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The Northern Review
Exploring human experience in the North

New Research on Northern Development

Reflection

Acting on MacPherson's Advice: Continuing to Study and Learn from the Northern Co-operative Experience

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Abstract: In the Spring 2009 issue of the *Northern Review,* Ian MacPherson—historian and venerated co-operatives scholar, educator, practitioner, and activist—wrote an article entitled "What Has Been Learned Should be Studied and Passed On: Why the Northern Co-operative Experience Needs to be Considered More Seriously." The Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) is acting on that advice. Building on important research and scholarship around northern co-operatives published by the CCSC and affiliated researchers and fellows, the Centre is working on and planning projects that revisit and reinvigorate previous initiatives and focus on a new set of questions meaningful to northern communities. We revisit, for example, the history of Inuit artists and artisans who deployed the co-operative model to retain artistic and community control of their cultural production. We explore how Arctic Co-operatives Limited is using its co-operative DNA to develop innovative business and training strategies. And we reflect on what the co-operative movement means to northern communities struggling with food insecurity, supply chain disruption, and climate change.

The Northern Review 57: 73–84 https://doi.org/10.22584/nr57.2025.008
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The Northern Review
Exploring human experience in the North

Nouvelles recherches sur le développement du Nord

Commentaire

Mettre en pratique les conseils du Dr MacPherson : Poursuivre l'étude et l'apprentissage de l'expérience des coopératives nordiques

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Résumé: Dans le numéro du printemps 2009 de la revue Northern Review (volume 30), Ian MacPherson, historien et universitaire spécialiste respecté des coopératives, éducateur, praticien et militant, a publié un article intitulé « Les enseignements doivent être étudiés et transmis : Les raisons pour lesquelles l'expérience coopérative nordique mériterait plus d'attention ». Le Centre canadien d'études sur les coopératives (CCSC) met ce conseil en pratique. S'appuyant sur les travaux de recherche et d'analyse majeurs menés sur les coopératives nordiques publiés par le CCSC et ses chercheurs et collaborateurs affiliés, le Centre travaille actuellement à la planification de projets visant à réexaminer et à renforcer les travaux antérieurs, tout en se concentrant sur de nouvelles questions significatives pour les communautés nordiques. Nous réexaminons, par exemple, l'histoire des artistes et artisans inuits qui ont adopté le modèle coopératif pour préserver leur pouvoir artistique et communautaire sur la production culturelle. Nous explorerons comment Arctic Co-operatives Limited mobilise son ADN coopératif pour élaborer des stratégies novatrices pour les entreprises et la formation. Nous nous pencherons également sur la signification du mouvement coopératif pour les communautés nordiques confrontées à l'insécurité alimentaire, aux perturbations des chaînes d'approvisionnement et aux changements climatiques.

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> The North is only a margin for those who don't understand it or who wish to reduce it to a lucrative periphery. (Findlay 2014, 44)

If you have ever visited the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC), an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre located in the Diefenbaker Building on the University of Saskatchewan campus, you may have noticed *Caribou Hunt* (n.d.), an exquisite stonecut by Inuit artist Geeshee Akulukjuk, on display in the hallway. This is more than intricate carving painstakingly inked onto paper, more than a beautiful work of art celebrating the traditional sustaining and sustainable caribou hunt, rooted in Inuit culture, tradition, and storytelling—it captures the theme of this issue: Northern Economic Development.

And this is by no means a stretch. For *Caribou Hunt*[1] came from the North to markets in southern Canada through Canadian Arctic Producers via the artist's membership in the Pangnirtung Inuit Co-operative on Baffin Island in Nunavut (Ramrattan 2025). One of many in communities across the Canadian Arctic, this Co-op began as artists collectively organizing to create employment and develop economic development opportunities, and the marketing, sales, and shipping capacity required to bring their works to southern markets at fair, competitive prices, while retaining control and agency over their artistic production. And the model through which they organized was co-operative.

Co-operatives are jointly-owned, democratically-controlled, people-centred enterprises controlled by and for their members to realize shared economic, social, and cultural needs. Grounded in values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, co-operatives aspire to the ethical principles of fairness, equality, social responsibility, community engagement, sustainability, and resilience. Co-operatives are guided by seven key principles: 1) open and voluntary membership; 2) democratic member control; 3) economic participation by members; 4) autonomy and independence; 5) education and training; 6) co-operation among co-operatives; and 7) concern for community (International Cooperative Alliance 2024).

That *Caribou Hunt* is on display to every visitor to the CCSC, over 2,700 km south of Pangnirtung, is emblematic of not only the innovation, self-determination, and resilience of the people and communities of the Arctic, but the history of co-operatives in the Canadian North and the power of putting those principles to work. Today, Pangnirtung Co-op operates a retail grocery

and general merchandise store, a hotel, cable service and property rentals—and continues to produce, market, and sell arts and crafts. The co-op is, and always has been, owned and governed by the people of Pangnirtung.

Caribou Hunt came to market from Pangnirtung's Co-op through membership in Canadian Arctic Producers (CAP). Founded in 1965, CAP was incorporated by twelve such co-operatives, in collaboration with the Canadian government, to produce and market arts and crafts, by Inuit artists and artisans, for Inuit artists and artisans—ensuring revenues generated were returned to the artists and their communities (Katilvik n.d.). In 1972, CAP merged with Canadian Arctic Co-operative Federation, a network of local grocery and general merchandise service and support co-ops, to become Arctic Co-operatives Limited (ACL) (Lund 2021, 4). Celebrating sixty years of "promoting, protecting, and preserving Inuit and Dene art," CAP has evolved into the wholesale art marketing arm of Arctic Co-operatives Limited (Canadian Arctic Producers n.d.).

Based out of the support office in Winnipeg, Manitoba, today ACL serves thirty-three co-operatives, Indigenous member-owned and driven, across Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and the Yukon (Arctic Co-operatives Limited 2025a)—that is a geographic reach of over 3,000 km from Qikiqtarjuaq, Nunavut, in the east to Old Crow, Yukon, in the west, and the same again from the northernmost co-op in Grise Fiord (Canada's northernmost community, which lies 1,160 km north of the Arctic Circle)[2] to CAP's home base in Mississauga, Ontario, in the south.

The seven co-operative principles ensure co-ops remain inclusive, member-focused, and socially responsible, while promoting sustainable development and mutual support (International Cooperative Alliance 2024). This is demonstrated in the impetus behind ACL:

> Our members did not want people from outside their communities coming in and establishing businesses to provide services; we wanted to develop the services ourselves. We also wanted to keep the profits from our businesses and use them to develop new and better services for our members and provide employment within our communities. The Co-operative Model was the best way for us to meet these goals. (Arctic Co-operatives Limited 2025b)

While co-operatives were introduced to Arctic communities by government officials (Hammond-Ketilson and MacPherson 2001; Lund 2021)—often in service of colonial and sovereignty projects with interests vested outside those of the Indigenous Peoples in those communities—the "turnaround point" was member education. As co-op members learned about co-operative governance and business management and co-op principles, members assumed those principles and took responsibility for the co-ops and, as such, meeting their communities' needs through services that they empowered themselves to provide through the model. The co-ops provide a wide range of services including retail stores, hotel and tourism operations, cable television, arts and craft marketing, fuel distribution, construction, and property rental, and are home to everything from Canada Post outlets to banking and financial services. The services offered by each co-op are specific to the needs of their members and communities.

The co-op structure also allows for local control and profit retention within the communities they serve. In 2024, ACL posted sales of $340 million and net savings of $14.7 million, with $13.1 million in patronage returned to member communities. The regional impact of these local co-operatives is immense. In 2023, 1,109 local people, predominantly Indigenous, were employed across the local co-ops (Nunavut, Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and, at the time, Saskatchewan[3]), and paid wages of $44.1 million—money that largely stays in those communities. This is northern economic development that sustains communities and grows community wealth, rather than exploits northern resources and flows money out and south.

ACL's member co-ops are also major partners in subsidiaries, which provided $3.6 million in benefits to ACL in 2024 (Arctic Co-operatives Limited and Arctic Co-operative Development Fund 2025). For instance, ACL has a 38% stake in Nunavut Sealink and Supply Incorporated (NSSI), a freight service established in 2000 to ensure competitive rates and give member co-ops agency and decision-making power over crucial transportation, freight, and supply services in Nunavut, and to return profits back to the communities that NSSI was established to serve (Arctic Co-operatives Limited 2025c).

In 2023, $54.5 million in financing for local reinvestment in member communities was facilitated by the Arctic Co-operative Development Fund (ACDF), a financial services co-op controlled and owned by the local member co-ops to support their development, growth, and sustainability and that of the ACL system. The ACDF exemplifies co-operation amongst co-operatives (Principle 6) and is "a striking example of how co-operatives working together can create collective capital and share resources in the common good" (Hammond-Ketilson and MacPherson 2001, 27), but also how community needs assessment and buy-in make for viable and sustainable economic development. For while ACDF ensures resources and capital are available to co-ops and for communities to start, develop, and grow co-ops, as ACL Vice President, Governance & Member Relations Mary Nirlungayuk explains, the impetus always "has to come from the community itself before it can get started" (Co-operatives First 2020). This is but one of the lessons

to be learned from northern co-operatives when it comes to northern economic development. And there are many more.

In the Spring 2009 issue of this journal, Ian MacPherson—renowned historian and venerated co-operative scholar, educator, practitioner, and activist—wrote an article entitled "What Has Been Learned Should be Studied and Passed On: Why the Northern Co-operative Experience Needs to be Considered More Seriously":

> They represent the mobilization of local resources, in the beginning often associated with arts and crafts, but also, and ultimately more importantly, a wide range of economic and associated social activity. Over the years, they have mobilized an impressive range of direct voluntary contributions, of social and human as well as financial capital, and of continuous engagement with the special dimensions of community-based enterprise. They are the result of remarkable ingenuity derived from both northern and southern resourcefulness. The co-ops, therefore, are more than they appear. They deserve to be more fully studied, understood, and appreciated, not least in the Arctic and northern regions themselves. Given their past and present roles, the co-ops provide models that the people of the Arctic and northern regions should ponder as they search for a future in which they try to maximize democratic control over local communities, meet pressing social issues, and cope with environmental change. (MacPherson 2009, 60)

Lessons have been learned, but while CCSC researchers and fellows have published excellent work on Arctic and Indigenous co-operatives (Findlay 2014; Pattison and Findlay 2010; Hammond-Ketilson and MacPherson 2001)—often featuring members of these communities as key informants—there has been a dearth of such research engagement in the past decade. This despite ACL continuing to grow, evolve, adapt, reorganize, and reprioritize. While many co-operatives are struggling with how to engage members, and make good on their commitment to the co-op principles and values, northern co-ops like ACL need to be—as MacPherson implored—considered more seriously. Because not only do they deserve to be "more fully studied, understood, and appreciated," but the entire sector has much more to learn from them.

And the CCSC has a number of initiatives that seek to do just that. Research is currently underway on the following projects that revisit ACL and visit anew, with fresh eyes, perspectives, and questions.

1. Community Powered: Celebrating Canadian Co-operatives Exhibition

Planning and research are kicking into high gear for the fall 2025 launch of this exhibition, presented by the Diefenbaker Canada Centre (DCC) in partnership with the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives,[4] as part of our activities around the United Nations International Year of the Co-operative. Through the lens of the seven principles, the exhibit and programming—including an online exhibit, guided and self-directed tours, school visits and educational programs, speakers, and events—will engage co-operators and communities through explorations of co-operative values; demonstrations of how co-operatives work; Indigenous co-operatives and decolonization; and co-operative history, art, research, education and archival materials. *Community Powered* will be on display in the DCC's 1,500 square foot gallery space, located in the Diefenbaker Building (home of the CCSC) at the University of Saskatchewan.

The exhibit will feature the history of Inuit artists and artisans who deployed the co-operative model to retain artistic and community control of their cultural production. This story will be told through the art and artists whose work made its way into University of Saskatchewan's collections through Inuit co-operatives—like Akulukjuk's *Caribou Hunt*, produced and marketed through Canadian Arctic Producers via the artist's membership in Pangnirtung Co-op. The research team is collaborating with CAP to trace works to their local northern co-operatives to tell the story of how Inuit co-operators seized the co-op model to create employment and training opportunities, build infrastructure, and develop economies and community wealth through their traditional cultural activities—from soapstone and whalebone carvings to sustainable hunting and fishing—in some of the most remote and underserved regions in Canada. This research and knowledge will be mobilized through guidebooks, educational programming, an exhibit catalogue, speakers and presentations, and journal articles.

2. Ivey Business Cases featuring Arctic Co-ops

The CCSC is currently working with Arctic Co-ops to write and publish compelling business cases and teaching notes for use in business school classrooms, exploring how ACL is using its co-operative DNA to develop innovative business and training strategies. While the International Centre for Co-operative Management (ICCM) published a recent and thorough case study on the history and operations of ACL (Lund 2021), the CCSC's focus will be on writing business cases specifically for submission to Ivey Publishing. Canada's leading provider of business case studies and the second-largest publisher of case studies in the world, Ivey cases are used in 96% of *The Economist's* top-ranked full-time MBA schools and 97% of the Bloomberg Best International Business

Schools (Ivey Publishing 2025). Intended to teach students business concepts, strategies, skills, and theories and how to apply them by putting them in the shoes of decision-makers, the CCSC's cases will put students in the shoes of real people at ACL—senior leaders, board directors, and members, at the local and federation level—addressing real-world crises and challenges, stepping into decisions they have made and their solutions to big problems faced by their co-operatives and communities.

Drawing from research on strategic deployment and design of balanced scorecards for co-operatives (Kaplan and Norton 1996; Dhamayantie 2018; Côté 2019), and Keddy's work on implementation and measuring the impact on employee engagement at ACL (Keddy 2024), research is underway on the first of these cases, which focuses on Arctic's monumental shift in strategy to prioritize ACL's mission, purpose, and co-operative principles in its adoption of a balanced scorecard (BSC) approach to evaluation and measurement. Students will learn about ACL and the co-operative model while applying their learning and theories—from change management to HR to strategy—through the scenario.

While the first ACL business case features southern co-operative leaders, as we build these relationships out into their northern member-owner co-operatives, research questions will be guided by the Expert Panel on the Future of Arctic and Northern Research in Canada's approach to Northern Research Leadership and Equity: "centering Northern experiences and prioritized approaches to research by and for the North" (Council of Canadian Academies 2023, 8–9). Genuine learning from the northern co-operative experience requires reversing the flow of learning from North to South, and future cases will endeavour to focus on Inuit leaders and northern communities, and the business decisions and situations they face in their co-operatives at the local and federation level.

3. Lessons from the Northern Co-operative Experience

While much has changed since MacPherson and long-time CCSC faculty and fellow Lou Hammond-Ketilson assessed the situation in 2001, this has not: northern co-operatives in general, and Arctic Co-ops in particular, have been, and continue to be, "one of the most important economic forces in the Canadian North—arguably the most important of those owned by northerners" (Hammond-Ketilson and MacPherson 2001, 26).

In future work the CCSC plans to delve into the "special sauce" of northern co-ops and what can and should be learned from how they are tackling big problems and challenges like food security, climate change, threats to sovereignty and sustainability, and provisioning the North. As Findlay writes,

> In its challenge to the non-cooperative economy, the Inuit experience stretches the terms of co-operative engagement, substituting interdependence for independence and reimagining the seventh of the seven co-operative principles—concern for community—to include the land and all that it sustains and is sustained by. (Findlay 2014, 55)

This will apply work and theories on what makes co-operatives—and northern co-operatives in particular—resilient, successful, enduring, and adaptable, and the lessons learned from that should inform co-op development and northern economic development in the future (Novkovic 2008; MacPherson 2009; Findlay 2014). It will also seek to evaluate ACL's practices and strategies through the lens of mission drift and other factors that have been identified as contributors to the failure of co-operatives (Fulton and Couchman 2015; Fulton et al. 2009; Pigeon 2020)—anticipating and flagging potential threats and challenges to the co-operative.

Returning to the northern economic development theme of this issue of the *Northern Review*, the CCSC's in-progress and proposed research will contribute to understanding how, where, and why, MacPherson (2009) argues,

> co-ops should figure prominently in how the people of the northern regions envision and build their futures; in how governments develop policies to encourage enriched communities and sustainable economies. In doing so, they will invariably encounter enriched communities and sustainable economies, the frustrations and possibilities, that have dominated northern co-operative development for generations and they will continue to do so. They will be able to learn, however, how people in the existing movement, southern and Indigenous, overcame obstacles and built a successful movement. (MacPherson 2009, 77)

What has not changed in the quarter century since MacPherson wrote those words is this: in any discussion of northern economic development, serious consideration should be given to the northern co-operative experience—what has been learned, what should be studied, and what needs to be passed on. And this is how the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives will contribute to informing those discussions.

Notes

1. While *Caribou Hunt* is not dated, for context, Pangnirtung Inuit Co-operative Limited (incorporated as the Pangnirtung Eskimo Co-operative) was formed in May of 1968; the print shop was established in 1969, and the first collection was released in 1973 (Inuit Circumpolar Council Archives n.d.; Inuit Art Foundation 2018). While acquisition records are spotty, Akulukjuk's stonecut made it into the collection of the Institute for Northern Studies, which donated it to the University of Saskatchewan in 1980 before the Institute was phased out starting in 1981 (University of Saskatchewan Library 2012).
2. The founding of what now describes itself as "the most 'vibrant' community in Nunavut" (Hamlet of Grise Fiord n.d.a) is a dark chapter in Canadian colonial history. To strengthen Canada's claim to High Arctic territory during the Cold War, the government established Grise Fiord through forced relocation of eight Inuit families from Inukjuak, Quebec, with false promises of abundance and support, abandonment, and exploitation to strengthen Canada's claim to the High Arctic through a permanently occupied northernmost settlement (Hamlet of Grise Fiord n.d.b). Today Grise Fiord is home to around 150 people, many of whom are member-owners of a thriving co-op that includes a multi-service store (including groceries, hunting equipment, local arts and crafts, and the post office) and hotel. For more on the history and survivor accounts of Grise Fiord—and a parallel forced relocation to establish Resolute Bay—see the National Film Board of Canada's documentary *Broken Promises — The High Arctic Relocation* (Tassinari 1995).
3. Île-à-la-Crosse Co-operative Association was incorporated in 2020, and opened in 2022 as the one Saskatchewan-based Co-op in the ACL federation (White and Fulton 2022). In 2024, the assets of the Île-à-la-Crosse Co-operative Association were sold to the Meadow Lake Co-op, a member of Federated Co-operative Limited, which continues to operate a food store in the northern community (Arctic Co-operatives Limited and Arctic Co-operative Development Fund 2025, 12).
4. The University of Saskatchewan Library and Archives, Kenderdine Art Gallery/College Art Galleries (KAG-CAG), and Saskatchewan Co-operative Association (SCA), as well as Canadian Arctic Producers (CAP), are collaborators on *Community Powered.*

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Research Perspective

The Canadian Rangers: A Force Multiplier for the Canadian Armed Forces in the Territorial North

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Abstract: The Canadian Rangers are a part-time, non-commissioned, community-based subcomponent of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). The Rangers operate in Canada's three territories and the northern regions of many Canadian provinces. This article focuses on the nearly 2,000 Canadian Rangers (specifically those in the First Canadian Rangers Patrol Group, 1CRPG) living in 65 communities throughout the Canadian Territorial North. Most Rangers in 1CRPG are Indigenous. This article examines the tangible and intangible value the Rangers provide to the CAF and the Canadian government, particularly in supporting Canada's security and sovereignty. It argues that the Rangers have existed for eighty years as a force multiplier for the CAF through their direct connections to the communities where they live, their intimate knowledge of the nearby land and waters, and their skills in surviving the harsh northern climate. The re-election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency and his isolationist and trade threats have caused Canadians to be more supportive of increased military spending. The security role of the Rangers within this higher level of military spending should be supportive of the CAF and focused on their skills and knowledge of northern conditions. This article concludes that the Canadian government can reinforce its sovereignty in the Territorial North and encourage sustainable northern economic development by supporting the Rangers in mobilizing northern people to continue building communities that are even more self-reliant and resilient.

The Northern Review 57: 85–119 https://doi.org/10.22584/nr57.2025.009
Published at Yukon University, Whitehorse, Canada | CC BY 4.0