referenced efforts to provide accessible workplaces, offering wellness packages and good health and safety records.

Other references that reflect the "social" dimension include commitments to Fair Trade, their co-operatives' commitment to job growth in their communities, support for accessibility needs and information or programs aimed at newcomers to Canada. Co-operatives also supported on their efforts to support the local, national, and international co-operative movement to help people

gain access to goods and/or services, to jobs, to fair wages, to education for their children, to healthy and safe work environments, and to community-oriented businesses.

And finally, the social key term is also reflected by how co-operatives talk about their business – how the goods and services offered affect the community. For example, financial co-operatives talked about financial literacy tools to help people make sound economic decisions. Housing co-operatives talked about providing affordable housing in some of the least affordable cities. Credit unions described keeping the money local and described providing loans to people who would not otherwise have access to credit. And some co-operatives described taking advantage of federal government programs to support internships within the co-operative to young and/or marginalized people.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #4: “SUSTAINABILITY” (INCLUDES “SUSTAINABLE”)

The “sustainability” key term was most frequently used in the context of environmental sustainability, even though the word “sustainability” was coded in more sources than “environment”. The environmental dimension of sustainability was reflected by co-operatives expressing their commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, lowering their carbon footprint, and reducing the amount of water, paper, and energy that they use. While environment was the main theme emerging from the sustainability key term, some co-operatives are using the language of “triple bottom line” and “social responsibility investing” (SRI). Some co-operatives expressed their commitment to a triple bottom line in both operating and reporting in their co-operative. One co-operative went so far as to produce a set of sustainability principles and talk about their connection to the co-operative principles.

Co-operatives are also communicating “sustainability” by talking about the awards and accreditation they have received for their sustainable activities. They are talking about the like-minded partners they are working with to help fulfill or achieve their sustainability aspirations, such as the World Wildlife Federation, Habitat for Humanity, and Global Alliance for Banking on Values.

Other “sustainability” references include policies related to as work/life balance, telework, and transit passes for employees, as well as educational programs and training units on sustainability for directors, managers, employees and members. And co-operatives talked about goods and services that promote sustainability to their members or policies in place that build sustainability from the ground up, for example, ethical sourcing of textiles or other materials.

Only a few co-operatives talked about a fully integrated system of planning, operating, managing, and reporting with sustainability at the core of what they do and how they do it.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #5: “DEVELOPMENT” (INCLUDES “DEVELOP”)

“Development” was relatively high on the list of key sustainability terms reflected in the websites and reports. Reflecting a geographical connection, we saw development being taken up at the local, regional, provincial, national and international levels. For example, co-operatives talked about supporting international development organizations that help create, nurture or grow co-operatives in developing nations. The umbrella organizations and sectoral federations were most likely to report on regional, provincial or national development support depending on their mandate, including references to rural development. French-only sources were also used this key term a great deal, especially in reference to supporting the development of their region and Quebec. Co-operatives also talked about the development of their co-operative in the context of director training and management education as well as employee skill development and member knowledge development.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY TERM #6: “ENVIRONMENT” (INCLUDES “ENVIRONMENTAL”)

Although sustainability is most often paired with “environmental” in public discourse, the actual words environment/environment were the sixth most frequently mentioned in the sources.

Co-operatives reported on their impact – or reducing their impact – on water, paper and/or energy consumption, with energy most frequently mentioned. Other examples included infrastructure upgrades and policies that support environmentalism: updating car fleets to be energy efficient, updating and building new buildings up to LEED standards, promoting public transit usage for commuting through a voucher program, changing all lighting fixtures to be LED, having sensors to automatically switch off lights when no one is in the room, programming printers to print double-sided, upgrading plants to reduce water usage or re-using water, implementing sustainable purchasing policies (i.e. FSC certified, eco-friendly, or fair trade supplies), and developing programs for dealing with electronic waste.

While some reports and websites included official indicators and metrics by which they are measuring consumption or reduction, others communicated a concern for trying to reduce their environmental footprint. Only a few reported the use of environment auditing procedures.

Co-operatives reported on supporting environmental events and partners whose mandate is to better the environment, such as Bike to Work, Earth Hour, and the Commuter Challenge. They also reported partnering with the World Wildlife Federation, Habitat for Humanity, Waste Not Worm Farm, and specific environmental NGOs in the communities in which they work.

A small number of co-operatives talked specifically about climate change and issues related to climate change, such as greenhouse gas emissions, carbon offsets and alternative energy sources.

And finally, co-operatives are reflecting their environmental values by offering environmentally-friendly products and services. Examples include products that are GMO -free, organic, locally-

grown, produced with an environmental certification, and/or produced by companies that have similar environmental values. Others offer goods or services to environmental organizations or companies with an environmental bent that help them to grow or start-up, such as, loans, grants, or insurance packages. Other co-operatives, especially the federations, umbrella organizations and sector organizations, report supporting co-operatives that specifically focus on doing environmental work or expand production to high environmental standards.

ADDITIONAL SUSTAINABILITY CONCEPTS: CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES AND GOVERNANCE

As stated in the methodology section, we also were open to any sustainability related terms that were not included in the framework, but which emerged when doing the analysis of the sources. Only two concepts that had not been accounted for in the framework emerged repeatedly that seemed to connect co-operatives to sustainability in a meaningful way: the co-operative principles and governance.

In regards to the co-operative principles, we found that co-operatives often saw these as their connection to social and economic sustainability and, less frequently, environmental sustainability. Co-operatives reported the most on Principles Six, Seven, Two and Five respectively. ^[910] In terms of Principle Six, co-operatives reported on supporting each other through formal mechanisms, like granting programs, federations, foundations and marketing schemes, as well through buying and selling to each and cross promotion. Regarding, Principle Seven, co-operatives talked about their support of non-profit organizations in the communities they do business in, offering employees paid volunteer days, and regional food drives.

Considering the other concept that emerged – governance – co-operatives clearly see the form of governance offered by the co-operative model as an important aspect of sustainability. The opportunity for direct participation, leadership and democracy embedded within co-operative models is vital to supporting social well-being, vibrant communities, and an engaged citizenry. One example that was found repeatedly was the education and training offered to Board members to learn how to best lead their co-operative. Additionally, many co-operatives discussed the needs for and policies built to ensure diversity – gender, age, ethnicity and ability – on the Board.

RESULTS OVERVIEW

There are clearly some Canadian co-operatives, federations and associations that demonstrate their commitment to communicating sustainability to their members, customers, stakeholders and the broader public. These organizations have reflected, through their websites and reports, the various dimensions of sustainability: social, economic and environmental. However, the

^[91] Principle Seven is Concern for Community, Principle Six is Co-operation among Co-operatives, Principle Two is Democratic Member Control and Principle Five is Education, Training and Information

number of co-operatives that report on sustainability with this kind of depth and breadth is about three per cent of the 118 that were studied population.

Another insight gain from this research is that the financial co-operatives – banking and insurance – are leagues ahead of the non-financial co-operatives when it comes to reporting on sustainability. Financial co-operatives, including Desjardins, The Co-operators and many credit unions, are more likely to have an Annual Report online and one that speaks to sustainability; they are also more likely to have other reports that address sustainability directly, as well as sustainability concepts mentioned on the pages of their websites. While the bigger financial co-operatives are doing more than the smaller financial co-operatives, in many cases the medium-sized and small financial co-operatives are still doing more than the big, medium and small non-financial co-operatives.

In addition, larger co-operatives tend to talk about sustainability more than medium-sized co-operatives within this study. This could be due at least partially to the size and sophistication of their reports and websites and the fact that they have more staff to produce these communications products.

Perhaps most surprising is the lack of sustainability talk from many of the sector federations, umbrella organizations and research centres. While it would be beyond the scope of some of these organizations to report on their own sustainability efforts – it could be argued that all organizations should look at and report on their economic, social and environmental impact. It could also be argued that associations and federations with a mandate to support their member co-operatives should be leaders in terms of sustainability in order to promote the trickle-down effect of values, policies, and messaging, while also opening up the opportunity for sharing resources such as programs, promotions, documents, branding, and personnel.

SUMMARY AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Research looking at how co-operatives talk about sustainability does not come without its limitations. Many researchers, environmentalists and human rights activists have dismissed websites, Annual Reports and even social responsibility and sustainability reports, labelling them “corporate greenwashing” and public relations “spin”. That said, it’s clear that organizations that “talk the talk” are more likely to “walk that walk” than those that do not. And this could be especially true for co-operatives, which are driven by values, principles and democratic participation rather than purely by seeking profits.

With that in mind, this research provides some important takeaways for the Canadian co-operative sector.

First, the main findings of this research on Canadian co-operatives concur with those of the Alliance’s sustainability scan. Co-operatives are reporting on meaningful connections with the social dimension of sustainability, especially through community donations and activities. Co-

operatives are also reporting on their connection to the economic dimension, through economic viability – especially relevant in times of economic stagnation and in areas that need economic stimulation from the co-operative. Although environmental sustainability was not as frequently mentioned as the other two dimensions, there is clearly an opportunity for co-operatives to deepen their connection to the environment, given the relationship between that dimension and Principle Seven.

Second, it should be noted that those co-operatives that demonstrate their commitment to communicating sustainability have truly embraced the co-operative/sustainability connection. Their depth and breadth of talking about sustainability is extensive and is clearly a part of the mandate of the co-operative. However, there are many more co-operatives – and especially co-operative federations and associations – which are not reporting on their sustainability-related activities and/or impact and many have minimal sustainability-related content on their websites or in their Annual Reports.

Third, for many co-operatives, their only mention of sustainability is in the context of their donations to the community. While these donations are important to the communities they serve and show the deep links between co-operatives and their communities, there are ample opportunities for co-operatives to take sustainability a step further.

Fourth, the financial co-operatives are leading the way in terms of reporting about sustainability. They are most likely to publish sustainability or social responsibility reports, most likely to disseminate sustainability information through their Annual Reports and most likely to mention sustainability concepts on their websites. They are also deepening their engagement with the environmental dimension of sustainability.

Fifth, there is a great opportunity for sector federations, umbrella organizations, and research centres to expand their role in terms of promoting sustainability. Once again, the results of our research concurs with the Alliance Sustainability Scan in that these types of organizations are not talking extensively about sustainability and there is a major opportunity to demonstrate leadership, and support and educate their member co-operatives by doing so.

While the findings of this research study are informative, its conclusions clearly open the door for additional research on co-operatives and sustainability. One of the most obvious next steps is to investigate how co-operatives are “walking the walk.” What are Canadian co-operatives actually doing in terms of sustainability impact and measurement? This would involve an extensive investigation of what co-operatives are doing, together with a standardized process or tool that could be used to evaluate co-operative sustainability initiatives.

There is also a need to further investigate the use of formal sustainability reporting and measurement tools by Canadian co-operatives: what tools are being used, motivations for using a sustainability measurement tool, barriers to using measurement tools and what indicators they focus on. While Ragainis (2015) has dealt with some of these questions, this research deals exclusively with co-operatives in Ontario and could be broadened to provide a more comprehensive and more national picture.

Other areas for further research could include: a comparison between co-operatives and other types of enterprises, in particular IOCs, in terms of both sustainability “talk” and “walk”; whether small and emerging co-operatives are making an effort to report on sustainability (since only the largest co-operatives were included in this research); ways in which co-operatives could support each other in making the connection between sustainability and co-operation; the role of co-operatives that are specifically working in the field of sustainability; what sustainability-related trends are emerging in different co-operative sectors; and finally, research that investigates the potential role of federations, umbrella organizations, associations, agencies and centres have in connecting, advancing, and supporting sustainability for co-operatives.

It is clear from both this research and the Alliance Sustainability Scan that co-operatives in Canada and around the world have a way to go if they are to fulfil the vision set out in the Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade: “to demonstrate convincingly that sustainability is in the intrinsic nature of co-operatives”. If, as Gandhi put it, our words become our actions, our actions become our habits, our habits become our values and our values become our destiny, the “talk” could well lead the way to a more sustainable destiny for our co-operatives, our society, and our planet.

APPENDIX A: CO-OPERATIVES IN CANADIAN SUSTAINABILITY SCAN

	Non-financial Co-operatives	Financial Co-operatives	Sectoral Federations	Umbrella orgs	Other CMC
1	Access Communications	Affinity	AFREA	ACCA	Agency for Co-operative Housing
2	Agropur	Alterna	Alliance des Caisses Populaires de l'Ontario	BCCA	CCCBE U Vic
3	Amalgamated Dairies	Assiniboine	Atlantic Central	CCANE	CSC U Saskatchewan
4	Arctic Co-operative Development Fund	Blueshore Financial (formerly North Shore Credit Union)	CAMIC	CCO	CMS Saint Mary's
5	Arctic Co-operatives Ltd.	Caisse Financial Group/Caisse Groupe Financier	CWCF	CCS	IRECUS
6	Battlefords & Dist	Cambrian	Central 1	CDEA	

	Non-financial Co-operatives	Financial Co-operatives	Sectoral Federations	Umbrella orgs	Other CMC
7	Calgary Co-operative Association	Coast Capital	CHF Canada	CDEM	
8	Central Alberta (formerly Red Deer)	Concentra	Credit Union Central Alberta	CDIPE	
9	Citadelle	Conexus	Credit Union Central of Canada	CECNB	
10	Comax	Co-operators (The)	Credit Union Central of Manitoba	Conseil acadien de la coopération	
11	Co-op Atlantic	Crosstown Civic	Federated Co-operatives Ltd.	Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada	
12	CoopZone	CUMIS	Fédération des caisses populaires acadiennes	CQCM	
13	EastAlta	Desjardins Group	Fédération des coopératives de paramédics	Manitoba Cooperative Association	
14	Embrun	First Calgary	Fédération des coopératives de santé et services à domicile et de santé	NLFC	
15	Exceldor	First Ontario	Fédération des coopératives funéraires	Nova Scotia Co-operative Council	
16	FCNQ	First West	FedGas	On Co-op	
17	Groupe Dynaco	Innovation Credit Union	FQCMS (Coopsco)+A20:D20	PEICC	
18	GROWMARK	Interior Savings	FQCF	Saskatchewan Co-operative Assn	
19	Hensall District Co-op	Libro	Health Care Co-operatives Federation		

	Non-financial Co-operatives	Financial Co-operatives	Sectoral Federations	Umbrella orgs	Other CMC
20	Heritage Co-op	Meridian	SaskCentral		
21	IGPC Ethanol	Prospera			
22	Interprovincial Co-op Ltd	Servus			
23	La Coop fédérée	Steinbach			
24	La Seigneurie	Vancity			
25	Lloydminster Co-op	Westminster			
26	Medicine Hat Co-op				
27	Mid Island				
28	Mountain Equipment Co-op				
29	Northumberland				
30	Nutrinor				
31	Ontario Natural Food Co-op				
32	Otter Co-op				
33	Pembina				
34	Peninsula				
35	Pioneer Co-op				
36	Prince Albert Co-op				
37	Profid'or				
38	Purdel				
39	Red River Co-op				
40	Saskatoon Co-op				

	Non-financial Co-operatives	Financial Co-operatives	Sectoral Federations	Umbrella orgs	Other CMC
41	Scotsburn				
42	Sherwood				
43	South Country Co-op (formerly Vauxhall)				
44	Ste. Anne Co-op				
45	UFA				
46	Unicoop				
47	Vanderhoof Co-op				
48	Vivaco (Merger of Bois-Francs and des Appalaches)+A30: C30				
49	Winkler				
50	Yorkton				

CO-OPERATIVE SUSTAINABILITY: BEST PRACTICES IN “TALKING THE TALK”

Vancity
www.vancity.com

Located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Vancity is Canada’s largest credit union. Vancity is well known for its sustainability practices and has been frequently named one of Canada’s greenest employers.

A rebranding campaign in 2012 featured a new catchphrase, “Make good money”, which combines Vancity’s commitment to its members’ investments with the credit union’s commitment to economic, social and environmental sustainability. The slogan is prominently featured on Vancity’s website and in its publications. Sustainability is also a central theme of the “Vision and values” page of the website, which leads off with the statement “As a values-based financial co-operative, Vancity is committed to transforming how banking is done so we can help our members and their local communities thrive financially, socially and environmentally.”

Vancity uses its site to report on a variety of sustainability-related activities, including such “green products” as its enviro Visa, green business program, home energy loans and clean air vehicle loans, as well as LEED certification for three of its branches, energy conservation efforts and carbon neutrality.

The credit union’s 2014 Annual Report, entitled “Good Money Works”, also has a strong sustainability focus and begins with the statement “At Vancity, we believe that true prosperity can only be achieved when local communities are financially, socially and environmentally sustainable.” The Annual Report includes an “organizational scorecard” which reports on targets and results in a variety of areas, including social, economic and environmental impact.

Federated Co-operatives Ltd.
www.coopconnection.ca

FCL is a second-tier co-operative owned by 212 retail co-ops located throughout western Canada. FCL provides central wholesaling, manufacturing, marketing and administrative services to its member-owners. Based on annual revenues, it is the largest non-financial co-operative in Canada.

FCL also owns and operates Canada’s only co-operative petroleum refinery, which is significant in light of the co-operative’s stated commitment to environmental sustainability. It is one of a handful of Canadian co-operatives that publishes a Social Responsibility Report. The report is promoted on the FCL website’s home page with the statement: “We strive to conduct our business in a way that protects members’ investments and, at the same time, ensures a sustainable approach to people, the environment and our communities.”

The 2014 Social Responsibility Report includes a section specifically devoted to environmental sustainability, reporting on FCL’s activities in such areas as recycling, waste reduction, energy efficiency, support for local food producers and specific environmental measures related to petroleum handling. FCL also reported on its carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions, noting that the combined carbon footprint of the co-op’s operations decreased by 6.9 per cent between 2013 and 2014.

Another section of the report, entitled “Community Investment”, reports on FCL’s contribution to the communities served by its member co-ops. It mentions several programs aimed at both charitable giving and support for community projects related to recreation, environmental conservation and urban agriculture, citing the amount of money contributed or committed to each initiative.

The Co-operators
www.cooperators.ca

The Co-operators is a co-operative insurance company and a major player in the Canadian insurance market. While sometimes mistaken for a mutual, its member-owners are other co-operatives and credit union centrals, not policy-holders.

The Co-operators publishes an annual Sustainability Report which can be downloaded from its website. The 2014 report, which can be downloaded from The Co-operators' website, was prepared in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and is the outcome of the co-operative's ambitious 2011-2014 Sustainability Strategy. Its opening statement sets out The Co-operators' commitment to sustainability: "Sustainability is aligned with our commitment to co-operative values and principles. With a focus on long-term thinking and long-term action, we believe they are inextricably linked."

The report's "Performance at a Glance" section sets out specific sustainability targets and results, including sustainability in governance practices, asset management in accordance with a Sustainable Investment Policy, and reduction in net carbon emissions. The Co-operators has also used surveys to measure the extent to which it is perceived by its clients as having a commitment to social and environmental sustainability, and the extent to which its own employees are "champions of sustainability."

The report includes a chart outlining various elements of The Co-operators' Sustainability Strategy, with various events and achievements plotted on a four-year timeline. Details are also provided on sustainability-related insurance products offered by The Co-operators, including discounts for insuring LEED buildings and electric or hybrid vehicles.

Mountain Equipment Co-op
www.mec.ca

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), is a retail co-operative specializing in outdoor gear and clothing. Established in 1971 with six members and \$65 in operating capital, it now has more than 3.3 million members and 18 stores across Canada.

Both The MEC website and its Annual Report reflect a strong commitment to sustainability. The 2014 Annual Report include a graphical "scorecard" which reports on the co-op's performance in such areas as carbon footprint, sourcing of products using bluesign-approved materials, support for community initiatives and water consumption. One interesting indicator is the "number of CEO-level conversations between MEC and our major brands about their social and environmental programs."

In addition to the Annual Report, the MEC website includes a page devoted to sustainability which links to pages about MEC's approach to sustainability, which includes working conditions in factories that produce MEC products as well as environmental measures. There is also a

direct link to the “sustainability scorecard” that is included in the Annual Report, as well as detailed information on the environmental impact of both MEC retail operations and MEC products. A web page entitled “Planet: lightening our load” notes that MEC’s head office in Vancouver, completed in 2014, “showcases best practices in building design and operations, and allows us to measure the impacts of the choices we made in developing this innovative space.”

Another web page provides information about MEC’s 1% for the Planet program, which donates 1% of MEC’s gross sales to environmental and outdoor-related organizations.

Desjardins
www.desjardins.com

Desjardins Group, known as Mouvement Desjardins in French, is a Quebec-based network of financial service co-operatives. It is the largest co-operative financial group in Canada and has been ranked by Corporate Knights, a Canadian magazine that focuses on corporate social responsibility, as the second most sustainable financial co-operative in the world, after Groupe BPCE in France.

Until 2012, Desjardins published a separate “social and co-operative responsibility report”, but in 2013 the decision was made to integrate social responsibility issues into the organization’s Annual Report. Both the current Annual Report, and past social and co-operative responsibility reports, are available on the Desjardins website.

Desjardins’ vision, as stated in the 2014 Annual Report, is “to leverage our position as Canada’s leading financial co-operative group to inspire confidence around the world through the commitment of our people, our financial strength and our contribution to sustainable prosperity.”

An Annual Report summary of 2014 highlights includes the Corporate Knights sustainability citation, as well as achieving fifth place in Corporate Knights Best Corporate Citizens in Canada ranking. There was also a reference to the 2014 Novae Corporate Citizenship Award for Desjardins’ alternative transportation program, which “was recognized specifically for having a positive impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting employee health.”

Like Vancity and The Co-operators, Desjardins Annual Report and website promote financial products that contribute to environmental sustainability, such as cashback, discounts and preferential rates for newly-built homes and “green” renovations. One page of the Annual Report is entitled “Desjardins does its part of the environment”, reporting on initiatives ranging from a school cafeteria that provides healthy lunches to its membership in Coop Carbone, a co-op that provides GHG-producing companies with assistance on projects aimed at reducing emissions.

Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada (CHF Canada)
www.chfcanada.coop

Of the sectoral federations whose websites were analyzed for the purposes of this paper, CHF Canada demonstrated the greatest effort to make sustainability a priority in its web communications. When the word “sustainability” was entered into the website’s robust search engine, there were a total of 379 separate results, ranging from newsletter articles to presentations to workshop reports to Annual Meeting resolutions. A search for the word “community” – a keyword related to social sustainability – revealed 1,130 results, not surprising for an organization whose mandate is to serve and represent housing co-operatives.

CHF Canada’s website provides its member co-ops with a wide range of resources to enhance their environmental sustainability, including information about energy retrofit funding and Ontario’s Feed-In-Tariff (FIT), Micro-FIT and Multifamily Energy Efficiency Rebate (MEER) programs. There are also links to a CHF Canada presentation entitled “Housing co-ops and good practices in sustainability: A Canadian perspective”, a May 2007 edition of CHF Canada’s *Newsbriefs* magazine entirely devoted to sustainability and other sustainability-related resources.

A section of the site entitled “20-20 Vision”, which is CHF Canada’s own blueprint for the housing co-op sector, makes numerous references to sustainability concepts, as does CHF Canada’s 2014 Annual Report.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AccountAbility. (1999). AA1000 framework overview. Retrieved from <http://www.accountability.org/about-us/publications/aa1000-framework-1.html>
- Adams, C. A. (2004). The ethical, social and environmental reporting-performance portrayal gap. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 17(5), 731-757.
- Adams, C. A., & Frost, G. R. (2006). The internet and change in corporate stakeholder engagement and communication strategies on social and environmental performance. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, 2(3), 281.
- Balkan, D. (2014). Co-op Identity 2.0: Do the websites of Canadian co-operatives reflect the co-op difference? *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. 47(1), 71-80.
- Bansal, T. and DesJardine, M. (2014). Don't confuse Sustainability with Corporate Social Responsibility. In *The Huffington Post Blog*. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/ivey-business-school/sustainable-business_b_5678831.html
- Beaubien, L., & Rixon, D. (2012). Direction in the development of KPIs in Cooperatives. *Journal of Co-Operative Studies*, 45(2), 5-15.
- Birchall, J. (1998). Co-operative values, principles and practices: A commentary. *Journal of Co-Operative Studies*, 30(2), 42-69.
- Birchall, J. (2005). Co-operative principles ten years on. *ICA General Assembly Edition*, 98(2), 45-63.
- Bollas-Araya, H., Segui-Mas, E., & Polo-Garrido, F. (2014). Sustainability reporting in European cooperative banks: An exploratory analysis. REVESCO N° 115 - Segundo Cuatrimestre.
- Brown, L., Carini, C., Nembhard, J., Ketilson, L., Hicks, E., McNamara, J., Novkovic, S., Rixon, D., and Simmons, R. eds. (2015). *Co-operatives for Sustainable Communities: Tools to Measure Co-operatives Impact and Performance*. Measuring the Co-operative Difference Research Network.
- Brown, L., & Hicks, E. & Leclerc, A. (2015). The Sustainability and planning scorecard: A tool designed for and with local retail food co-operatives. In *Co-operatives for Sustainable Communities: Tools to Measure Co-operative Impact and Performance*. Edited by Brown, L. et al. Saskatoon, Sk: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.
- Brown, L., & Hicks, E. (2007). Accounting for the social: Incorporating indicators of the cooperative difference into strategic planning. *CIRIEC Conference*, Victoria, BC.

- Canadian Consortium for Sustainable Development Research. (2016). *Sustainable Development*. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsdr.crcresearch.org/index-hp.htm>
- Carruso, I. (2007). Corporate Social Responsibility, values, and cooperation. *International Advances in Economic Research*. 13 (4), 454-460.
- Certified General Accountants of Canada (2005). *Executive Summary: Corporate Sustainability Reporting*. Retrieved from http://www.cga-canada.org/EN-CA/RESEARCH/ADVOCACY/AREASOFINTEREST/SUSTAINABILITYREPORTING/Pages/ca_sustainability_exe_summary.aspx
- Christianson, R. (2015). The co-operative sustainability scorecard. In *Co-operatives for Sustainable Communities: Tools to Measure Co-operative Impact and Performance*. Edited by Brown, L. et al. Saskatoon, Sk: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.
- Co-operatives UK. (2006). Demonstrating co-operative difference: Key social and co-operative performance indicators. Retrieved from <http://offline.cooperatives-uk.coop/Home/miniwebs/miniwebsA-z/cespis>
- Dale, A., Duguid, F., Lamarca, M. G., Hough, P., Tyson, P., Foon, R., Newell, R., & Herbert, Y. (2013). *Co-operatives and sustainability: An investigation into the relationship*.
- Duguid, F. (2015a). Social and Environmental Tools and Indicators for Co-operatives. (Presentation) International Co-operative Alliance Research Committee Conference. Paris. France.
- Duguid, F. (2015b). Economic Impact of the Canadian Co-operative Sector: A Comparison 2009-2010. (Presentation) International Co-operative Alliance Research Committee Conference. Paris. France.
- Eccles, G. (1991). The Performance Measurement Manifesto. *Harvard Business Review* 69. No 1 (Jan-Feb).
- Fairbairn, B. (2004). *Cohesion, adhesion and identities in co-operatives*. Saskatchewan: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives: Co-operative Membership and Globalisation.
- Gao, S. S., & Zhang, J. J. (2006). Stakeholder engagement, social auditing and corporate sustainability. *Business Process Management Journal*, 12(6), 722.
- García-Benau, M. A., Sierra-Garcia, L. & Zorio, A. (2013). Financial crisis impact on sustainability reporting. *Management Decision*. 51(7) pp. 1528 – 1542.
- Gazdar, K. (2007). *Reporting Nonfinancials*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

- Global Reporting Initiative. (2015). *Reporting framework overview*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalreporting.org/reporting/reporting-framework-overview/Pages/default.aspx>
- Gray, R., Owens, D. & Adams, C. (1996), *Accounting and Accountability: Changes and Challenges in Corporate Social and Environmental Reporting*, Prentice-Hall, London.
- Helliwell, J, Layard R. & Sachs, J (2013). *The World Happiness Report 2013*.
- Hough, P. (2015) "Walking the Talk": Putting Co-operative Principles and Values into Practice with the Help of the Co-op Index. In *Co-operatives for Sustainable Communities: Tools to Measure Co-operative Impact and Performance*. Edited by Brown, L. et al. Saskatoon, Sk: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.
- International Co-operative Alliance. (2016). *What is a co-operative?* Retrieved on February 25, 2016 from <http://ica.coop/en/what-co-operative>
- International Co-operative Alliance. (2013). *Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade*. Geneva: ICA.
- International Integrated Reporting Committee. (2011). *Towards integrated reporting: Communicating value in the 21st century*.
- Karaphillis, G., Lake, A. & Duguid, F. (forthcoming, 2016). Economic Impact of the Co-operative Sector in Canada. *International Journal of Social Economics*.
- Knox, S., Maklan, S., & French, P. (2005). Corporate social responsibility: Exploring stakeholder relationships and programme reporting across leading FTSE companies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 61(1), 7-28. doi:10.1007/s10551-005-0303-4
- MacPherson, I (2009). *Century of Co-operation*. Ottawa: Canadian Co-operative Association.
- McNamara, J. (2014). *Measuring the Co-operative Difference: Community Impact and Member Engagement towards a Resilient Society*. Conference Report Halifax: Saint Mary's University.
- Newell, R., Dale, A., Herbert, Y., Duguid, F., Foon, R., & Hough, P. (2015). Trans-disciplinary Research: An Academic-Practitioner Partnership Effort on Investigating the Relationship between the Cooperative Model and Sustainability. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(1), 23-53.
- Novkovic, S. (2006). Co-operative business: The role of co-operative principles and values. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 39(1), 5-15.

- Pannozzo, L., Coleman, R., Ayer, N., Charles, T., Burbidge, C., Sawyer, D., Stiebert, S., Savelson, A., & Dodds, C. (2009). *The 2008 Nova Scotia Genuine Progress Index*. GPI Atlantic. Retrieved from <http://www.gpiatlantic.org/pdf/integrated/gpi2008.pdf>
- Quarter, J., Mook, L., & Richmond, B.J. (2007). *What Counts: Social Accounting for Nonprofits and Cooperatives*. Prentice Hall.
- Ragainis, A. (2015) Social Accounting and the Obstacles to Implementation for Ontario's Co-operatives. Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University
- Reynolds, M., & Yuthas, K. (2008). Moral discourse and corporate social responsibility reporting. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78(1-2), 47-64. doi:10.1007/s10551-006-9316-x
- Rixon, D. (2013a). Are co-operative principles reflected in performance reporting: A case study of insurance co-operatives. *International Journal of Co-operative Management*, 6(2), 77-91.
- Rixon, D. (2013b). *Credit union performance reporting in North America*. Madison, Wisconsin: Filene Research Institute.
- Server R. & Capó, J. (2011). The interrelationship between the demands of Corporate Social Responsibility and co-operative principles and values. CIRIEC-Espana, Revista de Economía Publica, Social y Cooperativa. 73, special issue. 213-232.
- Stiglitz, J., Sen, A. & Fitoussi, J. (2010). *Mismeasuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up*. New York: New Press.
- Uzea, N. & Duguid, F. (2015). Challenges in Conducting a Study of the Economic Impact of Co-operatives. In Bouchard, Marie J. and Damien Rousselière (eds). *The Weight of the Social Economy – An International Perspective on the Production of Statistics for the Social Economy*, Brussels: PIE Peter Lang.
- Vos, R. O. (2007). Defining sustainability: a conceptual orientation. *Journal of Chemical Technology and Biotechnology*, 82(4), 334-339.
- World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 27. ISBN 019282080X.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fiona Duguid

Fiona Duguid, (PhD) is a researcher based out of Ottawa, Ontario. She has been the lead researcher on a number of projects including: the national study on the impact of co-operatives (Canada), women's co-operatives in Turkey, and non-financial indicators for co-operative impact assessment. She worked on the International Co-operative Alliance co-operative sustainability scan. She previously worked for Co-operatives Secretariat for the Government of Canada and at Canadian Co-operative Association. She is President of the Canadian Association for the Study of Co-operation (CASC) and is an instructor with the Saint Mary's University Co-operative Business Management program.

Donna Balkan

Donna Balkan is a writer, editor and communications consultant based in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. She served as Communications Manager for the Canadian Co-operative Association (now Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada) from 2008 to 2013 and currently manages the website for the International Co-operative Alliance's Committee on Co-operative Research. (<http://ccr.ica.coop>). She is the author of *Co-op Identity 2.0: Do the websites of Canadian co-operatives reflect the co-op difference?* published in the Journal of Co-operative Studies, Summer 2014.