Introduction
Social Economics and Sustainability

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When we began this project, our perspective on the social economy and sustainability was based on our work as theorists and practitioners active in the environmental movement. Over the years, however, that viewpoint has changed through our participation in an alliance of academics and community practitioners whose mandate was to research the role of the social economy in western Canada. This experience brought us into contact with many leaders from Canada’s co-operative and enterprising non-profit and community development sectors. While we had been building the environmental movement, they had been building—some of them for over forty years—the social economy movement and its networks.

We discovered that social economics is connected to all aspects of sustainability: ecological conservation, social justice, gender equity, cultural health and continuity, human well-being, and ethical responsibility for future generations. More importantly, we found in the practice of social economics new strategic directions for both the politics of sustainability and the organizational and institutional setup of sustainability alternatives. We saw how local, democratic organizations can advance ecological and social sustainability. By the very initiatives that they define and carry out, often to meet basic needs in a community or region, these small organizations practice sustainability. They “social economize” sustainability, you might say.

While we see a convergence occurring between social economics and sustainability, we do not want to overstate the wonders of the social economy. Let’s be frank: the theory and praxis of sustainability are a mess. At the same time, our transition to sustainability is no longer a choice but an imperative. Today’s
coincidence of climate change, degradation of planetary ecosystems, and global financial uncertainty poses a threat to all communities. For some, the threat is more immediate than for others. The relocalization of economies may be a way both to protect environments and to empower the most vulnerable of populations. The crucial question is whether the transition to a relocalized economy can be accomplished in a manner that is low carbon, ecologically sustainable, and socially fair.

In *Scaling Up*, we explore the possibility of a just transition to sustainability: one that is sustainable in social, economic, and environmental terms. We assess a number of initiatives in social economics and sustainability in western Canada. In light of that experience, we argue that the social economy sector is a small but effective piece of the transition challenge. Indeed, social economy leaders are old hands at running robust, resilient institutions and networks that can advance the sustainability agenda. In the chapters to follow, contributors examine issues ranging from attainable, affordable housing and local capital financing to local food and community-based energy. They show how these development issues link to issues of state power and structural change, which are concerns common to communities all over the world. They explore obstacles and challenges to achieving structural change, as well as strategies for deepening and broadening the impact of innovation and for interconnecting, horizontally and democratically, across the wider “green” social economy.

The innovations discussed in this book have been proven to work at the local level, but the question remains of how to deepen and broaden their extent—how to scale them up and out so as to create structural and societal change. *Scaling up* means escalating the impact of a particular innovation within the sector in which it operates, from community to city, from region to nation. *Scaling out* means taking innovations that have proven effective in one place, extending their impact through diffusion and adaptation into new geographical locations and new sectors. But scaling an innovation successfully often requires changing the very social and technological systems that make our current way of life unsustainable. The spread of these innovations implies profound changes in social systems of provision, in democratic practices and beliefs, and in state policies and economic power. In order for sustainability innovations to grow, the right conditions must be introduced. Strategic interventions and support mechanisms are required. Change will be resisted. The politics and practice of transition will be difficult, to say the least.

Notwithstanding the obvious challenges to altering the dominant capitalist system, the examples that we profile here demonstrate the emergence of innovative,
democratic ways to create change. In chapter 1, Sean Connelly, Mike Gismondi, Sean Markey, and Mark Roseland introduce the concepts of social economy and sustainable community development and the connections between them. They set out the distinction between strong and weak sustainability initiatives, emphasize the need to take ecology seriously, and explore the social economizing of sustainability. Chapter 2, by Mike Gismondi, Lynda Ross, and Juanita Marois, offers a socio-historical account of the social economy in Alberta and British Columbia and, using survey data, paints a picture of the current green social economy sector in both provinces. In chapter 3, Mary Beckie and Sean Connelly present examples of various ways in which people are relocalizing and resocializing food. They demonstrate that consumer demand for local food is growing, in part motivated by concerns about health, food safety, and environmental stewardship but also based in the desire of consumers to reconnect with farmers and the land. In chapter 4, John Restakis introduces social care as part of the sustainability equation. Challenging the status quo, he claims that the provision and consumption of human services is not the same as the production and consumption of material goods. His story of social co-ops in Italy emphasizes the importance of focusing on relational goods. Julie MacArthur discusses energy and sustainability in chapter 5. Faced with the dual challenge of climate change and uncertain future energy supplies and costs, how will we find the clean energy needed to run local economies? Her work addresses the power of capitalism and the challenge of developing renewables democratically to engage local people in ownership and profits. She offers strategies for launching an energy innovation and for scaling out a successful project from its originating community to a wider area. In chapter 6, Kelly Vodden, Lillian Hunt, and Randy Bell demonstrate how ecology, tourism and economic activity, and culture intertwine in First Nations’ efforts to strengthen community resilience. They stress the importance of culture and sense of place for generating the capacity of First Nations to take an active role in the protection and promotion of their cultural heritage. The tourism and economic development proposals discussed in this chapter involve local environmental management as well as alliances with other communities, private businesses, the state, environmental groups, and non-profit organizations in the region.

In chapter 7, George Penfold, Lauren Rethoret, and Terri MacDonald explain how affordable, attainable housing is critical to sustainability. In their review of housing research in British Columbia, they found that challenges differ in rural and urban settings. Replicating successful community projects from one place in other communities or across a wider region has not been shown to be successful,
particularly in rural Canada. In chapter 8, Marena Brinkhurst and Mark Roseland show how collective land ownership and community control over land can be linked to sustainability. They explore a variety of land tenure models that can increase community control over the use of land for local housing, agriculture, and even wind farms or other energy projects. A partnership of a non-profit group, a land trust, and a municipality is a highly effective way to reduce land costs for a housing project, a cultural arts building, a farmers’ market, a social care co-op, a community kitchen, or a building for local food storage and distribution. Any discussion of multistakeholder coalitions, whose construction is far from easy, turns our attention to engaging the power of government, at all levels, to meld sustainability and social economy, a theme that arises across other chapters as well. Yes, inertia and ingrained habits must be overcome. Trust is also a challenge, as are the oppositional interests and influence of private capital and the managers of incumbent systems who are keen to maintain the status quo. But the role of the state remains important.

In chapter 9, Noel Keough, Mike Gismondi, and Erin Swift-Leppäkumpu claim that heritage conservation can contribute to sustainability in built environments. They show that the repurposing of unused, derelict, or failing older buildings can rejuvenate neighbourhoods. The preservation of heritage buildings conserves embedded energy, reduces demolition waste, cancels out the energy costs of new construction, and preserves architectural elements that define the character of city neighbourhoods and their buildings. Moreover, the memory of a building’s previous uses and its social meanings are recovered as well. The authors demonstrate that involvement of municipal planners and support from higher levels of government is key to such preservation initiatives. In chapter 10, Sean Markey, Freya Kristensen, and Stewart Perry discuss the financing of the social economy. They analyze the uneven effectiveness of most rural credit unions in supporting community development and explore Vancity Credit Union as an example of a large credit union (Canada’s largest, in fact) that, through engagement in a wide range of initiatives, promotes both social innovation and sustainability.

Throughout the book, we provide examples of green social economy organizations. Each outlines the sustainability issue and social economy mission and its transformative potential.

The many small social economy sustainability initiatives found across western Canada can be thought of as seeds of innovation, a recurring metaphor in this volume. Each initiative strategizes differently to provide an alternative narrative to that of the dominant economy. Collectively, these stories demonstrate that
democratic institutions, social markets, a socio-ecological ethos, and coalition building provide a nurturing environment for incremental and transformative change. It’s all part of a growing global movement for sustainability and social justice. While some seeds may fall on stone, many others hold the promise of spring.