

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES (CCSC)

---

## Top Co-op Issues 2023

---

Author(s): **Stan Yu**, *CCSC Research and Communications Coordinator*

April 2024

[usaskstudies.coop](http://usaskstudies.coop)



**JOHNSON SHOYAMA**  
Canadian Centre for the  
Study of Co-operatives  
UREGINA ▼ USASK

Copyright © 2024 Stan Yu

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives  
101 Diefenbaker Place  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon SK Canada S7N 5B8  
Phone: (306) 966-8509 / Fax: (306) 966-8517

E-mail: [coop.studies@usask.ca](mailto:coop.studies@usask.ca)

Website: <http://www.usaskstudies.coop>

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	Executive Summary .....	1
	Sommaire .....	2
1.0	Introduction .....	3
2.0	Findings .....	3
	Appendix A: A Selection of Respondent Quotes on Survey Themes .....	7
	Appendix B: 2023 Top Co-op Issues Survey .....	10

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the sixth straight year, a survey of Canadian co-operative leaders say that the **lack of awareness** of the co-operative model continues to be the most pressing and important challenge facing the co-operative sector. As one of the 140 respondents to the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives’ 2023 Top Co-op Issues survey explained, *“members do not differentiate a co-op from any other business model. They mostly engage as customers, not members.”*

In an increasingly competitive environment with corporate and online alternatives vying for consumer support, many co-operative leaders stressed the importance of increasing awareness of their co-operative identity as a way of standing out from the crowd.

For the third year in a row, the second most pressing issue for co-operative leaders is the need to **access capital and financing**. Most co-operatives continue to wrestle with a lack of capital-raising options beyond building up retained earnings. At the same time, co-operatives sometimes struggle to obtain funding from banks and even credit unions because lenders do not understand the co-operative model very well. Many respondents said the sector needs access to patient capital – funding from sources that do not expect or a need a return on their investment in the short run. However, beyond

pointing to the need for government support, respondents offered few suggestions as to where this patient capital might come from and who might provide it.

Also for the third year in a row, the need to **develop strong co-operative leaders** was listed as the third most pressing challenge facing the co-operative sector. Co-operatives are increasingly facing succession challenges as senior leaders retire from the sector, with no one to lead the co-operative and the sector more broadly. Respondents noted, however, that it was challenging to find young co-operative leaders who had a passion for the co-operative model and the necessary business and technical skills and knowledge. Respondents said there was a commensurate need for more educational programs to train, support, and mentor young co-operative leaders.

For the second year in a row, co-operative leaders said the fourth most pressing challenge was that **policymakers all too often ignore or fail to take into account the co-operative sector when designing new policies**. This can mean that co-operatives are ineligible for programs available for their privately-held or publicly-traded competitors.

Entering the top five for the first time is the need to **nurture cooperation amongst co-operatives (Principle 6)**.

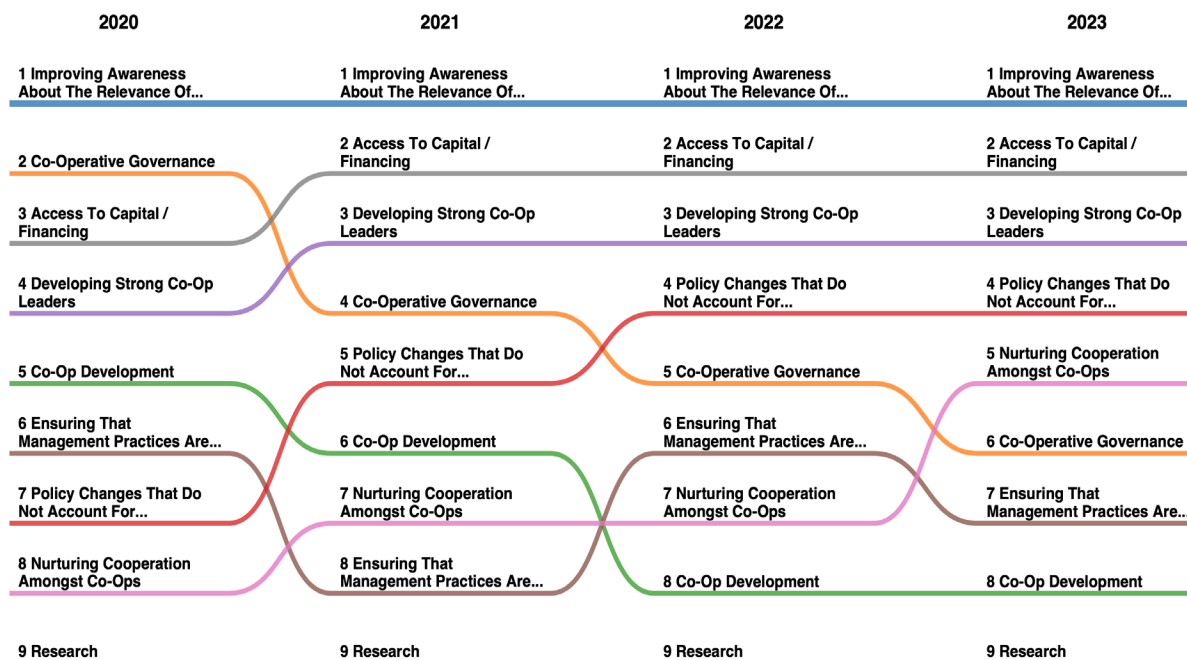


Figure 1: List of Top Co-op Issues Survey Rankings, 2020-2023

Co-operative leaders observed that the status quo within the sector consists of little to no cooperation amongst co-operatives. Instead, co-operatives tend to focus on the sustainability and success of their own co-operative.

A full list of the rankings from the 2023 survey, alongside the rankings from the past three years and how each challenge has trended within the rankings over time, can be found in Figure 1.

## SOMMAIRE

Pour la sixième année consécutive, un sondage auprès des chefs de file des coopératives canadiennes révèle que le manque de sensibilisation au modèle coopératif persiste comme étant le défi le plus urgent et le plus important auquel est confronté le secteur coopératif. « Les membres ne différencient pas une coopérative de tout autre modèle d'affaires. Ils s'engagent principalement en tant que clients et non en tant que membres », a expliqué un des 140 participants au sondage 2023 portant sur les principaux enjeux des coopératives, mené par le Centre Canadien d'Etude des Coopératives.

Dans un environnement de plus en plus concurrentiel où les entreprises et les alternatives en ligne rivalisent pour obtenir le soutien des consommateurs, de nombreux dirigeants de coopératives ont souligné l'importance de faire connaître davantage leur identité coopérative afin de se démarquer de la foule.

Pour la troisième année consécutive, le deuxième problème le plus urgent pour les dirigeants de coopératives est le besoin d'accéder au capital et au financement. La plupart des coopératives continuent de souffrir d'un manque d'options de mobilisation de capitaux au-delà de la constitution de bénéfices non répartis. Parallèlement, les coopératives ont parfois du mal à obtenir du financement auprès des banques et même des coopératives de crédit vu que les prêteurs ne comprennent pas très bien le modèle coopératif. De nombreux participants ont déclaré que le secteur a besoin d'accéder à un capital patient – un financement provenant de sources qui ne s'attendent pas à ou n'ont pas besoin d'un retour sur investissement à court terme. Cependant, au-delà de la nécessité d'un soutien gouvernemental, les personnes interrogées ont formulé peu de suggestions quant à l'origine de ce capital patient et à qui pourrait le fournir.

Également, pour la troisième année consécutive, la nécessité de former des leaders coopératifs forts a été citée comme le troisième défi le plus pressant auquel est confronté le secteur coopératif. Les coopératives font face à des défis de succession à mesure que les cadres supérieurs prennent leur retraite, sans qu'il y ait des candidats pour diriger la coopérative et le secteur en général. Les participants ont toutefois souligné qu'il était difficile de trouver de jeunes dirigeants de coopératives passionnés par le modèle coopératif et possédant les compétences et connaissances commerciales et techniques nécessaires. Les participants ont déclaré qu'il y avait un besoin proportionnel d'offrir plus de programmes éducatifs pour former, soutenir et encadrer les jeunes dirigeants de coopératives.

Pour la deuxième année consécutive, les chefs de file des coopératives ont déclaré que le quatrième défi le plus urgent était que les décideurs politiques ignorent ou omettent trop souvent de prendre en compte le secteur coopératif lors de la conception de nouvelles politiques. Cela peut signifier que les coopératives ne sont pas admissibles aux programmes offerts à leurs concurrents privés ou cotés en bourse.

La nécessité d'entretenir la coopération entre les coopératives entre pour la première fois dans le top cinq (Principe 6). Les dirigeants des coopératives ont observé que le statu quo au sein du secteur se traduit par une coopération limitée ou même absente entre les coopératives. Celles-ci ont plutôt tendance à se concentrer sur la durabilité et le succès de leur propre coopérative.

Une liste complète des classements du sondage 2023, ainsi que les classements des trois dernières années et l'évolution de chaque défi dans le classement au fil du temps, sont présentés dans la Figure 1.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

For the eighth year in a row, the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) reached out to a broad cross-section of co-operative leaders— including Chief Executive Officers/Executive Directors, managers, board members, and researchers — to ask for their opinion on the most pressing and important issues facing co-operatives today. We collected data between November 8, 2023, and December 31, 2023. As in years past, respondents were able to participate in English or French.

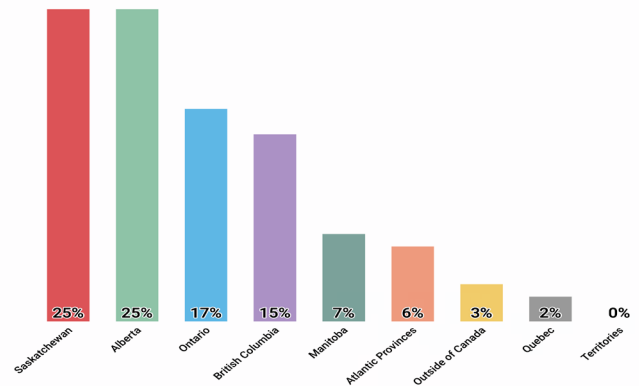
Like the 2022 survey, this survey incorporated a pre-populated list of top co-operative issues derived from past survey findings. The list was randomized for each respondent. Respondents were asked to select the three most important challenges facing co-operatives in Canada in ascending order, followed by an open-ended question that invited respondents to elaborate on each of the identified challenges. A selection of these anonymous open-ended responses pertaining to each challenge can be found in [Appendix A](#). For the survey tool, see [Appendix B](#).

We inversely weighted the data to reflect the ranking hierarchy. For example, we assigned the largest value to the top issue identified by each respondent, the second largest value to the second choice, and third-largest value to the third choice. We then tallied the score for each to produce our rankings.

### Profile of Respondents

As with our 2022 survey, the CCSC partnered with Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada (CMC) as well as several provincial co-operative associations to distribute the survey to a broader network of co-operatives and credit unions across Canada. In total, 140 leaders from the co-operative sector completed the survey, double the 2022 response rate.

As shown in Figure 2, the largest number of survey respondents was from Alberta and Saskatchewan, followed by Ontario, then British Columbia.



**Figure 1: Geographic Location of Respondents**

Almost half of the survey respondents said they held management (49%) roles. Meanwhile 27% said they were on the board of a co-operative, with another 11% described themselves as co-operative researchers/academics/scholars and 4% said they were co-op developers. The remaining 9% described themselves as legal partners, consultants, advisors, experienced staff, retired executive members, or involved co-operative members.

Among those who said they worked for a co-operative, the median number of employees at their organization was 42, while the participating organization with the greatest number of employees had 9,000.

## 2.0 FINDINGS

In 2023, co-operative leaders identified the following issues as the most important challenges uniquely facing the movement:

### 1. Improving awareness about the relevance of the co-operative model with the general public, members, youth, government, and other stakeholders

For the sixth year in a row, co-operative leaders said the need to improve awareness about the relevance of the co-operative model was the most pressing challenge facing the Canadian co-operative movement. In 2023, this issue garnered 29% of all votes cast, up from 26% in 2022.

Co-operative leaders said that all too often, members are unaware of how their membership benefits them, or how co-operatives are different from other businesses. Without that deeper understanding, respondents expressed concern that the relationship becomes purely transactional. As one co-operative leader explained, *“Our co-operative operates in a service area whereby the co-operative difference is not well-understood by members, and for whom engaging in community-building with other members is disincentivized by the nature of the service. There’s a strong urge to keep the relationship to the organization primarily transactional, and people are generally familiar with the for-profit private alternatives to our service, and hyperfocused on governance only as it relates to service’s price.”*

Co-operative leaders pointed to several factors that seem to be incentivizing this kind of relationship, including the easy availability of online, sometimes cheaper, alternatives, an increasing focus on finding the cheapest product in an environment of rising inflation, and perceptions among some members that co-operatives are less stable, uncompetitive, outdated, and more expensive than their private sector counterparts.

Co-operative leaders also pointed to awareness challenges with particular segments of the population, including youth and newcomers. With respect to youth, respondents pointed to the lack of opportunities for youth to learn about co-operatives in primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions, while newcomers to Canada appear have low awareness of the model and are not actively seeking it out.

On a more positive note, co-operative leaders emphasized that people generally like and support the co-operative model once they learn more about it. Moreover, the values associated with the co-operative model, such as supporting and sustaining local economies and communities, are well-aligned with most consumers in the 21st Century. For co-operative leaders, what is needed is more promotion of co-operatives. As one leader wrote, *“Co-ops do not aggressively promote the co-op principles and the amazing things they do for business and community”*. Some co-operative leaders advocated for more national campaigns, while others wondered if there were opportunities to teach about co-operatives in primary and secondary schools. Still, other co-operative leaders emphasized the need for, and importance of, member engagement within one’s own co-operative.

## **2. Access to capital/financing (for growth, technological spending, and other)**

According to co-operative leaders, the second most pressing challenge facing Canadian co-operatives – at 14% – was access to capital and financing to fund the growing need for investment in new technologies such as artificial intelligence, expansion, or simply to renew existing capital. This issue also ranked second last year, with 15% support.

With this in mind, respondents identified several capital / financing related challenges. For example, while co-operatives typically focus on retained earnings to fund their business, this source of funding is vulnerable to demands by members for the co-operative to make larger patronage allocations.

Co-operative leaders also noted challenges with securing loan funding, noting that banks and some credit unions have a poor understanding of the model and its strengths, which in turn affects their willingness to approve loans. This issue is especially challenging for start-up co-operatives and younger co-operatives.

To overcome these challenges, numerous co-operative leaders pointed to the need for patient capital or funding where there is no expectation for an immediate return from government or other sources.

## **3. Developing strong co-operative leaders**

The third most pressing challenge for respondents – and it has ranked third for three years in a row with 10% support – is the need to develop strong co-op leaders. Increasingly, co-operative leaders are facing succession challenges as senior leaders age out and/or retire from their current positions. However, unlike in previous years, a number of respondents described this challenge as not only about succession planning for co-operatives as individual entities but for the sector as a whole. They also called for a new vision that can unite the sector and bring in traditionally neglected voices such as Indigenous peoples and individuals from the women’s and environmental movements. As one co-op leader explained, *“We require a new generation of co-op leaders to not only fill the shoes of those who are on the way to retirement, but to create relevancy of co-op models in the future”*.

To address this challenge, co-operatives are increasingly seeking leaders from outside the co-operative sector. While these individuals come with a wealth of experience and

business acumen, there is often a need of ensuring they continue to espouse and uphold the co-operative model rather than dilute the model. Respondents pointed to the need for more programs to educate, support, mentor, and train young co-operative leaders would help to address this challenge.

#### **4. Policy changes that do not account for co-operatives**

Respondents identified public policy – and the tendency for co-operatives to be ignored or worse yet, marginalized by policymakers – as the fourth most pressing issue in the 2023 survey. Respondents said that all too often, government programs effectively exclude co-operatives or are not well suited to the co-operative model, with the result being that policymakers miss out on an important opportunity to achieve their policy objectives. This experience is shared amongst different types of co-operatives, ranging from producer co-operatives to credit unions to worker co-operatives. One co-operative leader listed institutions such as the Bank of Canadian Entrepreneurs (BDC), Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), and Export Development Canada (EDC) as institutions that commonly exhibit this behaviour.

More generally, co-operative leaders said they believe there is a lack of government support for the co-operative sector at the federal and provincial level that, in turn, is based on ignorance of the model.

As a result, co-operative leaders feel they must constantly educate policymakers about their model whenever governments are contemplating new legislation. Co-operative leaders suggested that ignorance of the model is a problem not just for the sector but for society as a whole because co-operatives have the potential to help solve some of our most pressing policy issues, including the need for affordable and green energy, affordable housing, succession planning for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and community economic development.

#### **5. Nurturing cooperation amongst co-operatives**

The fifth most pressing issue for co-operatives leaders, with 8% of the overall vote, was the need to nurture cooperation amongst co-operatives. This issue rose two spots, up from seventh in 2022. Co-op leaders lamented the absence of cooperation amongst co-operatives, with individual co-operatives increasingly focusing narrowly on their own business and not considering the interests of other like co-

operatives or the broader movement. This propensity in turn tends to lead to competition amongst co-operatives rather than cooperation to improve products or services. Some have further observed that this tendency is becoming especially pronounced amongst co-operative federations.

A number of respondents attributed this behaviour to “isomorphism”, a term used by academics to describe the process whereby corporate mindsets tends to converge. Others attributed the lack of cooperation to the complexity in negotiating shared services within highly regulated environments, such as the case for credit unions.

While co-operation among co-operatives may be waning, respondents said it was more important than ever. One leader noted, for example, that to tackle major environmental and social challenges requires building a common and ambitious cooperative vision. To help restore cooperation among co-operatives, respondents proposed creating a platform for co-operative leaders in Canada to communicate and collaborate or developing digital pathways for co-operatives to pool member information across co-operatives.

#### **6. Governance**

Respondents identified co-operative governance as the sixth most pressing issue (at 6%) facing the sector, down fifth place in 2022. Respondents noted ongoing challenges with AGM attendance and recruiting board members with the right values, skills, and experience to serve on their boards. Echoing sentiments from past Top Co-op Issues surveys, co-op leaders emphasized the need for directors that see co-operative values as tools to help frame their decision making. Without these kinds of leaders, respondents expressed concern that co-operatives boards will not properly hold management to account, become dominated by a few strong personalities, and fail to ensure that the co-operative is governed in a way consistent with the movement’s values and principles.

To overcome these challenges, co-operative leaders underlined the importance of governance education and training, particularly training informed by co-operative values and principles.



## 7. Ensuring that management practices are adapted to co-operatives

Dropping from the sixth most pressing issue to the seventh, co-op leaders identified the continuing challenge of ensuring management practices are adapted to co-operatives. Respondents said that co-operatives managers are increasingly being recruited from outside the co-operative sector. If these outside managers bring a conventional business-school type corporate lens to co-operatives, they may contribute to an erosion of co-operative values – isomorphism as described earlier – that could ultimately result in the business demutualizing (i.e., becoming a for-profit company). Co-operative leaders mentioned the recent case of MEC or Co-op Atlantic as examples of this process.

To address these issue, co-operative leaders stressed the need for co-operatives to see the co-operative model as a strength rather than a weakness. They underlined the importance of educating managers recruited from outside the co-op sector about the co-operative model through co-operative management education programs, especially ones that are accessible and do not require months of study. Respondents also pointed to the need for mentorship, networking, and knowledge sharing.

## 8. Co-operative Development

Respondents identified co-operative development as the eighth top issue in 2023, down from seventh place in 2022. Co-op leaders praised the work of ongoing co-operative development organizations, such as Co-operatives First.

Some co-op leaders said co-operative development was a kind of sparkplug that could generate excitement and reinvigorate the sector. They noted that some members of the public still see co-operatives as being “yesterday’s” movement. The development of new co-operatives that can meet contemporary challenges will help attract younger members, recapture the public imagination, and potentially provides a new path for new and younger co-operators to join the leadership of existing co-operatives, which could also provide new energy for those organizations.

However, in order for this potential to be realized, respondents said there is a need for more resources and supports ranging from more funding to the creation of formal and informal networks to support co-operatives, such as one finds in Mondragon, Spain, and the co-operative sector in Emilia Romania region of Italy.

Survey respondents identified a few other issues of concern. These included:

- **Increased research on co-operatives** – While current research efforts are appreciated, co-operative leaders said they would like to see more research that can gain the attention of the federal and provincial regulators, the courts, and the public.
- **Retaining competitiveness** – Respondents pointed to an increasingly challenging competitive environment.
- **Provincial associations** – Co-operative leaders identified a need for the sector to find ways to strengthen its provincial associations.
- **The rise of Environmental, Social, and Governance goals (ESGs)** – Co-operative leaders pointed to ESGs as an increasingly important topic and question the extent to which co-operatives are meeting ESG goals.
- **Rising operating costs** – Co-operatives are not immune to the rising costs of goods and services. Respondents drew particular attention to rising costs associated with technology, labour, regulatory, and rent.

## APPENDIX A: A SELECTION OF RESPONDENT QUOTES ON THE SURVEY THEMES

### 1. Improving awareness about the relevance of the co-operative model with the general public, members, youth, government and other stakeholders

"I regularly meet folks who think "co-op" is a brand name or chain, and don't realize that it is a governance model. The average person doesn't know what co-ops are and why they should be favoured."

"There is an overall lack of awareness of the importance of co-ops in maintaining sustainable, strong local economies. Even members of co-ops don't understand the meaning and importance of membership. That being said, it is incredibly challenging to communicate to such a broad audience and the approach to education and raising awareness about co-ops must be multifaceted. It will take time and money to address this issue."

"We continue to become less known as newer generations simply see us as another business (typically small business). They don't understand how we are different or how we can connect to many of the values they likely hold themselves."

"The advertising that the CRS does now is far stronger now in speaking to how Co-ops are local and dedicated to supporting their communities, but the CRS has national competitors (latest Petro-Canada ads, the "Daryl" ads that try and state that those companies are "local"). We need to define what local is to the public, and not be placed in the position of having to respond or react to others who are trying to define local in a way that is somewhat disingenuous. Additionally, the values that Co-ops bring to our communities (including equity, local employment with benefits, support for a myriad of local organizations) needs to be stressed and re-stressed to provincial and municipal politicians. We need to define "us" as a strong and stable and committed contributor to our members, our communities, and to our staff."

"I'm not convinced that the general public understands the potential benefits, individually and collectively for a community, of the co-operative model and a people-centric approach to delivering products and services. I guess the challenge is: how do you get peoples' attention to listen to the message and how to you convey the message in a compelling way so they can appreciate (and act) on it?"

### 2. Access to capital/financing (for growth, technological spending, and other)

"Balancing retained earnings to strengthen the balance with delivering a consistent return to our members."

"Having to rely on member capital (especially for a not-for-profit co-operative) for growth and to continue to evolve the co-operative enterprise and continue to renew the value proposition is a challenge. Many existing co-operatives began in a different economic "wave". When we look at AI and other 4th wave developments that are occurring, co-operatives that don't renew themselves with contemporary technology and business practices are going to be seen as irrelevant to members and will not provide a compelling value proposition to prospective (or existing) members. Access to capital that does not dilute or destroy the democratic governance model is needed."

"Securing protected status quo funding is hard enough. Securing growth funding for new initiatives, capital etc is even harder in an already financially pressed system. It holds cooperatives from doing what they do best - innovate and respond to community needs."

"Since banks do not trust or understand the co-op model, they tend to dismiss co-ops and turn them down when they apply for start up or expansion loans. This is discouraging. More education is needed at all levels to change attitudes and encourage more co-op development"

"Access to more funds with long runways could really boost the success for new co-ops to establish themselves."

### 3. Developing strong co-operative leaders

"The co-operatives in Canada are going through a generational shift. There are younger/newer leaders coming up and we need to support them and encourage more of this demographic to get training and experience in co-operatives and co-operative development."

"I was torn a bit between this and the Leadership option because I think there's an issue which straddles both which is succession planning within cooperative sector leadership. There's a real challenge in cultivating (recruiting, developing, and retaining) a new generation of cooperative leaders who more closely reflect the demographics of Canada. The consequence of not doing so is that the coop sector will be

seen as too white and grey to be relevant to meeting Canadian challenges.”

“The sector lacks strong individuals (does not attract or retain) with business acumen who understand co-operatives and see them as a unique and important part of servicing their communities.”

“Coops are facing succession challenges as senior leaders retire and the next generation come in to these positions. Co-ops are seeing senior management come in from outside of the co-op movement and they lack the education/experience of leading a co-operative. The passion/curiosity maybe there but there is a profound lack of consistent, accessible co-op management education that doesn't require months of study. Opportunities for networking, education and mentoring are now lacking across Canada - more opportunities for round tables, knowledge sharing and education that is relevant, timely and accessible is required.”

“Les défis environnementaux et sociaux contemporains nécessitent de construire une vision coopérative commune et ambitieuse. Actuellement, les leaders coop se contiennent à une approche business as usual.”

#### **4. Policy changes that do not account for co-operatives**

“There are a huge range of programs and policies offered by public and quasi-public institutions (ex. BDC, EDC, incubator/accelerator networks, CMHC, etc.) whose structure defaults to for-profit corporations as the only eligible legal form but whose objectives would otherwise align with those of co-operatives. Indeed, with Employee Ownership Trusts emerging as a federal policy we are in danger of watching this happen \*again\*. In the absence of this legal form equality/agnosticism, the consequences is that coops have the playing field tilted against them.”

“Attempts to update or change policies, especially in finance and labor, often undermine or do not understand the specific needs and benefits of co-ops, especially worker co-ops and credit unions. Also in agriculture, some policies seem to be moving away from specific support for various types and levels of co-ops. Finally there are laws that undermine the effectiveness of informal economic cooperation such as ROSCAs (rotating savings and credit associations), particularly among racialized groups. This reduces and undermines grassroots economic cooperation and collectives which are essential to low-income communities.”

“The legal structures of the provinces and federal government do not support co-operatives and there is really no robust policy framework to do so either”

“Cooperatives are usually a second-thought and must be advocated for with regard to general legislation and policy development. We are a viable model that addresses business practices in a different way. Allowing flexibility in policy to embrace cooperatives would allow them to grow and flourish in the marketplace.”

“Canadian Credit Union Association (CCUA) does a good job advocating with government on behalf of credit unions however it is still a fight to be considered when government sets policy on things EG: open banking because we are provincially regulated and small in comparison to the big banks.”

#### **5. Nurturing Cooperation amongst Co-operatives**

“Too many leaders of co-operatives place little to no importance on co-operation among co-operatives. As a result, they are reluctant to support co-operative associations and federations, especially intersectoral bodies. They also overlook opportunities to do business with other co-operatives and to support the development and growth of new co-operatives, at home and abroad.”

“Related to awareness building, there seems to even be a lack of awareness within co-ops to the importance of the co-op model and this is reflected in the way that co-ops are seemingly less and less willing to work together and instead are focusing on their own individual success. A strong co-op economy is better when co-ops are working together to support and learn from one another. We are at the risk of abandoning the co-op identity and that would be a huge loss to our communities.”

“In today's climate there is a lot of focus on individuality of the entity and survival. As we all grapple with ways to be sustainable, relevant and to continue growing, we forget to look up and realize that we are not alone within the sector and can achieve more by working together and achieve our goals as a sector, not individual entities.”

“A strong co-op economy is better when co-ops are working together to support and learn from one another. We are at the risk of abandoning the co-op identity and that would be a huge loss to our communities.”

“Les défis environnementaux et sociaux contemporains nécessitent de construire une vision coopérative commune et ambitieuse. Actuellement, les leaders coop se contiennent à une approche business as usual.”

## 6. Governance

“Governance will always be a challenge and opportunity for co-operatives. As co-ops evolve, grow and become more complex, directors and leaders need to be fully equipped with the skills, knowledge and attitude to fulfill their fiduciary, legal and strategic responsibilities. In addition, applying a co-op lens when making long term decisions can be at odds with enterprise base co-operatives. Ensuring decisions are in line with co-op values requires rigour and discipline for co-op boards.”

“Co-operative governance, like governance in all organizations, is about the distribution of decision-making power. As the structure of co-operatives continues to change and the challenges that co-operatives have to face evolve, it is vital that the right decision makers are in place.”

“Governance is tone from the top, and vision. Uninformed directors, and directors that do not share the cooperative values, lose sight of the value of cooperatives and possibly do not behave like a cooperative. Further, they can not direct or hold leaders accountable for cooperative values and behaviors if they themselves do not value them.”

“Member engagement is an ongoing challenge, especially when it comes to governance: AGM attendance, Board of Director elections, resolutions voting, etc. Depending on the type of cooperative, some members are more interested in the services and less in the governing process and structure. Understanding their role in a cooperative as a co-owner is an ongoing challenge and it gets harder as the co-op scales.”

“There is a dearth of co-operative governance excellence in evidence and many co-ops that could benefit from governance training don’t know where to find it or how to pay for it.”

## 7. Ensuring that management practices are adapted to co-operatives

“Most co-operatives, perhaps especially larger co-operatives, recruit their staff and executives from outside the co-operative sector. Many managers and CEOs have a thin understanding of

the co-operative and fail to adapt their management practices to reflect their co-operative nature. The pressure is always on to adapt best practices rather than best cooperative practices. Isomorphism is a constant presence. It affects all of us and we have to constantly resist the urge to be like the ‘others.’”

“Co-operative enterprises adopt dominant business management practices (standard by-laws are an example). With management based on a competitive business model, it’s not surprising that gradually co-ops devolve into the default model and begin to behave like competitive businesses. It is the path of least resistance”

“Coops are facing succession challenges as senior leaders retire and the next generation come in to these positions. Co-ops are seeing senior management come in from outside of the co-op movement and they lack the education/experience of leading a co-operative. The passion/curiosity maybe there but there is a profound lack of consistent, accessible co-op management education that doesn’t require months of study. Opportunities for networking, education and mentoring are now lacking across Canada - more opportunities for round tables, knowledge sharing and education that is relevant, timely and accessible is required.”

“As referenced earlier, as senior management and leaders retired out of the system, there is a lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of co-op models and structures. Ensuring that co-op management best practices are widely shared, networking opportunities created, and mentoring is available is critical for the adaptation of management practices to co-ops.”

## 8. Co-operative Development

“Many of the issues facing us today including income inequality, the business succession crisis, the desire for people to have more say in their workplace could be addressed by creating new co-operatives. However the lack of resources for co-op development means that it is challenging for people to get the support they need.”

“New development renews the presence, resonance, and prestige of co-operation as a solution for contemporary problems rather than allowing it to recede in the popular imaginary as a limited tool, reflecting yesterday’s values and realities. Fostering new co-op development also provides an important pipeline of ‘new blood’ for old co-ops, allowing them to draw from experienced developer-activists, their

communities, and their social movements rather than sliding into technocratic board dominance (dominated by managers and professionals) and their tendency to deemphasize the co-op difference.”

“New & exciting”, “growing”, “innovative” are all descriptors that tend to generate interest and energy. There is a great deal of value to established co-ops but interest in co-ops that are developing (either newly formed or evolving in novel ways) tends to be higher and to attract younger members &/or employees.”

“Need better formal and informal networks to support coops. Al la Mondragon and Emilia Romana”

“Co-operatives First is doing a fabulous job, but co-op development takes a lot of time and commitment and up-front investment from community members.”

#### Other themes

“Diversity, inclusion and equity in co-ops in Canada and other places like the USA is a serious challenge to the co-op movement and the growth of the co-op sector, because still in the 21st century there are both micro and macro challenges to racial, gender and other equities in co-ops. This reduces the strength and success of co-ops and also the growth of co-ops. Part of the problem is that the mainstream co-op sectors do not always recognize the more informal co-op activity happening among people of color. But even in formal co-ops, there are often incidents of white privilege and racial and gender microaggressions that turn people away from the co-op or undermine the co-op’s effectiveness. Co-ops are often reluctant to notice and address these problems, and so continue to mirror the inequities in the larger society. This also keeps growing segments of the population away from co-ops and feeling uncomfortable with a specific co-op or with the model. The co-op sectors in Canada could grow much faster and be stronger if they recognize these challenges, and embrace and celebrate the strong co-op traditions and cultures among people of color; and are more supportive of women, people with disabilities, and low-income people in general in co-ops, to achieve equity and justice not just diversity and inclusion. Being welcoming is not enough, and just having diverse representation is not enough. Co-ops need to contribute to changing power relationships, to achieving meaningful inclusion and developing equity and justice in their organizations as well as in their communities and

societies.”

“We continue to see significant cost increasing in technology costs, labour costs, and regulatory costs and margin are getting squeezed.”

“Over the past few years we have seen rapid consolidation of ownership and wealth inequality, which is having an eroding effect on democratic institutions and the ability to have independent operators in the marketplace. It will be increasingly difficult for co-ops to operate in this space.”

“There is a lack of published research on co-operatives in Canada and this hampers the ability to gain the attention of federal and provincial regulators, much less the courts (i.e. MEC Bankruptcy).”

## APPENDIX B: 2023 TOP CO-OP ISSUES SURVEY

For the last seven years, the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (a research centre sponsored by Canadian co-operatives and the University of Saskatchewan) has asked members of the co-operative sector across Canada “What are the top issues facing co-operatives in Canada today?”. Results from last year’s survey can be found here: [https://usaskstudies.coop/documents/pdfs/ccsc\\_top-co-op-issues-2022.pdf](https://usaskstudies.coop/documents/pdfs/ccsc_top-co-op-issues-2022.pdf)

It is now time to understand how the challenges facing the co-operative sector in 2023 may be changing. The survey is available in English and French. You can change the language on the survey using the language button located on the top righthand corner of the survey.

Rest assured, your responses will be kept anonymous. Our report, anticipated this winter, will be informed by analysis of the aggregated response. Finally, please note that the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) has examined and approved this study (BEH#: 2269).

Many thanks for your prompt attention to this survey!

Sincerely,

Marc-André Pigeon, Director and Strategic Research Fellow  
Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives  
University of Saskatchewan  
<http://usaskstudies.coop>

1. How many people does your organization employ? If you don't work for a co-operative, simply put "not applicable" in the textbox below.
2. What is your position within your organization? \*Please select all that apply\*
  - Member of the Board of Directors
  - Management
  - Co-operative Developer
  - Academic
  - Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Where is your organization headquartered? If you are self-employed, where are you based out of?
  - Alberta
  - British Columbia
  - Manitoba
  - New Brunswick
  - Newfoundland and Labrador
  - Northwest Territories
  - Nova Scotia
  - Nunavut
  - Ontario
  - Prince Edward Island
  - Quebec
  - Saskatchewan
  - Yukon
  - Outside of Canada
4. What, in your view, is the most important challenge uniquely facing co-operatives in Canada today? Please make your selection from the following list:
  - Improving awareness about the relevance of co-operative model with the general public, members, youth, government, and other stakeholders
  - Co-operative governance
  - Co-operative development
  - Policy changes that do not account for co-operatives
  - Developing strong co-operative leaders
  - Ensuring that management practices are adapted to co-operatives
  - Nurturing cooperation among co-operatives
  - Access to capital / financing (for growth, technological spending and other)
5. What, in your view, is the second most important challenge uniquely facing co-operatives in Canada today? Please make your selection from the following list:
  - Research on co-operatives
  - Other (please specify)
  - Please enter a comment
6. What, in your view, is the third most important challenge uniquely facing co-operatives in Canada today? Please make your selection from the following list:
  - Improving awareness about the relevance of co-operative model with the general public, members, youth, government, and other stakeholders
  - Co-operative governance
  - Co-operative development
  - Policy changes that do not account for co-operatives
  - Developing strong co-operative leaders
  - Ensuring that management practices are adapted to co-operatives
  - Nurturing cooperation among co-operatives
  - Access to capital / financing (for growth, technological spending and other)

7. You selected Improving awareness about the relevance of co-operative model with the general public, members, youth, government and other stakeholders as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
8. You selected co-operative governance as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
9. You selected co-operative development as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
10. You selected policy changes that do not account for co-operatives as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
11. You selected developing strong co-operative leaders as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
12. You selected ensuring that management practices are adapted to co-operatives as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
13. You selected nurturing cooperation among co-operatives as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
14. You selected access to capital / financing (for growth, technological spending and other) as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
15. You selected research on co-operatives as a top challenge, what is the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge?
16. You selected the other option as a top challenge, please elaborate on the nature of this challenge and why is it a challenge.

This is the end of the 2023 Top Co-op Issues Survey. If you have any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share with us, please leave them below.

Au cours des septième dernières années, le Centre Canadien d'Etude des coopératives (un centre de recherche parrainé par les coopératives canadiennes et l'Université de la Saskatchewan) a sollicité des membres du secteur coopératif à travers le Canada sur les principaux problèmes auxquels les coopératives au Canada font face aujourd'hui. Les résultats du sondage de l'année dernière peuvent être consultés ici: [https://usaskstudies.coop/documents/pdfs/ccsc\\_top-co-op-issues-2022.pdf](https://usaskstudies.coop/documents/pdfs/ccsc_top-co-op-issues-2022.pdf)

Il est temps maintenant de comprendre comment les défis auxquels le secteur coopératif est confronté en 2023 peuvent évoluer.

Il s'agit, comme toujours, d'une demande personnelle que nous adressons aux PDG, présidents de conseils d'administration et autres leaders et observateurs de coopératives canadiens. Nous garantissons que vos réponses resteront anonymes afin de produire une liste agrégée des principaux problèmes auxquels sont actuellement confrontées les coopératives, tels qu'ils sont vus par les organisations et les acteurs du secteur. Nous partagerons les résultats avec la communauté coopérative canadienne et nous utiliserons vos réponses pour guider nos futures recherches. Le comité d'éthique de la recherche comportementale de l'Université de la Saskatchewan (Beh-REB) a examiné et approuvé cette étude (BEH #: 2269).

Merci beaucoup de votre attention immédiate à cette enquête!

Cordialement,

Marc-André Pigeon, Directeur et chercheur associé stratégique  
Centre Canadien d'Etude des Coopératives  
L'Université de la Saskatchewan  
<https://usaskstudies.coop>

1. Combien de personnes votre organisation emploie-t-elle? Si vous ne travaillez pas au sein d'une coopérative, inscrivez simplement « Ne s'applique pas » dans la zone de texte ci-dessous.

2. Où se situe le siège de votre organisation? Si vous êtes indépendant, où êtes-vous basé?

• Alberta

- Colombie-Britannique
- Manitoba
- Nouveau-Brunswick
- Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador
- Territoires du Nord-Ouest
- Nouvelle-Écosse
- Nunavut
- Ontario
- Île-du-Prince-Édouard
- Québec
- Saskatchewan
- Yukon
- À l'extérieur du Canada

3. Quelle est votre poste au sein de votre organisation ?

\*Veuillez sélectionner tout ceux qui s'appliquent\* \*

- Membre du conseil d'administration
- Gestionnaire
- Consultant dans la création de nouvelle coopératives
- Professeur / universitaire
- Autre, svp indiquer : \_\_\_\_\_

4. Selon vous, quel est le défi le plus important auquel sont confrontées les coopératives au Canada aujourd'hui? Veuillez faire votre choix de la liste suivante (Veuillez choisir une seule réponse):

- Améliorer la sensibilisation à la pertinence du modèle coopératif auprès du grand public, des membres, des jeunes, du gouvernement et d'autres parties prenantes
- La gouvernance coopérative
- Le développement coopératif
- Des changements de politique qui ne tiennent pas compte des coopératives
- Développer de solides leaders coopératifs
- S'assurer que les pratiques de gestion sont adaptées aux coopératives
- Favoriser la coopération entre les coopératives
- L'accès au capital / financement (pour la croissance, les dépenses technologiques et autres)
- La recherche sur les coopératives
- Autre (veuillez préciser). Veuillez insérer un commentaire

5. Selon vous, quel est le deuxième défi le plus important auquel sont confrontées les coopératives au Canada aujourd'hui? Veuillez faire votre choix de la liste

suivante :

- Améliorer la sensibilisation à la pertinence du modèle coopératif auprès du grand public, des membres, des jeunes, du gouvernement et d'autres parties prenantes
- La gouvernance coopérative
- Le développement coopératif
- Des changements de politique qui ne tiennent pas compte des coopératives
- Développer de solides leaders coopératifs
- S'assurer que les pratiques de gestion sont adaptées aux coopératives
- Favoriser la coopération entre les coopératives
- L'accès au capital / financement (pour la croissance, les dépenses technologiques et autres)
- La recherche sur les coopératives
- Autre (veuillez préciser). Veuillez insérer un commentaire

6. Selon vous, quel est le troisième défi le plus important auquel sont confrontées les coopératives au Canada aujourd'hui? Veuillez faire votre choix de la liste suivante :

- Améliorer la sensibilisation à la pertinence du modèle coopératif auprès du grand public, des membres, des jeunes, du gouvernement et d'autres parties prenantes
- La gouvernance coopérative
- Le développement coopératif
- Des changements de politique qui ne tiennent pas compte des coopératives
- Développer de solides leaders coopératifs
- S'assurer que les pratiques de gestion sont adaptées aux coopératives
- Favoriser la coopération entre les coopératives
- L'accès au capital / financement (pour la croissance, les dépenses technologiques et autres)
- La recherche sur les coopératives
- Autre (veuillez préciser). Veuillez insérer un commentaire

7. Vous avez choisi « améliorer la sensibilisation à la pertinence du modèle coopératif auprès du grand public, des membres, des jeunes, du gouvernement et d'autres parties prenantes » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

8. Vous avez choisi « la gouvernance coopérative » comme un défi majeur, quelle est la nature de ce défi et pourquoi est-ce un défi?



9. Vous avez choisi « le développement coopératif » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

10. Vous avez choisi « des changements de politique qui ne tiennent pas compte des coopératives » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

11. Vous avez choisi « développer de solides leaders coopératifs » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

12. Vous avez choisi « s'assurer que les pratiques de gestion sont adaptées aux coopératives » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

13. Vous avez choisi « favoriser la coopération entre les coopératives » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

14. Vous avez choisi « l'accès au capital / financement (pour la croissance, les dépenses technologiques et autres) » comme un défi majeur, Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

15. Vous avez choisi « la recherche sur les coopératives » comme un défi majeur. Quelle est la nature de ce défi?

16. Vous avez choisi « autre » comme un défi majeur. Veuillez préciser la nature de ce défi.

17. Ceci est la fin du sondage sur les principaux problèmes liés aux coopératives durant l'année 2023. Si vous avez des idées ou des commentaires supplémentaires que vous aimeriez partager avec nous, veuillez les noter ci-dessous.

## ABOUT THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES

The Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre located on the University of Saskatchewan campus. Established in 1984, the CCSC is supported financially by major co-operatives and credit unions from across Canada and the University of Saskatchewan. Our goal is to provide practitioners and policymakers with information and conceptual tools to understand co-operatives and to develop them as solutions to the complex challenges facing communities worldwide.

We are formally affiliated with the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina. The connection strengthens the capacity of everyone involved to develop research and new course offerings dedicated to solving social and economic problems. Our most recent collaborative work has resulted in a new Graduate Certificate in the Social Economy, Co-operatives, and Nonprofit Sector.

## OUR FUNDERS

The Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) and the University of Saskatchewan acknowledge with gratitude the support and commitment of our funders.

These organizations provide the CCSC with resources and leadership, helping us to develop the knowledge needed to construct co-operative solutions to the increasingly complex challenges facing global communities.

Our co-op and credit union sector partners have contributed nearly \$12 million to co-operative teaching, research, and outreach since the CCSC opened its doors in 1984.

## ABOUT CO-OPERATIVES AND MUTUALS CANADA

Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada is a bilingual association that supports and unites 7000 small, medium, and large co-operatives and mutuals throughout Canada. They contribute to the co-operative business model through government advocacy, co-operative research, education in co-operation, and spearheading network and other sector events.

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY





**JOHNSON SHOYAMA**

Canadian Centre for the  
Study of Co-operatives

UREGINA ▼ USASK

Diefenbaker Building, 101 Diefenbaker Place,  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 5B8

Ph: 306-966-8509

Email: [coop.studies@usask.ca](mailto:coop.studies@usask.ca)