

# A Better Way Forward

2017 ANNUAL REPORT



## WHO WE ARE

Co-operatives First is a business development organization focused on increasing awareness and understanding of the co-op business model in rural and Indigenous communities across western Canada.

Our goal is to help groups and community leaders build new businesses, grow local economies and support community development.



 **co-operatives first**

## WHAT WE DO

We support groups hoping to capture opportunities to build new businesses or organizations.

Our job is to make sure community leaders understand the benefits and versatility of the co-operative business model, and group entrepreneurs have every available tool to make their venture a reality.

# THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDER

We receive \$1 million dollars per year\* in funding from Federated Co-operatives Limited and the Co-operative Retailing System. Thanks to this generous, unique and unrestricted funding, we are able to support groups across western Canada working to grow new businesses, local economies and thriving communities in rural and Indigenous communities.

Rural and Indigenous communities are important to local, regional and national economies throughout Canada. In western Canada, Federated Co-operatives Limited and the Co-operative Retailing System are blazing a new trail in their unmatched level of support for co-operative business development and the promotion of the co-operative business model in these communities.

We applaud their leadership and are grateful for their continued support and trust.

\* They have committed to \$5M over 5 years beginning in 2015.

## MESSAGE FROM CHAIR OF THE BOARD

I am pleased to offer this report on behalf of my colleagues on the Board of Directors of Co-operatives First.

While the Board is pleased with the positive impact that Co-operatives First is creating operationally, we also made significant progress on the organization's governance. We continued to make progress towards articulating a long term strategic vision, while at the same time developing policies and procedures to ensure that a sustainable governance model is in place.

Co-operatives First provides an opportunity to tap into the long-overlooked potential in Western Canada's indigenous and rural communities. We believe that co-operative development in these areas provides tremendous opportunities for partnerships, growth and even reconciliation. We look forward to working with a range of stakeholders – entrepreneurs and small business, community-based organizations, governments as well as the co-operative sector – to support community driven solutions to deep rooted challenges. We believe strongly that true innovation and tremendous opportunities will spring from these collaborations.

Co-operatives First was conceived in the knowledge gained from two years of in-depth research by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan. Now, as we enter our third year of on-the-ground operations, we're well aware of the challenges before us and the communities we partner with. Realizing our objectives will not be easy and achieving even a few of them certainly won't happen overnight. But the long-term benefits of providing tools and collaborations to practical solutions are too great to pass on simply because it might be hard or take some time.

I am pleased to report that our vision for the future – and the foundations that have been built - has allowed us to attract an outstanding group of new Directors and committee members from across Western Canada. The newly expanded, deeply committed and knowledgeable Board is committed to taking Co-operatives First to a new level. As I step aside from my role as Chair of the Board and welcome a new Board and Chair, I'm excited by what we've started here and confident it will make a lasting difference.

Warmest regards,



Vic Huard  
Chair of the Board of Directors, Co-operatives First



# MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2017 has been a year of both introspection and growth. We've seen numerous projects begin to take shape and are actively working to see them through to thriving businesses. Through these projects, we've learned and adapted our service delivery to better serve clients. Likewise, we've adjusted our outreach strategy to better reflect realities in the co-operative sector. The products resulting from this work should be encouraging for the sector and inspire long term growth.

Our aggressive approach to community engagement is driving awareness of the co-operative business model across western provinces and First Nations. The response has been positive, particularly within Indigenous communities, and we expect to see this interest increase as awareness of our organization and the business model continues to grow.

Opportunities for further growth lie in driving awareness of the model and educating on the versatility and benefits of the model for rural and Indigenous communities. To do this, we have engaged with economic, business and community development professionals across western provinces and First Nations. The support of these organizations and the individuals working for them is key to developing an in-depth awareness of the business model, increasing co-operative development and fostering the incubation of innovative uses of the model.

Through blog posts, presentations, sitting on panels, face to face meetings and advertising, and by using familiar business-friendly language, we have introduced or reintroduced the business model to a wide variety of community leaders, elected officials and business professionals.

In 2018, we are looking forward to furthering this work and introducing key tools in our strategy, such as launching a podcast called The Common Share and releasing an online business development platform called the Co-op Creator.

Thank you to the Board and staff of Federated Co-operatives Limited and to the whole Co-operative Retailing System for their continued support and faith in what we're working to achieve. A special thank you to outgoing Board Chair, Vic Huard, for the leadership, guidance and vision he has brought to the organization, and to Julie Breuer for her insight and critical eye while serving on the inaugural Board of Directors.

Best regards,



Audra Krueger  
Executive Director, Co-operatives First







## WORKSHOPS

Recognizing a need for increased co-operative business development in rural and Indigenous communities across western Canada, we've engaged in an outreach campaign to reach economic, business and community development professionals and community leaders across the region.

To supplement their existing business knowledge, we've been hosting workshops focused on increasing co-op knowledge.

## TOOLS & RESOURCES

To support co-op business creation, we are developing an accessible and comprehensive platform for co-operative business development, including an online business planning tool.

## ONLINE GOVERNANCE COURSE

In partnership with the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan, we have created an accessible online governance course.

The first cohort hosted over 480 registrants, with 50 earning a badge and 32 the full certificate.

The goal of this course is to create capacity in rural and Indigenous communities through an increased familiarity with governance theory and practice.



## GOOD GOVERNANCE MATTERS ONLINE COURSE TESTIMONIALS

*“This course has greatly increased my understanding of what good governance could/should look like and how each part (boards, management, members) plays a vital role in the co-operative’s success.”*

*“This course was highly enjoyable, and relevant to working in not only the co-op space, but with any group that needs to make decisions.”*

## PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR THE CO-OP SECTOR



### ARTICLES

We highlight western Canadian co-operatives as much as possible through our blog. Some of our most successful biogs, which have reached hundreds of readers, have been ones that profiled Federated Co-operatives Limited (FCL) or their member associations. FCL featured many of our articles throughout Co-op Week.

### WITCONYXE

We partnered with the University of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan Co-operative Association (SCA) to use an issue-based event to create awareness about the co-op model. We had 90 attendees, mainly women business leaders, youth and young professionals. This event gather a lot of attention and even inspired a follow up event in Saskatoon for Women in Technology.

### REGULAR COMMUNICATIONS

Through the strategic use of a CRM and monthly newsletter, we are actively communicating where we are and what we're doing, which provides opportunity for pro-actively engaging and partnering with our friends in the co-op sector. Our monthly newsletter is focused mainly on the co-op sector. It informs readers of what we've been up, what's coming up and provides tools and ideas.

### PARTNERSHIPS

The co-operative sector remains supportive of our work and we are eager to continue building partnerships with our friends in the sector. In 2017, we had the opportunity to partner with the team as Saskatchewan Co-operative Association and the University of Saskatchewan. Our online governance course and WITCONYXE are two outcomes from these partnerships.



# MAKING AN IMPACT



## WORKING TO INCREASE BUSINESS IN THE NORTH

Numerous northern Saskatchewan communities are exploring fuel and grocery retail solutions or business transitions to a co-operative.

A northern BC community has a new community service co-operative incorporated and is about to start offering youth education programming.

Our work with northern communities interested in retail stores and gas stations has led us to connect both FCL member associations and Arctic Co-operatives with these groups. ACL is working with a couple of them to potentially advance a store in Pelican Narrows and explore gas and retail in a few other communities.



## EDUCATING DECISION-MAKERS & INFLUENCERS

Community leaders in a southern Saskatchewan town of 300 has been introduced to investment co-ops, how they might slow the loss of small business through succession planning using the co-op model, as well as serve young families in the area through a daycare co-op.

After only 3 Creating Connections workshops, we've reached over 90 economic development professionals across the West. These frontline business development advocates and key players in support systems now have a better understanding of when and how a co-operative can help realize an opportunity for them.

Our online governance course had over 450 enrolled, and provided a badge to 50 students in good co-operative governance practices - 32 of whom earned the full certificate. That's 32 community and co-op sector leaders that better understand co-ops and how they're best governed. Beyond the impressive completion rates, the discussion forums were a lively place to exchange ideas.



## HELPING DEVELOP A UNIQUE NEW CO-OP

A rural Saskatchewan village has an unique co-op that offers access to "a literal forest of food" and traditional Indigenous teachings.





## HOW TO CONTACT US

### Office

213 - Wall Street  
Saskatoon, SK S7K 1N7

### Phone

306.382.4410

### Email

[info@cooperativesfirst.com](mailto:info@cooperativesfirst.com)

### Website

[CooperativesFirst.com](http://CooperativesFirst.com)

