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New Perspectives on Northern Economies

Research Article

The Changing Nature of the Social Economy in the Yukon: The Transformation of a Frontier Culture

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Abstract: The Yukon and the rest of the Canadian North have undergone tremendous social, cultural, and economic change over the past sixty years. Northern communities have experienced processes of development quite different from most other communities in Canada. These processes have resulted in many unique challenges. One of the ways northern communities have responded to these challenges is through the social economy—the use of community-based organizations that are neither profit-oriented or part of the government sector. Researchers have noted the particular importance of this sector for the North. Research has also noted regional differences within the Canadian North, and in particular between the Yukon and the rest of the region. The vestiges of a "frontier mentality" limited the use of co-operatives and other community-based organizations in the territory. More recent research has shown that social economy organizations have grown much faster in the Yukon than in other regions of the North. This article discusses the degree to which we can link this growth to a transformation in the traditional frontier culture of the Yukon.

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Article de recherche originale

La nature changeante de l'économie sociale au Yukon : La transformation d'une culture frontalière

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Résumé: Le Yukon, comme le reste du Nord canadien, a connu d'importantes transformations sociales, culturelles et économiques au cours des soixante dernières années. Les communautés nordiques ont connu des processus de développement assez différents de ceux de la plupart des communautés canadiennes. Ces processus ont engendré plusieurs enjeux spécifiques. L'une des façons dont ces communautés ont répondu à ces défis est par l'entremise de l'économie sociale — c'est-à-dire l'utilisation d'organisations communautaires qui ne sont ni à but lucratif ni gouvernementales. Des chercheurs ont noté la singularité de ce secteur pour le Nord. Ils ont aussi noté des différences régionales au sein du Nord canadien, notamment entre le Yukon et le reste de la région. Les vestiges de la « mentalité frontalière » ont limité l'utilisation des coopératives et autres organisations communautaires dans ce territoire. Des recherches récentes ont montré que les organisations d'économie sociale ont crû beaucoup plus rapidement au Yukon que dans d'autres régions du Nord. Cet article examine dans quelle mesure cette croissance peut être liée à une transformation de la culture frontalière traditionnelle au Yukon.

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The Yukon and the rest of the Canadian North have undergone tremendous social, cultural, and economic change over the past sixty years.[1] Northern communities have gone through processes of development quite different from most other communities in Canada. These processes have resulted in many unique challenges. One of the ways northern communities have responded to these challenges is through the social economy—the use of community-based organizations that are neither profit-oriented nor part of the government sector. These organizations, which seek to empower communities by developing social capital and human capital capacity through assisting non-profit, voluntary, and co-operative organizations, work more effectively in the interests of their communities. Researchers have noted that the social economy has a special importance for northern communities due to the central place of Indigenous traditions, the mixed economy, and the relative isolation of communities (Abele and Southcott 2016; Southcott 2015).

At the same time, research has indicated that the nature of the social economy varies by the region of the Canadian North (Southcott and Walker 2015). In particular, researchers have pointed out the specific nature of the social economy in the Yukon. The Yukon has had the highest number of organizations per capita in the North, but groups in the Yukon tend to be smaller in size and with less structure—many organizations lack formal budgets and employees and rely more heavily on volunteers. One of the most noticeable differences between the Yukon and other regions in the North is the relative absence of formal co-operatives (Lionais and Hardy 2015). Lionais and Hardy suggest that the unique nature of the social economy in the Yukon is related to the fact that the region has traditionally been linked to resource-extraction industries that are seen to provide economic growth, and which therefore dominate the "political imagination" of the Yukon. According to these researchers, "the rugged frontier capitalism of placer gold mining still holds much of the imagination of Yukoners" (163).

Yet as Coates and Morrison point out in their history of the Yukon, since the Second World War the state has played an important part in the social and economic development of the Yukon (Coates and Morrison 2005). Since the mid-twentieth century, the Canadian North has largely been the "Bureaucrats' North" and the Yukon is no different (Coates 1985). The continued highlighting of the frontier past of the Yukon seems to be a contradiction to the reality of a society where the public sector plays such an important role. At the same time, mining is still seen by many as the foundation of the Yukon economy. Placer gold mining continues to exist in the region, and while it provides little in terms of direct employment or wealth, it provides indirect value to the Yukon—as a cultural export in the form of television productions—as well as being a relatively stable economic

activity (Johnson et al. 2024; Lazenby 2015). Large capital-intensive mining projects have largely replaced individualistic placer mining since the opening of the Faro mine in 1969, but these have been prone to boom-and-bust development cycles. Still, the continued importance of mining in the Yukon can be seen as keeping aspects of the frontier imagination alive (Huskey and Southcott 2016).

Despite the continued importance of mining in the social imagination of the Yukon, recent research on the social economy in the region has revealed that the territory has gone through important social and economic changes in the past twenty years—much of it unrelated to mining. A survey of the social economy sector undertaken in 2023 shows that this sector of the Yukon's economy has experienced tremendous growth. Much of this growth is related to a rapid change in the socio-demographics of the territory. The image of the Yukoner as a rugged individualistic placer miner, as still seen on Yukon licence plates, is being replaced by a new type of Yukoner, with a high level of formal education and a new attitude towards what is important in the region. This article discusses the results of this research in an attempt to determine what impact the changing nature of the social economy, and the changing nature of the people who make up this new social economy, could be seen as a part of the transformation of the traditional frontier political imagination of the territory.

A History of the Yukon Social Economy

For almost all of the history of human habitation of the Yukon, social and economic needs were met by the social economy. The term has been used to refer to the traditional and cooperative relationships that exist within Indigenous communities and the social relations that characterize their subsistence economies. Natcher has noted the work of anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1931, which drew attention to the fact that "the economies of Aboriginal peoples not only entail highly specialized modes of resource production, but also involve the transmission of social values" (Natcher 2009). This interpretation of the social economy continues to exist in northern research (Harder and Wenzel 2012). The Indigenous communities of the Yukon can be seen as having been based on relationships similar to what today are called part of the social economy.

The first large-scale movement of non-Indigenous populations into the region started with the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s. This resulted in a rapid migration of primarily single working-age males into the Dawson City area gold fields during the years from 1898 to 1901. The in-migration was short lived, with many migrating out of the region after a short period of time (Coates and Morrison 2005).

This gold rush was unique as a pattern in the Canadian North in that the migrants arrived in the region as hopeful prospectors and placer miners, people who were individual entrepreneurs and risk takers rather than employees. In this context, while short-term co-operation may have happened, the situation was not conducive to the formation of formal social economy organizations. The dream of adventure and quick wealth, combined with the romantic lure of gold mining that had developed in the American West in the second half of the nineteenth century, created unique conditions to attract thousands, many of whom were Americans, to the gold fields (Southcott 2010). Indigenous communities were destroyed and others marginalized, lessening the influence of Indigenous traditions on the formation of the social economy (Cooke 2016). This brief period of the Yukon's history has had a major cultural imprint on the territory—one that differentiated it from other parts of the Canadian North. As mentioned above, at least one study has indicated that the influence of an individualistic culture partially explains a relative lack of cooperative organizations (Lionais and Hardy 2015).

From a symbolic perspective, the Klondike gold rush is probably the most well-known mining development in the Canadian North. At its start, it can be seen to have followed what American historian Frederick Jackson Turner refers to as the "frontier" model of development (Turner 1920). For Turner, the frontier in North America was at the border of wilderness, or "savagery" and civilization. Its conditions produced

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (Turner 1920, 37)

Others have noted that in Canada, it produced a culture of "frontier masculinity" (Kikkert and Lackenbauer 2017). Yet the actual economic situation that produced these cultural images did not last long. Within ten years of the initial discovery of gold in the Dawson area, a shift in the economic structure of the gold mining industry had already occurred. A rationalization of the industry resulted in the transformation of it from one based on individual risk-takers to industrial wage workers (Coates and Morrison 2005, 157). The need for new technology to rationalize the production process meant that the government had to work closely with American and British investors to continue development on the gold fields.

Less than ten years after the initial discovery of gold, industrial activity in the Canadian North was dominated by a new logic based on close cooperation and planning between the national government and international capital. This was the logic followed in later industrial developments in the Canadian North, such as silver and lead mining in the Mayo and Keno City region of the Yukon starting in 1906.

This logic became even more prevalent following the Second World War when American government actions, with some help from Canada, had rapidly established new transportation systems in the Canadian North, such as the Alaska Highway along with a series of northern landing strips and air bases. In the eyes of many, these developments legitimized the superior nature of industrial developments planned by both government officials and large industrial interests. Following the war, industrial activity in the Territorial North became almost entirely controlled by the federal government as the region became "the bureaucrat's north" (Coates 1985, 191).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to say what impact these socio-historic conditions had on the development of the social economy in the region during the twentieth century. Indigenous traditions linked to the mixed economy, the role of the state, and dependence on natural resource exploitation can be expected to have had an impact on the type, form, operation, and development of social economy organization in the Yukon. Each of these factors impact the social economy in different ways. It is not a simple matter of saying that this factor will have a positive impact or that factor will have a negative impact. The reality will be much more complex. Since there were no studies of the social economy in the twentieth century, and few records related to voluntary and non-profit organizations in the Yukon, we have little idea, beyond anecdotal evidence, about what the impacts of these unique conditions were on the region's social economy.[2] If "frontier individualism" imprinted itself on the Yukon's settler society early, then such a culture would likely be averse to using the social economy to provide services that could be supplied by the private sector. The type of individualism supposedly inherent in a frontier culture would see little value in the social co-operation necessary for the successful operation of formal social economy organizations. It can be assumed that such a culture, if it valued the social economy sector at all, would prefer less-institutionalized, volunteer-based organizations.

The first clear idea we get of the social economy in the Yukon came with surveys conducted by the Social Economy Research Network for Northern Canada (SERNNoCa), and associated research, conducted from 2006 to 2013. This project started with a definition of the social economy that included community-based organizations that were neither profit-oriented nor part of government.[3] They were "part of a stakeholder economy, whose enterprises are created for

and by those with common needs, and accountable to those they are meant to serve" (Southcott 2009, 4). At that time, the research was able to show that social economy organizations in the North were more numerous than in other regions of Canada (Southcott and Walker 2015). It was also able to show that there were important differences between the social economy sector of the Yukon and other regions of the Canadian North. The first difference was that the Yukon had a higher per capita number of social economy organizations than the rest of the region. In addition, compared to the averages for the Territorial North, it had a much higher percentage of social economy organizations engaged in sports, recreation and tourism, as well as in arts and culture. The Yukon had a lower percentage of social economy organizations engaged in trade, finance and/or insurance as well as development and housing (Southcott and Walker 2015, 35). This is linked to the relative absence of co-operatives in the retail trade sector in the Yukon when compared to Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Only 2% of social economy organizations in the Yukon were co-operatives compared to 25% in Nunavut (37). While the social economy sector in the Yukon was bigger, and organizations were slightly older than in other regions, it was also less institionalized in the sense that a higher percentage were primarily volunteer organizations. At least 88% of social economy organizations in the Yukon used volunteers for their activities compared to 55% in Nunavut (Southcott and Walker 2015, 38). An important difference between the Yukon and other regions of the Canadian North, suggested as an explanation for some of the social economy differences, was the percentage of the population identifying as Indigenous. In 2011, 25.1% of the Yukon population identified as being Indigenous compared to 50.3% in the Northwest Territories, and 85% in Nunavut (Southcott and Walker 2015, 28).

A study conducted in 2007 noted the importance of the volunteer sector in Whitehorse and the surrounding area (Johnston and Twynam 2009). Through the study of volunteering for the 2007 Canada Winter Games, the researchers were able to isolate reasons why volunteering was so strong in the Whitehorse area. Some of the most important reasons expressed included a desire to feel part of the community, to create a better society, and to put something back into the community (109).

The image one gets of the social economy sector of the Yukon in 2013, when updating SERNNoCa's database concluded, was that it was vibrant and growing. At the same time, compared to the other regions of the Canadian North, the social economy of the Yukon was largely based on volunteers and was more oriented towards sports and recreational needs and art and cultural needs, of the territory. In other regions, social economy organizations were more engaged in responding to the social challenges of the region in health, housing, and development, as well as trade and finance.

Socio-Demographic Change in the Yukon

Additional funding enabled another study in 2023, to compare against what SERNNoCa found before 2013. Before examining these changes, it is useful to look at overall changes in the region. As noted in previous work, in the past, socio-economic shifts in the region were often linked to resource development projects opening or coming to an end (Huskey and Southcott 2010; Southcott 2015). Between 2013 and 2023, mining was relatively important for the Yukon economy and several mines opened and closed. The impacts of these changes can best be seen in changes in the population of the region during this period.

Table 1 shows the changes in population from 2011 to 2021 for five regions in the Canadian North. The data shows that changes varied greatly between regions. The population of the Yukon increased by over 18% during this period. Both Nunavut and Nunavik also saw substantial population growth at 15.5% and 16.2% respectively. One can assume that such drastic changes in the population, and the variances among the regions, would have impacts on their social economies. Despite growth in Nunavut, Nunavik, and the Yukon, the population of both the Northwest Territories and Labrador actually decreased slightly during this time period—by 0.9% in the NWT and by 0.3% in Labrador.

Table 1. Population in the Canadian North, 2011 to 2021, for five regions: the three territories, the Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT), and Nunavut, and the northern regions of the provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Census Year	Yukon	NWT	Nunavut	Nunavik	Labrador
2011	33,897	41,462	31,906	12,090	26,728
2016	35,874	41,786	35,944	13,188	27,197
2021	40,232	41,070	36,858	14,050	26,655

Source: All census data for this article was obtained from Census Profiles of Statistics Canada, 2001 to 2021:
https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/2775ad9a-8a68-4455-bf88-7b05d7ef6f87
https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/english/profil01/CP01/Index.cfm?Lang=E
https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E
https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E
Data for the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut are based on the territory; data for Nunavik is based on the Nunavik Health Region; and data for Labrador is based on the federal electoral district.

Comparing population growth in the Yukon between 2016 and 2021, one can see that the population increased by 4,358, or more that 12.1%, the highest growth in Canada (Hatherly 2022). This was more than twice Canada's overall growth rate of 5.2% for this period. Statistics Canada referred to the increase in population in the Yukon as comparable to another gold rush. They noted that this rush had started slowly in 2001, following declines in late 1990s linked to the closure of the Faro and other mines in the early 1990s (Statistics Canada 2022). The study by Statistics Canada noted that, unlike the situation prior to the 1990s, when growth was largely due to mining and infrastructure projects in several smaller communities of the Yukon, recent growth was largely limited to Whitehorse and, to a lesser extent, Dawson City. They noted that in Whitehorse alone, there were "1,266 more dwellings built over this five-year period to house the additional 3,116 inhabitants" (Statistics Canada 2022).

While Indigenous communities are largely maintaining their populations, the rapid urbanization of the Yukon population in Whitehorse, and the lessening demographic importance of smaller communities—that once were the foundation of the mining sector of the Yukon—are leading to a call for changes in the Yukon, including changes to a political system that gives unequal representation to urban voters (Halliday 2024). In 2021, the City of Whitehorse represented 70% of the population of the Yukon. In 1996, after the closure of the Faro mine, Whitehorse represented 62% of the Yukon's population. If one includes the communities adjacent to the City of Whitehorse, the Whitehorse Census agglomeration represented 79% of the total population of the Yukon in 2021.

This urbanization of the Yukon population is happening alongside other important socio-demographic changes.[4] Industrial employment has also changed. Table 2 shows the changes in industrial employment in the Yukon from 2001 to 2021. What is interesting in this data is that mining represents a small percentage of overall direct employment in the Yukon during this period. In the 1991 Census, the Yukon was listed as having 990 people employed in mining, a figure that represented 5.9% of all jobs in the territory. By 2001, only 430 people worked directly in mining, including those in oil and gas extraction. It is true that 2001 was a bad year for mining, with only placer gold activities providing employment in this sector. By 2021, employment in mining and oil and gas increased to 675 as both the Minto Mine and the Eagle Gold Mine were in operation at the time. Still, mining jobs only represented 2.9% of all employment in the Yukon in 2021. Part of the explanation for the decrease in mining jobs is not so much the reduced importance of mining for the Yukon economy, but rather both technological change and the shift to fly-in, fly-out employment strategies (Finnegan and Jacobs 2015; Jones and Southcott 2015).

Table 2. Labour force aged 15 years and over, by industry, percent of total labour force in Yukon Territory in 2001 and 2021, based on the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS)

	2001		2021	
Total, all industries	17,665		23,140	
11 Agriculture, forestry, fishing & hunting	285	1.61%	365	1.58%
21 Mining and oil & gas extraction	430	2.43%	675	2.92%
22 Utilities	145	0.82%	215	0.93%
23 Construction	1,400	7.93%	2,045	8.84%
31–33 Manufacturing	385	2.18%	300	1.30%
41 Wholesale trade	330	1.87%	290	1.25%
44–45 Retail trade	1,940	10.98%	2,230	9.64%
48–49 Transportation & warehousing	770	4.36%	865	3.74%
51 Information & cultural industries	695	3.93%	555	2.40%
52 Finance & insurance	370	2.09%	320	1.38%
53 Real estate and rental & leasing	200	1.13%	300	1.30%
54 Professional, scientific & technical services	740	4.19%	1,240	5.36%
55 Management of companies and enterprises	10	0.06%	0	0%
56 Administrative and support, waste management, remediation	585	3.31%	610	2.64%
61 Educational services	1,180	6.68%	1,730	7.48%
62 Health care and social assistance	1,585	8.97%	2,745	11.86%
71 Arts, entertainment and recreation	555	3.14%	635	2.74%
72 Accommodation and food services	1,595	9.03%	1,285	5.55%
81 Other services (except public administration)	725	4.10%	945	4.08%
91 Public administration	3,735	21.14%	5,785	25%

Source: Statistics Canada 2002. 2001 Community Profiles. Released June 27, 2002. Last modified: 2005-11-30. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 93F0053XIE. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/english/Profil01/CP01/Index.cfm?Lang=E

While Table 2 shows us that mining employment increased slightly from 2001 to 2021, the categories that showed the largest increases were public administration as well as health care and social assistance. There were 2,050 more jobs in public administration in 2021 than in 2001, and 1,160 more jobs in health care and social assistance. The next largest increases were in construction, with 645 more jobs, followed by educational services with an increase of 550 jobs, and professional, scientific, and technical services with 500 jobs. It is evident that employment in the Yukon, outside of the construction sector, is increasingly based on "white collar" jobs in the public sector that are dependent on higher levels of formal education.

These changes are borne out by an examination of changes in levels of education in the Yukon. In 2001, there were 3,570 people living in the Yukon who had a university degree or higher as their highest level of formal education. By 2021 this number was 8,965, an increase of 151%. Indeed, the Yukon now has a population with a higher level of education than the Canadian average. For Canada as a whole, 26.7% of the population has a university degree or higher, while for the Yukon the percentage is 27.4%. Comparable figures for the other territories are 22.1% for the Northwest Territories and 10.6% for Nunavut.

Another interesting change that is noticeable when looking at the data for the highest level of education in the Yukon is the gender difference. As seen in Table 3, as concerns the working age population between the ages of 25 and 64, 38.9% of women in the Yukon have a university degree or higher compared to only 26.5% of men. This gender difference in education helps explain the fact that women now dominate employment in those industries that require higher levels of formal education. In 2021, women represented 57.6% of people employed in public administration, 71.7% of those employed in educational services, and 79.4% of those employed in health care and social assistance sectors.

These changes outlined confirm that society in the Yukon, while perhaps still placing importance on the frontier image that dominated its early settler history, has changed substantially away from the type of society that produced this image. Perhaps the most important indicator that the frontier society of the early twentieth century was becoming less of a reality was the negotiation and signing of modern comprehensive land claim agreements in the Yukon between 1993 and 2006. These treaties reduced the marginalization of Indigenous communities that a frontier society had promoted (Cameron 2019). In addition, as seen in our discussion above, Yukon society has become increasingly urbanized. Its economy has become increasingly dependent on the service sector. Educational levels have increased to the point where the Yukon is now one of the most highly educated jurisdictions in Canada. Finally, the economy and society of the territory has become increasingly feminized as women play a bigger role in the leading sectors of the economy.

Table 3. Yukon population 25 to 64 years of age, highest level of schooling, by gender, 2021.

	Men+		Women+	
Highest certificate, diploma, or degree for the population aged 25 to 64 years in private households*	10,950		11,945	
No certificate, diploma or degree	1,385	12.6%	845	7.1%
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	2,715	24.8%	2,465	20.6%
Post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree	6,855	62.6%	8,635	72.3%
Post-secondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	3,960	36.2%	3,990	33.4%
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	1,715	15.7%	475	4.0%
Non-apprenticeship trades certificate or diploma	445	4.1%	290	2.4%
Apprenticeship certificate	1,275	11.6%	185	1.5%
College, CEGEP, or non-university certificate or diploma	1,905	17.4%	2,955	24.7%
University certificate or diploma below bachelor	340	3.1%	560	4.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	2,900	26.5%	4,645	38.9%
Bachelor's degree	1,845	16.8%	2,850	23.9%
University certificate or diploma above bachelor	165	1.5%	280	2.3%
Degree in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine	55	0.5%	70	0.6%
Master's degree	730	6.7%	1,360	11.4%
Earned doctorate	100	0.9%	85	0.7%

Notes: * from the sample data from long-form questionnaire completed by 25% of households)

Source: Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

The Changing Social Economy of the Yukon

What is the impact of these changes on the social economy of the region? The study undertaken in 2023 can help shed some light on this question. Although limited resources did not allow as extensive a survey as was done previously, it allowed us to update the lists of social economy organizations in the same five regions of the Canadian North. This new "census" of the social economy allows us to compare the situation in 2023 to that of 2013. What was immediately noticeable was the growth of the social economy in the Yukon as shown in Table 4. Labrador, Nunavik, and Nunavut also saw growth in the number of social economy organizations, but to a much lesser extent than the Yukon. The Northwest Territories saw a decline in the number of social economy organizations between 2013 and 2023.

Table 4. Change in number of social economy organizations: 2013 to 2023 for territories, and northern/Arctic areas of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador

Year	Labrador	Nunavik	Nunavut	NWT	Yukon	Total for North
2013	168	42	256	303	570	1,339
2023	248	49	286	250	838	1,671
Total Change	80	7	30	-53	268	332

The number of social economy organizations in the Yukon increased by 268, or 47%, from 2013 to 2023. As seen in Table 5, groups engaged in sports and recreation represent those social economy organizations that had the largest increase. There were 88 more groups in this category in 2023 compared to 2013. The next largest increase was in groups engaged in law, advocacy, and politics, whose numbers increased by 57 from 2013 to 2023. Groups engaged in arts and culture had the next highest growth in numbers. These organizations increased by 36 from 2013 to 2023, from 88 to 124. No category of activity saw a decrease in the numbers of organizations from 2013 to 2023 as far as the Yukon was concerned. All activity categories saw more groups in 2023 than existed in 2013.

What is evident is that the changes the Yukon has experienced recently have not had a negative impact on the growth of its social economy sector. In terms of numbers of organizations, the Yukon has seen substantial growth. Indeed, its growth has been much higher than in other areas of the Canadian North. There is increasing demand for the social economy to provide services for leisure activities for an increasingly urbanized and better educated population—both in terms of sports and recreational activities, as well as arts and culture. At the same time, there appears to be an increasing interest in becoming involved in organizations dealing with law, advocacy, and politics. It is important to note that these are organizations that tend to be less institutionalized and more dependent on volunteers than other types of organizations (Southcott and Walker 2015).

The changes that occurred in the social economy sector of the Yukon between 2013 and 2023 also indicate that there are increasing differences between this region and other regions of the Canadian North. Generally, the most important difference is that the social economy of the Yukon is more strongly focused on sports and recreation organizations than in other areas of the region. Table 6 shows that these organizations represent 27.2% of all social economy organizations in the Yukon. Looking at totals for the entire Canadian North, we see these groups only represent 20.3% of all social economy organizations. Similar, but less extreme differences are found in law, advocacy, and politics-based organizations and arts and culture organizations. These organizations are a larger part of the Yukon social economy than in the other regions of the Canadian North.

Table 5. Social economy organizations by activities: The Yukon 2013 and 2023

	2013		2023	
	Number of organizations	% within Region	Number of organizations	% within Region
Law, Advocacy, and Politics	59	10.4%	116	13.8%
Arts & Culture	88	15.4%	124	14.8%
Business Association or a Professional Association	50	8.8%	66	7.9%
Development and Housing	17	3.0%	18	2.1%
Education	28	4.9%	39	4.7%
Environment	37	6.5%	41	4.9%
Health	24	4.2%	27	3.2%
Manufacturing, processing, and/or construction	2	0.4%	5	0.6%
Religion	41	7.2%	54	6.4%
Social services	43	7.5%	49	5.8%
Sports & Recreation	140	24.6%	228	27.2%
Grant-making, Fundraising, and Voluntarism Promotion	41	7.2%	63	7.5%
Trade, Finance, and/or Insurance	0	0.0%	8	1.0%
Total	570	100.0%	838	100.0%

Several types of organizations seem less important in the Yukon than in the rest of the Canadian North. The most significant difference is that concerning organizations dealing with development and housing. For the Canadian North as a whole, these groups represent 5.4% of all social economy organizations while in the Yukon they are only 2.1% of the social economy sector. The next most significant difference is the number of groups involved in social services. These types of organizations represent 9% of all social economy organizations in the Canadian North. In the Yukon, only 5.8% of social economy organizations are engaged in these types of activities. Another important difference concerns educational services. Social economy organizations dealing with educational issues represent 7.4% of all social economy organizations in the Canadian North while the corresponding percentage in the Yukon is 4.7%. Finally, in terms of using cooperatives to provide retail trade, finance, and/or insurance services, the difference that we saw in 2013 between the Yukon and other areas of the Canadian North, continues to exist in 2023. These types of activities represent 3.7% of the social economy sector for the entire North but only 1% in the Yukon.

Table 6. Social economy organizations by activities 2023: The Yukon and Canadian North

	Yukon	Canadian North
	%	%
Law, Advocacy, and Politics	13.8%	11.1%
Arts and Culture	14.8%	13.1%
Business Association or a Professional Association	7.9%	8.0%
Development and Housing	2.1%	5.4%
Education	4.7%	7.4%
Environment	4.9%	3.8%
Health	3.2%	3.5%
Manufacturing, Processing, and/or Construction	0.6%	0.3%
Religion	6.4%	8.4%
Social Services	5.8%	9.0%
Sports and Recreation	27.2%	20.3%
Grant-making, Fundraising, and Voluntarism Promotion	7.5%	5.9%
Trade, Finance, and/or Insurance	1.0%	3.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Observations

Data from the 2023 study shows that the social economy still represents an important sector of Yukon society. Indeed, numbers of organizations have increased substantially since 2013. While it is difficult to link changes in the social economy directly to other changes in the Yukon, it does appear that an increasingly urban, educated, and service sector-based society continues to see the social economy sector as an important means to provide services to Yukon communities, including Whitehorse. An important difference perhaps to the other regions of the Canadian North is that the social economy of the Yukon is increasingly oriented towards providing recreational and leisure services while in other regions, organizations are more focused on dealing with important social challenges such as housing, social services, and education.

A major reason for these differences is the demographic differences between the Yukon and the other regions of the North. While the overall population of the Yukon grew substantially, the percentage of the population that identified as Indigenous declined from 25.1% in 2011 to 22.2% in 2021. Differences in the

relative size of Indigenous Peoples in Yukon society compared to other regions of the Canadian North were used to explain differences in the Yukon social economy compared to other regions of the Canadian North in the original SERNNoCa study. It is likely these differences remain and are indeed increasing.

The non-Indigenous population of the Yukon has increased substantially since the original SERNNoCa research was carried out from 2007 to 2013. Increasingly, the typical resident of the Yukon, is urbanized, works in the public sector, and is highly educated. Women occupy an increasing role in the Yukon paid economy. The new Yukoner continues to place a large degree of importance on the social economy sector. However, unlike other areas of the Canadian North where the social economy is used more directly to deal with social challenges and economic needs, the Yukoners increasingly value social economy organizations to provide recreational and leisure services.

The demographic changes that are occurring in the Yukon can be seen to be quite different from that of a frontier society, at least that described by Frederick Jackson Turner. For Turner, the frontier was the antithesis to urban life—it was the "outer margin of the 'settled area'" (Turner 2008, 2). It was also "intolerant of administrative experience and education" (16). Given that the Yukon is becoming increasingly urbanized and that it is being urbanized by the increasing importance of public administration to its economy, and that this administration increasingly depends on education, one can reasonably ask the question whether the historic frontier imagery of the Yukon is becoming less acceptable to the new Yukoner. This is especially the case given that the frontier thesis is increasingly linked to some of the worst abuses of settler colonialism (Altenbernd and Trimble Young 2014).

Does this mean that the historic valuation of the Yukon as a frontier is in decline? Since the traditional frontier culture of the Yukon has been seen as important for shaping the social economy of the Yukon, does this mean that these unique aspects of the Yukon social economy are disappearing? The sociologist Max Weber was always critical of the Marxist idea that cultural change follows economic change (Weber 2002). For Weber, culture can be somewhat independent of economic change. Indeed, while economic conditions in the Yukon bear little in common with the frontier conditions of the gold rush era, this has been the case for some time now and yet the frontier image continues to be valued as part of the Yukon identity. Indeed, economic reasons for its continued existence can be seen in its use by the territory's tourism sector—although in a revised version that places greater importance on Indigenous culture.

It is difficult to say if the Yukon's unique frontier culture is in decline. Social media provides us with constant examples of people going to the Yukon to experience the frontier (Tukker 2022). Yet it is clear that this culture is being transformed. In the word of one author, at least in Whitehorse it is being gentrified (Nelson 2024). The increasing presence of a highly educated population that is only marginally dependent on the mining sector, along with an awareness of past negative impacts of the frontier mentality, especially as regards women and Indigenous communities, is creating a more cosmopolitan frontier culture, one that tries to accentuate the positive aspects of this culture.

In terms of changes to the social economy sector, the 2023 study indicates little has actually changed to indicate that the particularities of the Yukon social economy, supposedly linked to the importance of the frontier mentality, have not disappeared. While a few new co-operatives exist, they still play much less of a role than in other regions of the Canadian North. Most new social economy organizations in the Yukon continue to be less institutionalized and more dependent on volunteers than elsewhere.

Notes

1. For the purposes of the social economy research done for the SERNNoCa project, the Canadian North was defined as the three territories, Nunavik, and Labrador. As indicated, for some of the research, analysis was limited to the three territories due to data issues.
2. Some records do exist of social economy organizations as well as occasional listings of community organizations. Future archival work could help us clarify the development of the social economy during this period.
3. While for-profit enterprises were normally excluded, those with clear social purposes are often considered part of the social economy and are often referred to as social enterprises. In the Yukon, for example, Raven Recycling, a for-profit recycling operation, was included as part of the social economy of the Yukon. Several Indigenous partners noted that self-government inspired organizations should not be included as part of the social economy since to do so would raise sovereignty issues. As a result, Indigenous organizations were only included as part of the social economy if their existence was not directly related to treaty requirements.
4. One of the important changes, although not directly related to social economy organization changes, is an increase in the immigrant population resident in the Yukon. In 2001, 10.6% of the population were immigrants. By 2021, this had increased to 13.6% of the population. Source: Statistics Canada 2001 Census Profile for the Yukon and Statistics Canada 2021 Census Profile for the Yukon.

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