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## **"Bridging Social and Economic Issues for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Canadians"**

### **National Congress of the Canadian Cooperative Association**

After a decade of restructuring, debt and deficit are coming under control but social stresses have increased. There are wide disparities in regional growth rates, and growing income inequality. High income groups retreat into gated communities: self-reliance competes with collective responsibility.

There is a social disconnect as fewer people share the risks. Family structures have changed, from extended to nuclear family and from breadwinner to two-earner family. More marriages are breaking down: 57% of sole support mothers live in poverty and 40% of poor children live in sole parent families. Many elderly people are stranded - far from or without attentive relatives.

In the work disconnect, risk is more individual. Employers adapt to competition by shifting risk to employees (short term, part time, casual work), 30% of workers are in non-standard jobs - usually low pay, without benefits, or training access. Wage differentials are widening: low skill vs high skill; big vs small firms; young vs older workers.

There is also a policy disconnect as governments are shifting risk to individuals. Fewer people qualify for Employment Insurance, for example. Cuts to health care and education create fears that quality and access will be impaired. There is a decline in deference for authority and deep skepticism about the political process. Governments still have an activist role but they must be accountable, participatory and fiscally prudent.

It is time to search for a new model that balances social and economic issues. An era of strategic social investment is ahead. How will we build the consensus? How will we overcome the social deficits? We need a national debate around goals/priorities to determine where and what to invest.

Cooperatives have a unique capacity to create and nurture community, to get members and fellow citizens talking about what really matters, to build partnerships with others in community. Public dialogue is one way to make this happen. Canadian Policy Research Networks has created issue guides to be used by voluntary sector and other partners. Coop members can use them to mobilize their communities.

Sustainable Calgary is one example. A group of citizens developed a set of indicators of the health of their city. They included : the economy, resource use, the natural environment. Community issues included leisure time, crime rate, sense of community, valuing diversity, volunteerism. Health and education included childhood asthma, grade 3 scores, healthy birthweight babies, adult literacy, self-rated health. These indicators say a lot about the trends in quality of life. They help to set priorities for community action.

Canada is rich in both economic and social resources. Globalization does not leave us helpless - it does create challenges to do the best we can with the resources we have. We have our own energy and time, and some money. Communities like Calgary that invest time and energy in setting goals for sustainability, cities that strive to be child-friendly. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be our chance to get the social and economic balance right.

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