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Procurement and a People's Centred Economy

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ABOUT THE CANADIAN SOCIAL ECONOMY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

The Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERP) is a collaborative effort of six regional research centres across Canada, their community partners, and the national facilitating research hub. CSERP reaches out to practitioners, to researchers and to civil society, and undertakes research as needed in order to understand and promote the Social Economy tradition within Canada, and as a subject of academic enquiry within universities.

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The authors' interest in the topic of procurement and a people's centred economy emerges out of a research project stretching from 2005 to 2010, funded by the Southern Ontario Node of the Social Economy Research Hub. This research specifically focused on procurement policies in three types of publicly funded organizations at the sub-provincial level: municipalities, school boards, and universities – all of which could be argued to be central and relatively accessible organizations for actors involved in various aspects of a people's centered economy. We argue that they are accessible because of their 'public' nature and relatively large socially directed and mandated budgets. The aim of our research was to identify or 'map' these policies in these three types of organizations both on the purely pragmatic level (who has policies) but also on the level of values (what policies do organizations have, why have they developed them, and, why have they not developed them further). This paper will outline some key frameworks for understanding procurement policies, discuss some key findings of the research in the context of universities, and contextualize these by sketching the possible roles for procurement policies in establishing the people's centred economy.

As this paper has been specifically constructed as an information piece for the Conference on the People's Centred Economy at Carleton University May 30th and 31st, 2010, it is important to highlight three key constraints on detail that such a project entails. First, while our conclusions are based on qualitative and quantitative survey techniques as well as literature reviews, only the basic outlines of the research can be presented here. Further, the paper has been constructed to appeal to a popular audience, and therefore has few references (although these can be made available on request). Second, there are results from our research not contained within this paper because of the limits of space. To make our points we exclusively focus on our results from the university sector. Finally, the paper briefly discusses economic values and practices, a discussion that might appear speculative in its abbreviated form. Regardless of these constraints, the authors believe that combining the theoretical work on economic value with research on purchasing policies forms a powerful framework for people's centred organizations in their search for transparent practices and market access. Further, the authors encourage those that are interested in further details or discussion of our work to contact us, or to access the forthcoming publications generated by our research.

Purchasing Policies in Definition and Practice

We chose to focus our research on purchasing policies because they reflect in important ways the economic terrain where economic and political ideals battle to realize themselves in practice. The urgency of this point has been clearly brought home by the recent revelation that purchasing policies

are being discussed in the current trade negotiations between Canada and the European Union with an eye to removing their “public control” nature for “market” competition. But before discussing the important role that purchasing policies can play for the people’s centred economy however, we must be clear on the definition of them. They are, most generally, formalized policies that outline specific guidelines for the organizational purchasing of inputs that facilitate that particular organization’s functioning. In simpler terms, when an organization has an articulated framework that directs them to choose one product over another, they have a purchasing policy. These can range from buy local, provincial or national policies of various governments, to the purchasing of recycled paper by a small social enterprise as part of their organization’s commitment to a “triple bottom line”.

Given this definition it is perhaps not surprising that governments and government funded organizations at all levels tend to have more developed purchasing policies. This responsiveness by government is not always instinctive, rather it is in significant ways driven by public demand and popular movements. In recent years, for example, there has been increasing demand from various social movements for publicly funded organizations to justify their allocation to resources according to a vast array of value-based causes – i.e. no sweat, organic, fair trade, union, sweatshop free, various independent environmental labelling initiatives, etc.. These actions have met with important, but limited, success within some government and government funded organizations. We will discuss some of the aspects of this problem below in our research on university purchasing policies.

Perhaps less successful in the implementation of purchasing policies, however, are socially-focused businesses. This is mostly due to the perceived or real costs associated with purchasing policies or the belief that such policies are too administratively onerous. This reality is changing in Canada however as social and political actors have increasingly targeted these organizations through campaigns to ensure that “their” Social Economy organizations are fully realizing their potential as agents of ethical activity and social change (for example environmental sustainability campaigns). We recognize that these two organizational aspects of the purchasing policy problematic are the result of differing realities for each, but try in this paper to get underneath it by discussing economic values. Thus while our research specifically focuses on government influenced organizations, it is relevant for both types of organization because it examines the values underlying the pushes and pulls which influence all purchasing policies.

Before examining these values however it is useful to outline a quick history of the idea of purchasing policies to underline the connection between them and broader social justice movements. Such an examination opens up the

possibility for discussing values because it moves the discussion of purchasing policies from one on technical or instrumental practice to understanding them as part of a longer and more diverse movement for economic justice. Once this brief history has been outlined, we will move to discussing those values which influence (consciously or unconsciously) “purchasing policy movements”, and, just as importantly, the values which resist these movements from a for-profit perspective. From these two perspectives we can contextualize our research on government directed or influenced purchasing policies using the university as an example to make broader suggestions for a role for purchasing policies in a people’s centred economy.

Illustrative Historical Examples

There is much that one could say about the history of the idea of purchasing policies in a variety of historical, social and cultural contexts. However, what is common to all of them is the fact that the idea of ethical purchasing emerges in the context of capitalist development and the social and economic exclusions which it creates. In other words, the strategy of purchasing policies as a policy solution is unique to capitalism. The importance of this point can not be underestimated. We therefore examine three illustrative examples of this common pattern to locate in history the idea of purchasing policies as it emerges through movements for economic justice. We do not pretend that these examples are exhaustive, but rather that they illustrate our point about the importance of the historical movements for economic justice for the contemporary practice of purchasing policies.

The first illustrative historical example of the movement for economic justice through purchasing is contained in E.P. Thompson’s famous essay “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”. In this essay, Thompson points out that as the for-profit logic of capitalism was taking hold in eighteenth century England there was a sustained movement to limit its impact on people’s lives. Specifically, local riots occurred consistently over decades whenever merchant violated accepted norms and practices around the sale of grain - an idea that was picked up a century later in the formation of the first consumer co-operative Rochdale (which itself is an example of the development of purchasing policies of freely associated consumers). Thompson argues that rather than considering these events as episodic and simple “riots”, one could more productively consider them as morally-based protests against high priced, falsely scarce, and adulterated grain. Importantly, many of the rioters did not simply break up stalls or steal grain, but often insisted on paying the “moral” price for the grain. Thompson’s framework allows us to conceive of these events as examples of a longer history of informal social movements for economic justice. We can consider these riots, and the later

formation of co-operatives, as part of a movement towards purchasing policies specifically because the crowd was demanding regulation, or more precisely the proper application of regulation in the case of the Assize of Bread (a law which outlined rules for the selling and production of grain), of markets to insure quality and “ethics” in the production and consumption of grain as well as a fair price. Perhaps more importantly, Thompson points out that the regulations contained both within practice and the law demanded privileged purchasing for small, poor consumers, rather than the emerging market system which privileged large, for profit purchasing. Parallels between the actions of the crowd in eighteenth century England and the movement for a people’s centred economy can be drawn as each brings together a variety of social actors and movements to demand fairness and morality in economic activity.

The second illustrative example that we can outline are the “rights” protests embodied most famously in the abolitionist, labour, civil rights, environmentalist, and women’s movements. These movements take the “moral economy” arguments of the crowd and formalized them in focused organizations which specifically targeted social groups experiencing the economic exclusion of capitalism in a variety of contexts. While these movements have usually been represented as “rights” movements only, in fact they had significant economic components to their activities in that they specifically applied economic pressure to achieve their ends. Key to these activities was the targeting of economic purchasing and consumption through a variety of means. The abolitionist movement, for example, succeeded in ultimately overturning an entire system of production - slavery - through its exposure of the inhumanity of goods produced this way. Specifically, citizens were asked to avoid participation in this inhuman trade and its products as to do so was unethical. In important ways the current “no sweat” movement has parallels with this movement. The civil rights movement famously targeted lunch counters, bus service and a range of other businesses through its boycott campaigns - a strategy which continues in a variety of economic justice struggles through to this day. Various stages of the women’s movement targeted both public and private production, successfully exposing the gendered nature of economic activity. The withdrawal of labour and women’s centred purchasing from bookstores to food markets were central features of this struggle. The environmental movement also brought the “externalities” of capitalist production into view, again through targeted boycott and education campaigns. Finally, the labour movement, through its time tested methods of collective bargaining, withdrawal of labour, political engagement and education of members and the public has had an enormous impact on collective conceptions of economic activity and purchasing. In fact, one might argue the “union made” label was the first ethical brand. What is important here, is that the idea of ethical purchasing and consumption are part of these traditions and, when they work, they provided a clear articulation of their concerns. In our research, for example, we used the exclusions articulated

by these movements to examine university purchasing policies. Specifically we examined these policies for their inclusion of environmental, labour, and social concerns (including child and slave labour as well as gender exclusion). Surprisingly, university purchasers were aware of the issues at play and often claimed that they were working on including them in their policies.

The third illustrative historical example can be found in the world-wide anti-colonial struggles which again were successful in altering an entire system of production. Each of these struggles involved particular economic strategies, too numerous to outline here, in order to highlight the inequitable conditions of colonialism and used economic purchasing or boycott to achieve their ends. Again, these strategies have much in common with purchasing policies in that they highlight an alternative economic value within their strategies. Perhaps most illustrative of this is Gandhi's famous salt "satyagrahis" protest against the British salt tax, and "khaki" or spinning movements to encourage local production of cotton clothing. These movements focused specifically on the economic purchasing power of common Indians, and the power that directed or withdrawn purchasing could have on achieving the social and political goal of independence. The connections between this activity for economic justice and the contemporary movement for purchasing policies is clear, especially in the regional or national "buy ..." campaigns which have the implicit value of economic self-determination at their core.

These movements for economic and social justice have continued into the twenty-first century, and have one of their branches in Canada on territorially-focused purchasing policies such as buy Canadian, local, or purchasing targeted towards historically marginalized communities such as First Nations. In the case of "no sweat" and fair trade, purchasing moves beyond the national, regional or community based policies to the international level. Most importantly, all three of the illustrative historical examples outlined above help us conceive of an alternative, people's centred, approach to economic activity as having a long and varied history. By so doing, they highlight alternative values within economic activity which have realized themselves in purchasing policies. It is to these values that we now turn.

Economic Values and Economic Justice

The key question of value which sits behind purchasing policies is how, with the assumed economic ethic of individual choice and profit maximization of capitalism as the backdrop, can economic activity based on community well-being and social maximization be effectively engaged. This question is important for purchasing policies, especially on a state or institution level, because if the driving idea of economic value behind them is cost reduction

and private market delivery, social movements such as Fair Trade have little hope of “competing” in such an environment. This is because the basic function of purchasing policies is to direct purchasing towards goods which internalize, rather than externalize, the social costs of goods in order to deliver more economic value to people. This means that often, although not always, the goods purchased have initial or true higher costs for the purchaser. For example, fair trade as an independently audited label provides individuals and organizations with a purchasing vehicle which aims to address historical price and production inequalities which have their roots in colonialism. It is in important ways, a continuation of the economic justice ideas contained in the anti-colonial movements mentioned above. It is these economic justice values which fair trade tries to highlight through creating relationships between consumer and producer and directing more of the end costs of a product to the producers, as well as maintaining a certification regime which guarantees this social value is followed. These two functions have a real impact on price, even if the middleman is cut out of the value chain. However if the only value upon which we judge fair trade is price, then it is not rational to purchase these products. Perhaps more importantly if we continue to construct purchasing decisions as purely decisions of individual choice (to buy or not Fair Trade products) rather than a collective moral obligation there will not be large scale adaptation of economic justice in purchasing. This is not something which can be forced on populations, but rather needs to be accepted as a value, which can only be done by engaging in public democratic debate. By engaging in this discourse of economic values and justice, purchasing policies help translate individual choice to instituted codes of behaviour which is an important development in the history of ethical economic behaviour.

This function of purchasing policies, to reveal the ethical intentions of the architects of the policy beyond individual choice and profit maximization, is an important step to take. Purchasing policies fulfill this function of making conscious and less arbitrary the supply decisions of organizations and institutions. However they are rarely articulated as such, and are therefore somewhat confusing for the casual observer. What we propose is that the values behind these policies need to be articulated within the dominant conception of economics of recent history - the value of capitalism. We should understand that capitalism is a tendency towards the private and exclusionary ownership of the means of production for profit. Contained within this conception of economics is the idea that individual gain is the prime economic motivation and that private ownership is at the heart of most of the economic good since the start of the industrial revolution at least. Adam Smith presciently captured this view with his famous statement that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self interest.” (1976, 18) This belief is so ingrained that we rarely are able to think beyond it to understand the possibility of the social

being a source of economic activity and value. The issue here is that there has been a long history of what we might call collective entrepreneurship that is obscured by this value-based view of economic activity as fundamentally selfish and individual. Procurement policies are an example of this collective entrepreneurship - of making possible more ethical economic choices for individuals and organizations.

More broadly, when we conceive of economic activity as value based, we recognize that all economic activity is in fact a kind of purchasing policy. That is we make choices upon various values-based ideas - such as always shop for the best deal (capitalist) to only buy ethical products (such as vegetarianism or organic or natural food). While these “policies” are most often in fact practices which vary over time, we need to recognize that purchasing is done according to values, however transient. As mentioned above, purchasing policies are an attempt to make transparent these values and to open them up to debate or reflection. For example, an ideal type public corporation has a purchasing policy based on the value of maximizing profit for shareholders. Purchasing thus is directed by the value of low cost, regardless of the consequences – what economists call externalities. However, it is precisely this clear anti-social focus of corporations which has inspired social movements to pressure them to be more inclusive of social and environmental values. The problem with these movements is that they are often constructed in the negative - anti-globalization for example - rather than combining this opposition with an articulation of the alternative values which they hold dear. Purchasing policies provide the opportunity to do the difficult work of articulation and codification of these values - a task which is not to be underestimated for its difficulty. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that purchasing policies are rarely conceived of as a larger social issue, but are in fact seen as atomized in organizations, as a result of their own particular needs and practices. In important ways then, these policies have not taken on a movement or shared nature. One might see this problem as a result of the fact that the individualistic values of capitalism have not been overcome in practice.

Our Research

There is one exception to this which is the movements around various social justice labels, the most well known of these are the no-sweat movement and fair trade. Our research focused on these as examples of more developed purchasing policies in the context of universities - the recognition of these labels as bringing added ethical value was seen as an important step in bringing to organizational consciousness social and labour issues. Although there are many other labels such as the Forestry Stewardship Council and Marine Stewardship Council, these labels are industry led rather than activist lead, and therefore

less likely to indicate sympathy with a peoples centred economy. That is not to say that these labels are of no value, we measured them along with other “environmental” labels as well as a first step in purchasing policies towards a wider awareness of economic justice issues beyond price. More values based labels in the environmental category can be found in the organic and local food movements. These form “blended” examples of labelling, in that often state, corporate and social movement input has been given. In the case of organics the “movement” nature of the label has increasingly been challenged by state and industry initiatives to “lock” practice at the lowest common denominator. In the case of the local food, the issue becomes definition of local and intersections with other social justice activities, and the modifications that result – local food plus, organic local food, co-operative organic local food etc. In the end, our research on university purchasing policies focused on the implementation of three broad categories of purchasing policies - environmental or green, labour, and fair trade.

One of the key findings of our research was that purchasing policies develop out of a combination of forces ranging from stakeholder pressure, including social movements and government, and individual “champions” in administrations. While social movements are important, for purchasing policies to be enacted all the way up the economic justice ladder, there needs to be a significant campaign of education and “buy in” to the values of these movements. Where the issues and values are not clearly articulated, there is opposition or foot-dragging by key administrative figures. Perhaps more importantly, we discovered that within universities, and indeed other governmental funded institutions such as school boards or even municipalities, the complexity of the bureaucracies are also a significant barrier to implementation. That is, the organizations in question are so complex that purchasing policies are rarely implemented universally, but rather are contained within administrative silos. This means that the education work of social movements is increased enormously.

This problem is further intensified by the fact that suppliers seem to have a significant effect on the perception of purchasing policy managers on the possibility of implementing economic justice focused policies. Suppliers in effect often work against the education campaigns of social movements and determine the vista of possibility for purchasing policies – especially around cost concerns. This is despite the fact that most purchasing policy managers are generally convinced that more ethical purchasing policies are “the right thing to do”. Finally, our research discovered that there is a values based opposition to purchasing policies in that they are perceived to “pick winners”, an observation which seems to increase the further one goes up the decision change. For example, government officials do not want to be perceived as “interfering” in the market through purchasing policies.

Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

These four research discoveries are important to purchasing policies and a people's centred economy for at least two reasons. First, as mentioned above, purchasing policies are an attempt to modify or replace the individualist and for-profit economic values of capitalism with a social value of some kind. In fact, purchasing policies are built with a specific and conscious privileging of particular social values in mind in order to address the inequalities created by the dominant economic value. If, as our research discovered, the educative efforts of social movements are confronting a deeply held economic value in the administrations of organizations (and one would assume that the same underlying economic value is held by the upper administration of social enterprises) despite general sympathy for the goals of economic justice we have a problem which may require a different strategy than has been currently engaged. Specifically, a strategy which seeks to outline not only the problems of exclusion created by the current economic value of capitalism, but also clearly articulates its alternative value - potentially a people's centred economy.

This however raises the second issue, purchasing policies confront the problem of individual choice and profit maximization as a deeply held economic practice. The problem is not just that there is a discomfort with "picking a winner" and interfering with competition, but also a reluctance to implement for inclusive practices of economic justice in practice. Many purchasing policies thus take a "soft" rather than a "hard" line on implementation. For example, the few fair trade policies that have been developed at Canadian universities remain incomplete, as they are based on individual choice rather than social value. Thus in these policies, coffee and tea retailers have only to offer the choice of fair trade, and existing contracts with retailers remain in force. Consequently, retailers like Tim Hortons can continue to not offer the choice of fair trade on campus' which have declared themselves "fair trade". While the social movements which helped initiated these policies have clearly been successful in creating the policies, the harder work of maintaining interest in them and engaging the larger issue of the economic value of individual choice remains. We will have to see the results of this struggle, but we can be assured that it will not be an easy one.

This struggle is an important one for the people's centred economy because if practices and values are not linked clearly, the alternative values of the various movements seeking economic justice are obscured and cynicism about alternatives grows. If purchasing policies do not clearly fulfill their stated purpose - fair trade purchasing must mean fair trade purchasing for all - then the movements for economic justice become unwitting participants in "greenwashing" or "fair washing". This is because corporations become the beneficiaries of purchasing policies rather than the movements which helped

create them. We have already seen this in the approach that Starbucks has taken to fair trade, with their outlets plastered with fair trade logos even though the coffee and tea is more often than not unavailable and constitutes only 1% of their total sales. The social economy organizations and movements, such as 100% fair trade co-operative coffee roasters, which helped bring these issues to the forefront of the public's consciousness can not easily distinguish themselves in the market and the alternatives that such economic activity represent are obscured.

This leads us to our conclusion and policy suggestion for the people's centred economy. There is a need to focus purchasing policies on values rather than products. By focusing purchasing policies on values, such as economic justice throughout the value chain, capital and attention can be directed to participants in the people's centred economy rather than those whose economic practices have created the social and economic exclusions which such an economy is built to mitigate. The key question for a people's centred economy purchasing policy thus becomes how to organize this focus in a practical way. We believe that there are two policy solutions which can achieve this goal.

First, the enormous wealth that "leaks" out of the people's centred economy because of the lack of "linkage" between organizations – John Loxley's work "Transforming or Reforming Capitalism: Towards a Theory of CED" is a good start to thinking through this problem, but needs to be applied to the movement for a people's centred economy, not just geographically. In other words, purchasing policies need to be developed which are internal to the people's centred economy need to be developed - somewhat similar to one of the international principles of co-operation: co-operation amongst co-operatives.

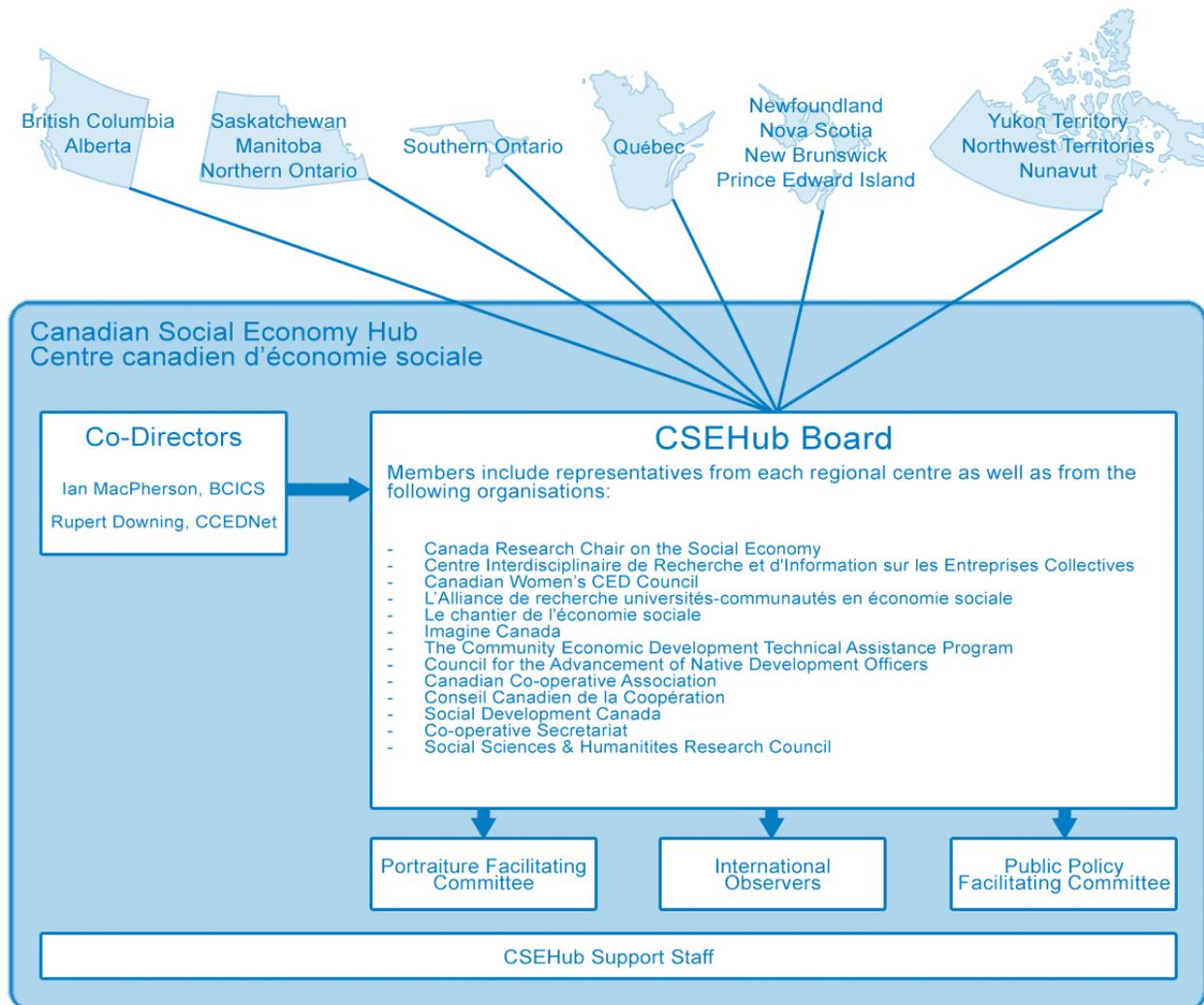
Second, there is an important need to implement measurement tools which can help organizations transition themselves through what our research identified as a progression towards increasing social justice. How can an organization reveal to itself its progress from its current state to a more ethical organization in terms of its purchasing policies, but also its social practices. This has been called by McMurtry elsewhere "ethical value-added". In terms of purchasing policies specifically, organizations need to target areas of development of procurement not as an end state, but as a process towards a series of social value and thereby initiate a constant process of increasing organizational integration into a people's centred economy. There is a need to take purchasing from the range of individual choice into broadly accepted standards of institutional, governmental, international and personal consumption. This doesn't mean abandonment of label purchasing or struggles for change within non-social economy institutions, but rather involves people's centred economy organizations taking a leadership role in a process of education around economic

justice using purchasing policies as a tool. By so doing, the people's centred economy movement will be placing itself within the long historical movement outlined above.

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