

Inuit co-ops: From government intervention to self-determination

HISTORY OF INUIT CO-OPS

In the first half of the 20th century, the Inuit people were converted from traditional ways of life to a dependency on trading in the Canadian capitalist economy, which proved to be unsustainable. The everyday lives of the Inuit people were altered drastically by the introduction of Christianity as well as by government intervention. By 1950, most Inuit had shifted from their traditional ways of living off the land to relying on the fur trade economy and its interactions with white Canadian organizations and governments to support themselves (Iglooliorte, 2017). However, during the Great Depression, the prices and demand for the white fox pelts that they traded plummeted, resulting in severe poverty among the Inuit and greater reliance on government subsidies.

Prior to the 1930s, the federal government and provincial governments had essentially ignored the well-being of the Inuit people. Around this time, texts concerning the “Eskimo problem” (Mitchell, 1996) expressed concern about the Inuit’s increasing reliance on government stipends. At the same time, these texts omitted any responsibility on the part of the colonial agents and governments for destroying traditional ways of life, forcing the relocation of Inuit communities, and ultimately creating the very cycle of dependency that the government was now afraid of.

The first Inuit co-op was founded in 1959 as a direct government intervention intended to provide a solution to Inuit poverty. The early co-ops in Inuit communities were paternalistic in nature—intended by the government to look after and provide for the Inuit. They did not initially involve much self-determination; over time, however, the Inuit people have taken ownership of their co-ops.

When I refer to a cooperative, I should clarify that I don’t just mean people

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working together collectively or cooperatively. A co-op is a type of collective organization that is legally incorporated as a cooperative business. The generally accepted definition of a cooperative is “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” (International Cooperative Alliance, 2018). This definition is vague, allowing the word “cooperative” to encompass the many types of ways in which people work in a cooperative manner, including the various cooperative acts and laws of different countries. However, all cooperatives hold to the same set of seven cooperative principles. These principles allow all cooperatives to have a common identity despite their variations around the world.

The Inuit co-ops, established by government interventions in the 1950s and 1960s, were originally producer co-ops, where Inuk individuals (producers) could come and receive cash for their furs, game, and fish, as well as arts and crafts. Membership fees were \$1 for each person. The game, fish, and fur industries proved to have insufficient market, but a market for Inuit carvings had developed

in the late 1940s through the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Quebec arm of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (Paci, 1996). In fact, the first exhibition of Inuit carvings in Montreal, in 1949, sold out in only three days!

PROBLEMATIZING INUIT CO-OPS

Marybelle Mitchell’s (1996) history of Inuit craft co-ops is critical of the government’s motives for setting up cooperatives, noting that co-ops were set up with a number of political agendas, and were flawed in numerous ways. Some of the problems that she highlighted include:

- differences between the needs and experiences of the Inuit in the Northwest Territories (now Nunavut) and those of the Inuit in Quebec;
- tensions between English and French control within Quebec, which resulted in many Inuit co-ops preferring federal government support over support from the province;
- tensions between the Inuit and development initiatives in northern Quebec, including mining, forestry, and hydroelectric projects;
- conflict between the federal government and the provincial government of Quebec, which led some Inuit leaders to feel that they were being used as a bargaining tool to cement power in the northern regions of Quebec;
- the lack of Inuit representatives in decisions about the marketing of Inuit art in the 1960s and 1970s by government and not-for-profit agencies; and
- the assumption among government agents and policy-makers, not that they should consider what the Inuit wanted for themselves, but that the Inuit would go along with whatever they were told was best for them.

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Despite these problems, the co-ops were successful as a result of a continued market for Inuit art in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Inuit artists were not in full control of their co-ops because the start-up funding from federal and provincial governments came with many strings attached. The leadership and the staff of the co-ops remained mostly white until approximately 1980.

CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES: FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The development of co-ops by government agencies often fails because co-ops are intended to be a community solution to a recognized need, not a government directive. In the case of Inuit co-ops, the government imposed the co-op model on Inuit communities, which violates co-op principle four as outlined by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)—autonomy and independence. Principle four means that co-op members must have control over the activities, funding, and services offered by the co-op (usually by voting on the board of directors and other important matters).

The principle of co-op autonomy was adopted largely because of the government's top-down co-op models, which many people in the co-op movement felt were not true co-ops. This was certainly due in part to the adoption by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of co-ops as a way to organize workers, but it was also likely informed by the situation of Inuit co-ops in Canada. In 1995, in acknowledgment of the many situations in which co-ops were tied to—and sometimes started by or beholden to—nation-states and religious entities, the ICA added autonomy as an official co-op principle (ICA, 2018).

It has also been argued by many decolonial scholars, such as Paolo Friere (1989), bell hooks (1984), and Walter Mignolo (2000), that substantive change must come from the people being oppressed, from the bottom up or from the margins, rather than from the centre of social and economic power. In the

case of Inuit co-ops, co-ops as a form of change were initiated by government power on behalf of people who were seen as being unable to help themselves. For this reason, while the co-ops were initially successful in developing a market for Inuit crafts and improving the quality of life for many Inuit communities, they were unsuccessful in gaining real involvement from Inuit producers for several decades because of the top-down government initiative and financing of the co-ops.


I argue that Inuit co-ops have remained successful because, over time, Inuit producers developed ownership of their co-ops. They always had ownership through the one-member, one-vote system, but the first few decades of Inuit co-ops saw heavy government involvement and external intervention in the management of co-ops from other organizations. While some of these interventions did help the co-ops become established and survive, it also meant that the average Inuit producer did not trust that the co-op was operating in the best interest of the Inuit people. It was only when Inuit co-ops united under two Inuit-led umbrella organizations that the Inuit began to take true ownership of their co-ops.

Federalizing under new, Inuit-led initiatives was not easy for Inuit co-ops. The co-op federations faced opposition from both provincial and federal governments and the agencies that marketed Inuit art. They faced a stumbling block in the form of co-op law that prevented provincial and national co-ops from amalgamating, and even opposition from within their membership, which did not necessarily trust the co-ops because of the government's involvement.

FEDERATED INUIT CO-OPS TODAY

Today, Inuit co-ops are federated under two main umbrella co-op organizations serving Nunavut and Quebec: Arctic Co-ops Federated, which has 32 member co-ops, and La Fédération des coopératives du Nouveau-Québec (FCNQ), which currently includes 14 member co-ops. These

co-ops, which grew from the early government co-ops encouraging arts and crafts production, now provide many services based on the needs of each specific Inuit community.

To this day, both Arctic Co-ops and FCNQ include an arts and craft retail component, where the co-ops buy craft items from Inuit producers and sell them through their respective retail arms, Northern Images and Art Nunavik. However, the co-ops under both federations have expanded and changed with the needs in their communities to truly serve their members in a variety of areas. The federated Inuit co-ops now provide retail services for groceries and essential supplies, vehicle parts, hotels, cable TV services, gasoline/fuel distribution, and administrative support to individual member co-ops, in addition to taking full responsibility for buying, marketing, and selling authentic Inuit arts and crafts from their producer members. This wide array of services would likely have been impossible had Inuit co-ops not united under Inuit-led federations and taken control of their co-ops to truly serve their community needs. 

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