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WORKING PAPER

Innovations in Public Policy Design Enabling the Social Economy.
Working across institutional boundaries in five municipalities
in Quebec

Marguerite MENDELL, Nancy NEAMTAN (Quebec, Canada)

Local SSE Policies enabling Socio-Ecological Transition brings together seventeen working papers in response to a call for papers launched by the GSEF's Research Working Group.

Coming from all corners of the world, these papers provide an overview of various direct and indirect local public policies supporting the Social and Solidarity Economy. The scale varies, ranging, for example, from small municipalities (El Hoyo) to larger cities (Bordeaux, Grenoble, Montreal). The texts also identify contexts where local policies are derived from policies developed at higher levels, such as provincial (Gangwon) or national (Morocco, Haiti) policies. Finally, the examples demonstrate the great diversity of the SSE, ranging from a cultural festival in a rural area (Italy) to community and municipal banks (Brazil).

This multilingual collection brings together texts written in English, Spanish, and French, and highlights the processes of (co-)constructing local policies through experiences of institutionalizing the social and solidarity economy, which sometimes involve collaboration with actors in the field and sometimes political appropriation.

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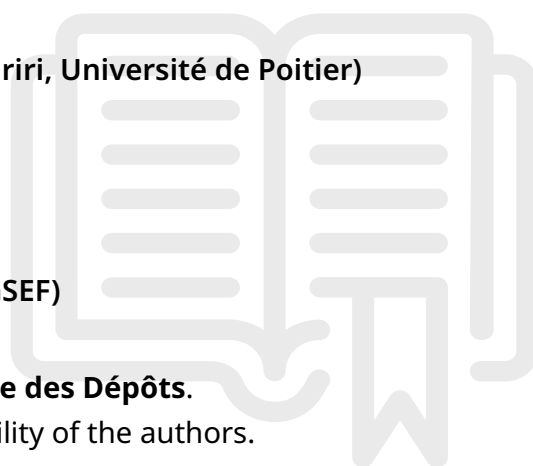
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Innovations in Public Policy Design Enabling the Social Economy. Working across institutional boundaries in five municipalities in Quebec

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Introduction

In May 2025 the Summit on the Social Economy brought together over 1400 people from across all regions and economic sectors in Quebec including representatives of Quebec's First Nations. This Summit, preceded by two years of preparatory work, designed the path forward for the next decades of development for the social economy in Quebec, launching a wide diversity of comprehensive initiatives and identifying shared and ambitious collective objectives.

The success of the Summit reflects the commitment of Quebec civil society to collective entrepreneurship. It also affirms the solidarity of the alliances between Quebec social economy actors and social movements who share the same values and the same goals: a just socioecological transition and economic democratization. The final declaration of the Summit states this common purpose.

On May 14 and 15, 2025 in Montreal, a wide diversity of economic, cultural, environmental, political, community and research actors, unanimously declared that, faced with social and environmental degradation brought about by the economic status quo, the social economy, rooted in communities and at the service of common good,

represents an essential solution to build an economy for the benefit of society and the planet, an economy that works for all.¹ (*Sommet de l'économie sociale, 2025*)

For several decades, the growth of the social economy movement in Quebec has been enabled by favorable public policy, primarily by the Quebec government. The Government of Canada and some municipal administrations have supported its development through sporadic initiatives without continuity or targeted and integrated policy proposals. However, in the past ten years, the political climate has changed considerably and the role of municipalities in the support of the social economy has begun to emerge as a new trend in municipal public policy.

The opposite phenomenon can be observed at the provincial level. The current administration in Quebec, in power since 2019, is focused on traditional economic development strategies and has not understood the potential contribution of the social economy to Quebec's socioeconomic development. It has also rejected all forms of participatory democracy that identify a role for civil society in the development process, breaking with a long tradition of social dialogue in Quebec. That said, the portrait is not entirely negative: framework legislation adopted unanimously by the National Assembly in 2013, recognizes the social economy as an integral part of the province's socioeconomic landscape, and obliges the Quebec government to maintain most existing policy tools and programs, including an action plan every five years and the recognition of the Chantier de l'économie sociale and the Quebec Council on Cooperatives and Mutuals (CQCM) as privileged interlocutors.²

The most recent action plan (2025-2030), adopted by the government of Quebec in July of this year (Gouvernement du Québec, 2025 July 14), acknowledges the contribution of the social economy to the Quebec economy. Despite the reticence of this government since it has been in power, its support for the social economy continues. This not only affirms the institutionalization of the social economy in Quebec society but more importantly, that it is grounded in the vital and determinant role played by civil society in its continuous development despite the political indifference of the last decade. New alliances and innovative partnerships have allowed it to flourish during these challenging times.

The changing political climate has seen the emergence of a new generation of elected officials, particularly at the municipal level. In most of Quebec's major cities, young mayors have been elected on the basis of their commitments to reinforce the role of cities in taking on the important social, economic, environmental and cultural challenges they are facing. This has opened the door to new significant and promising alliances that have deepened during this period, based on partnerships between municipalities and social economy actors. Many Quebec municipalities, both rural and urban, are working actively with social economy networks and enterprises to meet the diverse challenges they are facing. An increasing number of municipalities are recognizing the important contribution, both past and future, of the social economy to their communities in a wide range of sectors, including housing, waste management, food systems, culture, sports, recreation and alternative transportation among

¹ Translated from French by the authors.

² Loi 27. Loi sur l'économie sociale. 2013.

others. This increased recognition has led to the adoption of new comprehensive municipal policies on the social economy in four important Quebec cities (Gatineau, Laval, Sherbrooke and Longueuil) as well as new targeted policy measures for social economy enterprises and organizations in other municipalities and regional municipal networks, including the city of Montreal. Most recently (September 2025), a Regional Municipal Council, (MRC) comprising several small communities, adopted the first municipal policy on the social economy in a rural area.³

This increased collaboration between civil society and municipal governments to develop the social economy is a manifestation of a broader trend. Social movements, and particularly the movement for socioecological transition, have shifted an important part of their focus to the local level in their interaction with governments. In Montreal, Transition en commun (TEC) is a grassroots movement that emerged over the past three years, based on a dynamic alliance between citizen groups, the City of Montreal and civil society more broadly. As its mission states,

Transition en commun is an alliance of groups from various sectors of the Montreal community (municipal, government, community, citizen, academic, and philanthropic organizations) with the ambition to work together so that major and rapid solutions can be implemented to address the ecological, social, democratic, and economic challenges we face. (*Transition en commun*, 2025)

TEC also served as the inspiration and the springboard for the creation of Multitudes, a Quebec wide movement with the same objectives. At the same time, a network of municipal elected officials has emerged. Known as the “New Wave”, it brings together many young mayors who are committed to accelerating socioecological transition in collaboration with civil society. The ‘New Wave’ and Multitudes are closely linked and coordinate actions and strategies to advance their common cause.

The strategic vision articulated by TEC and Multitudes includes an important place for the social economy. Priority has been given to the need to redefine the practice of democracy through the implementation and institutionalization of diverse forms of citizen participation. They also prioritize democratization of the economy and transformation of the dominant economic model. In both cases, the social economy is a key vector for both political and economic democratization.

This paper will summarize progress in municipal public policy in Quebec over the past years during which four cities have adopted social economy policies and the City of Montreal has continued to support the social economy without an integrated overarching social economy policy. Despite many juridical and other constraints limiting the discretion of municipal

³ This regional municipal council, the MRC des Collines-de-l’Outaouais consists of 6 small rural and semi-urban municipalities, north of the city of Gatineau with a total population of 56,000. mrcdescollinesdeloutaouais.qc.ca

governments which were outlined in our previous paper (Mendell, Neamtan and Yi, 2020)⁴, policy measures and the consolidation of partnerships with the municipal government in several sectors have recently emerged, permitting increasingly ambitious social economy initiatives to scale in many cases. The embryo of a network of municipal elected officials and social economy organizations grew out of the collaboration by elected municipal officials in the preparation of the recent Summit in May.

New Trends in Municipal Governance

In recent years, several municipalities in Quebec have engaged in active and ongoing dialogue with civil society organizations and social movements, harvesting a new political culture of collaboration with the potential to modify and even to upend established structures and modalities of governance within cities. These collaborative processes are not new to the social economy in Quebec with its history of mobilizing social economy actors and networks across sectors, collaboration with social movements and acting as a key interlocutor in policy design promoting and enabling the social economy. That this process of dialogue, collaboration and co-construction is now emerging more broadly at the municipal level, suggests that there is a movement towards transformation in governance at the local level.

What might be seen as a pragmatic response to enable cities to address increasingly complex socioeconomic and environmental challenges, is in fact a radical cultural shift in processes of policy design and implementation, as cities acknowledge the benefit of working across boundaries with civil society actors and organizations as well as the need to dismantle silos within urban institutional architecture. These trends in Quebec correspond with those in other parts of the world where diverse forms of a “new municipalism” are emergent or already in place.

New municipalism not only aims to implement progressive policies but to transform policy making processes. This takes many forms, including “public common partnerships” as in Barcelona, Grenoble or Zagreb, for example, or a “shared sense of ownership of policy process”, of which there are many examples (Bianchi, 2021; Russell, 2019). Several international organizations, including UN-Habitat and the OECD have likewise called for more active participation of civil society in local governance (United Nations Human Settlements Program, 2018; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021). As well, “co-cities” around the world make up a map of hybrid governance in the spirit of Elinor Ostrom’s “polycentricity”, recognizing the need for openness to democracy but also to what works best in governing cities (Ostrom, 2010). Co-cities have radically transformed spaces of governance and policy design internationally (Del Bono & Mendell, forthcoming). Taken together, these examples are radically transforming processes of urban policy making.

⁴ Please see Mendell, Neamtan and Yi. (2020). Working Paper 2020-4 for a detailed analysis of these policies from 2013-2019. This paper outlines the place of the social economy in municipal public policy given the legislative divisions of power within Canada that determine and limit the role of cities, considerably reducing their autonomy to implement new policy measures. That said, new policy spaces have emerged which we will identify in this paper. We ask readers to return to this 2020 study for detailed analysis.

In some cases, the initiatives are taken by municipal governments; in others, it is civil society that drives this process. In Quebec, it is certainly the latter that has shaped the history of the social economy; however, as municipal governments are increasingly understanding the need to rethink policy design, they may be inclined to take the lead. Previous experiences elsewhere will influence the openness for some municipal governments to do so.

In Quebec the seeds for a “new municipalism” have been planted, establishing partnerships and new spaces for dialogue, especially among those municipalities that have collaborated in implementing specific social economy policy measures or integrated social economy policies. These trends in Quebec point to a growing recognition of the inefficiency of static forms of governance. In the examples of cities adopting social economy policies in Quebec, local governments have expressed the need to break down institutional silos, to work with social actors and to think systemically. Institutionalizing these processes is critical to overcome election cycles.

In this paper, we will summarize the new policies and action plans for the social economy recently adopted in four municipalities in Quebec as well as new measures put in place in Montreal. However, the focus is on the processes that led to their adoption and implementation. Many of the programs and policies we will discuss embrace commitment to flexibility, openness, fluidity, agility, and above all, to democracy, foundational to this new municipalism movement. Examples include participatory processes, consultation with citizens, social justice and the right to the city and ecological transition. The social economy cuts across all these objectives as municipalities recognize that promoting the social economy has its historic roots in these underlying commitments. Today these can only be achieved through a revamping of institutional culture, through the adoption of new processes of deliberation and decision making⁵. This paper will conclude with an analysis of some of the lessons learned in the hope that these experiences may support and inspire other municipalities to take action.

A Rapidly Evolving Economic and Political Environment

The recognition of the social economy as an integral component of socioeconomic development emerged in the mid 1990’s in a context of high unemployment and a politically unacceptable government deficit. Several innovative social economy initiatives were deployed, giving visibility to the contribution of the social economy to job creation, poverty reduction and its capacity to respond to crucial needs of communities, including daycare, homecare for the elderly, cooperative and non-profit housing and waste management (Neamtan, 2019).

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on important theoretical foundations that embrace this approach including Jurgen Habermas’s “communicative action” to renew cultural knowledge and engage in public discourse (Habermas, 1984); John Dewey’s democracy as an “ethos” grounded in public engagement rather than a set of institutional arrangements (Dewey, 1939); and Elinor Ostrom’s “governing the commons”, especially the need for polycentricity among others (Ostrom, 1990).

Today, the North American and global context has changed significantly. Unemployment is not the central issue despite recent fluctuations in employment levels due to the imposition of tariffs by the United States. On the contrary, enterprises face labor shortages as Quebec experiences the impacts of a rapidly aging population combined with the introduction of various restrictions limiting immigration. New issues are at the forefront of public debate and policy: a severe housing shortage and spiraling real estate prices, an environmental crisis that has short and long-term effects on the population and communities, the impacts of the tariff war and the various measures and unpredictability of the Trump administration. Food deserts and the proliferation of food banks is a stark illustration of the evolving context.

It is in these circumstances, that the social economy continues to evolve and respond to new complex challenges. For example, as the Canadian government insists on the need to reorient economic strategy to limit dependence on trade with the US, this has stimulated a call for greater economic self-reliance and local control, particularly around basic issues such as food systems, culture and communications, and manufacturing. Local control, self-reliance and sustainability are part of the DNA of the social economy, and it is thus not surprising that the social economy movement in Quebec, in partnership with municipalities, has the potential to become a key actor in future development. The recent Summit was a big step in this direction.

Five Cities: Five Approaches to Social Economy Policy

The collaboration between social economy enterprises and organizations and municipal governments in Quebec has a long history in certain sectors such as culture, sports and leisure. With the increased recognition of the social economy, attention in many urban and rural municipalities has turned to a wider variety of sectors including housing, transportation and waste management, among others. However, each municipality has taken a diversity of policy measures to enable the social economy. The first comprehensive social economy policy initiative at the local level was adopted by the city of Gatineau in 2020. Inspired by this example, in 2025 the cities of Laval, Sherbrooke and Longueuil have adopted social economy policies adapted to their specific territorial contexts. What these four cities have in common beyond their shared commitment to the social economy, is the process of policy design. While each policy measure was initiated by political leadership (mayor) and other elected officials, they were the result of a process of co-construction between representatives of municipal government and civil society.

Embedded within this process was the need for new collaborative and more open approaches to policy design. It is not surprising that this was also met with resistance within municipal administration bound by established norms and structures. Still, these initiatives are the seeds of a new municipalism: they are drawing the template for co-city governance. Even if this is limited to the social economy in this discussion, such a transformation may also have significant spillover effects on other divisions of local government.

Although it is still too early to measure the impact of the Laval and Sherbrooke initiative, it is important to note that the Gatineau social economy policy framework has been implemented on a continuous basis despite two changes of political leadership. We underscore this to distinguish the institutionalization of policies enabling the social economy from those dependent upon supportive leadership. As stated earlier, this is especially true for shifting political winds and the fragility of policies associated with those in power.⁶

The following section presents a summary of the adopted policies, a description of the process that led to their adoption and the identification of the major challenges in the implementation process, from the point of view of both municipal and civil society actors. Except for Gatineau which adopted a social economy policy in 2020, the other examples are very recent and in one case, the adoption of the policy is immanent. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss the direct impact of this policy on the social economy as yet. That our focus is on the process of policy design allows us to conclude that there is a clear trend in new approaches to policy conception and implementation as we noted earlier.

Gatineau

Gatineau is a city in southwestern Quebec with a population of 305,041 (2024). It is a regional hub whose economy and employment rely considerably on its proximity to Canada's capital, Ottawa, and the presence of the Federal Government. Other employment sectors include health, tourism, education, and small and medium size enterprises (SMEs).

The city is divided into 19 electoral districts. Maude Marquis Bissonnette, the leader of Action Gatineau, a political party created in 2012, is presently the mayor. In her former role as city councilor, she was responsible for the social economy and was actively involved in the elaboration of Gatineau's social economy policy.

Gatineau, and the Outaouais region where it is located, is recognized as a dynamic territory with a long tradition of social economy development. It is in this region that the first Regional Development Cooperative was established in 1985.⁷ Over the past decades, several important initiatives demonstrate the strength of Gatineau's social economy. They include broad citizen mobilization in reaction to the closing of the local dairy, leading to the creation of La Laiterie d'Outaouais, a hybrid structure that includes a 600-member consumer cooperative and a worker cooperative, and a unique partnership between the municipality and a social economy enterprise to build and manage arenas for the practice of hockey, Canada's national sport.

Social economy enterprises/organizations in Gatineau include 207 enterprises employing 4401 people. Approximately 2/3 of these enterprises are not for profit. This reflects a trend

⁶ Municipal elections will be held on November 2, 2025. The example of Gatineau is especially significant in this context.

⁷ Regional Development Cooperatives (RDCs) are a network of cooperatives organizations across Quebec to support the development and growth of the cooperative movement. They provide numerous support services to cooperatives.

across the province of Quebec in which the number of not-for-profit enterprises/organizations have grown rapidly. The development of Gatineau's social economy is supported by the Pôle de l'économie sociale de l'Outaouais, a regional network of social economy hubs that exists in all Quebec regions, and by the Outaouais Regional Development Cooperative. These development structures offer a diversity of services to encourage and accompany the emergence of collective enterprises, often in collaboration with local governments.

A process of co-construction

The development of this new municipal social economy policy took place over a short period of six months in the final year of the previous mayor's mandate following his decision to not seek reelection. As a strong supporter of the social economy, he initiated an accelerated process to assure its adoption before his departure. Because he anticipated resistance by top management of the city to what was clearly a new approach to policy design, he chose to involve only elected officials and civil society partners in the process, leaving out senior civil servants. He engaged an external consultant, an expert in social economy and public policy to lead the process, in collaboration with the Coopérative de développement régional Outaouais-Laurentides (Regional Development Cooperative) and other civil society partners. The final version of the plan was adopted by Gatineau City Council in October 2020.

An ambitious and comprehensive policy

The Gatineau social economy policy identifies a wide variety of objectives requiring the mobilization of many different actors within the city administration and a constructive partnership with civil society actors. Its declared goals are to:

- Support the emergence, consolidation and development of collective enterprises in a wide range of economic sectors
- Develop, with the municipal administration, a culture and practices that promote the social economy as a distinctive solution to specific needs
- Contribute to the response to the needs of current and future citizens of Gatineau
- Contribute to the implementation of conditions to facilitate citizen participation in the emergence and consolidation of initiatives that add to the economic, social and cultural vitality of Gatineau
- Maximize the potential contribution of the social economy to socio ecological transition.

The document outlining the new municipal social economy policy was conceived both as a broad proposal to advance ongoing practices and as a pedagogical tool. It presents the existing and potential contribution of the social economy to the city's development, to its collective enrichment and to innovation, while underlining the challenges, including a redefinition of the relationships between the municipal administration and civil society through the urban

commons. It contains many illustrations from other jurisdictions both nationally and internationally. It also introduces new concepts such as the commons and identifies key factors for success in its implementation, including a strong historical presence of the social economy in the city, the identification of competent development actors linked to local, regional, national and international networks and an open municipal administration.

The policy identifies five major orientations:

- Recognize and promote the contribution of the social economy to Gatineau's development
- Accompany collective entrepreneurs to create, consolidate and develop social economy enterprises
- Promote and support citizen participation in seeking and putting into place innovative solutions in favor of the common good
- Reinforce the partnership between the city and social economy enterprises in a variety of economic sectors.
- Maximize the use of municipal leverages to reinforce the contribution of the social economy to Gatineau's development.

In its conclusion, the policy requires the city to produce a four-year action plan to be elaborated by a working group, under the leadership of the city's top management in collaboration with elected officials from different municipal commissions and local civil society partners.

A cross-cutting process of implementation

The social economy policy was adopted in 2020 at the end of the mayor's term and during the pandemic. The newly elected Mayor, representing a different political party, chose to continue its implementation, establishing a new position within the economic development department to pilot this file. A committee, made up of elected officials and representatives of Gatineau's social economy was created in 2021 to follow up on its implementation. This committee meets twice a year. A five-year action plan was adopted in 2021 and the committee now has the responsibility to follow and assure its implementation.

The city hired a social economy commissioner to establish a process to put the various strategies identified in the policy document into action. The strategy includes a horizontal inter-departmental approach within the municipal government and has already produced results. Social economy actors in Gatineau underline the increased understanding by civil servants of the advantages and possibilities of collaboration. Over time, this has garnered support for social economy initiatives across different city divisions and services. For example, citizen's management of a municipal forest by the Boucher Forest Foundation (Fondation de la forêt Boucher), that existed prior to the adoption of the social economy

policy, is now recognized for its innovation in collective resource management and has received new contracts.

Another interesting illustration of the impact of the social economy policy is on procurement by the city of Gatineau. A recent re-examination of the exclusion from a municipal call for proposals of La Relance Outaouais, has opened the door to dialogue with social economy actors with significant possibilities for reconsidering public procurement more broadly.

La Relance, a work insertion not for profit enterprise and a pioneer in the social economy in Gatineau, was established in 1980. It comprises four enterprises providing a number of services, including counselling and capacity building, maintenance and cleaning services, refurbishing of used computer equipment, the collection and transport of such equipment as well as collecting bulky material from households. The commitment to partnerships with social economy actors enabled a reconsideration of shortsighted and narrow procurement practices and a better understanding of the capacity of the social economy to respond to different needs and aspirations of the municipality. This would not have been far less likely prior to the implementation of the social economy policy.

Another recent example is the contract given to the social economy pole and the regional development cooperative (CDR-Outaouais Laurentides) to lead a process of ideation regarding how abandoned infrastructure in the city can be transformed and used by social economy organizations. It is clear that the process of decision making on many key issues and challenges has been affected by the social economy policy and its role within the municipality.

Laval⁸

Laval is the third largest city in Quebec with a population of 460,000. It is situated just north of Montreal and combines a status of city, one of Quebec's 17 regional administrations as well as a regional county municipality.⁹ Laval covers a land surface of 267 km². It remains principally an extended, mainly residential suburb with commercial and technological sectors. It also includes agriculture zones; the Quebec law on the protection of agricultural territory protects 30 % of the city's territory for agricultural use. Laval's economy is based principally on high tech enterprises, services, commerce and health services. There are also several important pharmaceutical laboratories and a vigorous agricultural sector.

⁸ A recent detailed research report on the social economy in Laval, Quebec "Politique d'économie sociale de Laval au Québec" has been issued in 2024 by the Centre d'étude en responsabilité sociale et écocitoyenneté (CERSE) in collaboration with the Pôle régional de l'économie sociale de Laval as part of a larger action research project "Économie sociale et municipalités - Nouvelles pratiques des territoires innovants". Our section on the city of Laval in this paper, is a brief summary of the adoption of policy for the social economy.

⁹ A regional county municipality (RCM) brings together all municipalities in a given territory to form an administrative entity which is recognized as a municipality by the Quebec law on municipal territorial organization. There are 87 RCMs across Quebec.

The current mayor was elected in 2021, after serving as a city councilor for two mandates. He was the youngest mayor to be elected to lead the city at the age of 33. In addition to housing, his top priority, the mayor has identified the transformation of Laval from a suburban reality to a vibrant community as his major ambition with a downtown area, bicycle paths and other collective infrastructures.

Recent statistics indicate that Laval has a more limited number of social economy enterprises than most other Quebec regions. Although it represents 5% of Quebec's population, its 270 collective enterprises and their 5100 employees represent less than 2.5 % of the 11,200 enterprises and 220,000 employees identified in 2016 by the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ) for all of Quebec. One of the goals of its new social economy policy initiative is to reverse this tendency and become a leader in the field.

A process of ongoing co-construction

Laval's social economy policy was the result of a collaboration between the regional social economy pole and Laval Économique, the city's economic development entity. The process was initiated in June 2023 and benefited from a \$ 100,000 budget allocation that allowed for the participation of 100 different partners involved in promoting or developing the social economy. The city's ambition was clearly to become a leader in the support for collective entrepreneurship. The policy was adopted in November 2023 and an action plan is in the process of finalization.

Principal axes of the Laval policy

The Laval policy identifies the principal issues that the region is confronting and the potential opportunities for development through the social economy. The orientations are the following:

- Optimize the social economy's contribution to a responsible and sustainable economic, social, environmental and cultural development of Laval
- Facilitate and support citizen participation in the development of social economy enterprises responding to collective needs and aspirations in Laval
- Support and accompany social economy enterprises in all phases of development
- Activate various financial and strategic levers to optimize the development and structuring of social economy projects
- Assure cross-cutting, intersectoral and evolving coordination of the policy to increase the impact and greater efficiency of the social economy in Laval

The acceptance of the policy by Laval's city council was an initial step; however, the action plan to be adopted in September 2025 will allow a more accurate evaluation of the city's commitment to supporting and financing its application over the next years. In addition to the policy, several major sectoral initiatives have been announced, particularly in response to the

housing crisis. For example, the city recently announced that it has allocated 8 new municipal lots for social and affordable housing, including non-profit and cooperative housing, representing a potential of 1330 housing units.

Sherbrooke

Sherbrooke is the principal economic, cultural and institutional hub for l'Estrie, a Quebec administrative region. It is 130 km east of Montreal and 50 kilometers north of the American border. The population of Sherbrooke is approximately 184,667 in 2025, whereas the metropolitan region's population is 224,557, making it the fourth largest RMC in Quebec.

Sherbrooke is a major center for higher education with two universities and 40,000 students per year. The university includes a faculty of medicine and the two major teaching hospitals with excellent research capacity are located in Sherbrooke. The proportion of university students is 10.32 for 100 residents, making it the highest density of students in Quebec.

Sherbrooke has been a center for manufacturing since the end of the 19th century, but its economy has evolved. The third sector and the knowledge economy are now its major sectors of activity. The city is also an important hub for tourism with infrastructure for winter and summer sports.

The mayor of Sherbrooke is the first woman to be elected to this position. After having served as a city councilor for Sherbrooke Citoyens, the political association that she founded, she was elected as mayor in 2021. Her priorities include the protection of the environment, collective transportation and improved management of public funds. She recently decided to not run for re-election in November 2025. It is noteworthy that three of the four principal candidates to replace the current mayor, are directly involved in the social economy. Two are currently employed by social economy organizations and the third represents the current administration which has recently adopted a social economy policy framework.

The social economy has a relatively long history in Sherbrooke. The key sectors in which it is present are personal services, housing, commerce and childcare; secondary, sectors include tourism and recreation, culture and heritage.

A collaborative process of co-construction

Sherbrooke's policy on the social economy was adopted in June 2025 by the City Council. The resolution to approve it identifies the diversity of actors who participated in its elaboration, including the mayor, the President of the Economic Development Commission, the Director of the City of Sherbrooke, the head of the Economic Development Services in collaboration with Entreprendre Sherbrooke (the municipal services that support and accompany economic initiatives for the city) and the Collective Entrepreneurship Hub. All these actors were involved directly or indirectly in the design of the policy. Individual

interviews, focus groups and workshops were organized with elected officials, representatives of various municipal services, and social economy enterprises and networks. University researchers also contributed to the process.

Major axes and orientations of the policy

In an introductory statement to the policy framework, the political leadership of the city underscores that Sherbrooke is recognized for its dynamic social economy sector and affirms that the city will be an ally and strategic partner, capable of responding to territorial challenges. The statement further acknowledges that the social economy is:

- A model that is beneficial for the community, reinforcing its social safety net and dynamizing collective life
- A creative and innovative force, promoting the emergence of initiatives with concrete socioeconomic benefits for the population.

The policy underscores the importance of shared territorial leadership. In so doing, it recognizes the central role of the existing ecosystem that has been supporting the development of the social economy and commits to working in close collaboration. The guiding principles of the policy are:

- Recognition of the capacity of the social economy to reinforce Sherbrooke's economic, social and cultural vitality
- Reinforcement of partnerships between the city and social economy enterprises by recognizing and promoting the value of the social economy as a distinct response to specific needs
- Improvement of the available levers and tools available to support both emerging and existing social economy enterprises
- Creation of a climate of collaboration and sharing among a diversity of actors and institutions
- Facilitation of citizen participation in the emergence and the consolidation of initiatives contributing to Sherbrooke's economic, social and cultural vitality
- Maximization of the social economy's significant contribution to socioecological transition.

Based on a vision that recognizes the contribution of the social economy to Sherbrooke's inclusive, green and innovative development, the policy suggests that the social economy be seen as a political priority, and essential to stimulate local development by and for citizens.

The policy identifies a series of orientations and deployment strategies that are very specific in their application.

- The first orientation presents a series of actions to improve comprehension and appreciation of the social economy. A wide variety of actions is proposed ranging from collaboration with research and teaching institutions, increased visibility within municipal communications, the implementation of a process of impact evaluation and a program of student apprenticeship.
- The second orientation addresses accompaniment of enterprises, including improved access to municipal programs and the mobilization of existing expertise through city and social economy services.
- The third orientation aims to reinforce strategic partnerships, particularly within municipal services and to assure improved coordination with existing plans and policies such as housing and food.
- The fourth orientation underlines the importance of support for innovative collective initiatives and outlines a series of ambitious goals, including the goal of removing 20 % of housing stock from the market and the construction of a sustainable food system. The policy also proposes the creation of an internal city laboratory dedicated to experimentation and innovation involving interservice collaboration.
- The fifth orientation addresses internal issues. It proposes supporting the evolution of the municipal framework in order to maximize the development of the social economy. This implies a series of adjustments to the city's administrative processes including regulatory, financial and organizational structures and operations to respond to the specific needs of social economy enterprises.
- The final orientation calls for greater coordination among the various support structures to allow for an efficient roll-out of the policy. It underlines the importance of teamwork and collaboration between diverse organizations and proposes the creation of a partnership committee to follow the policy's implementation.

Longueuil

This is the most recent city to adopt a social policy initiative. As this was passed in July of this year, we will provide a brief summary.

Founded in 1657, Longueuil is a city in the Montérégie region of Quebec, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River facing Montreal. As of 2021, the population of Longueuil is approximately 254,483. It is divided into three principal boroughs, Le Vieux-Longueuil, Saint Hubert and Greenfield Park. Longueuil boasts a large aerospace sector with more than 5000 employees along with research and commercial sectors. It is also the site of the very large dairy cooperative, Agropur. Longueuil is also home to several branches of institutions in higher education.

There are currently 269 collective enterprises employing 4125 workers. Social enterprises and organizations exist in many sectors in Longueuil, especially housing, perinatal and childcare centers, arts and culture, tourism and leisure, retail, agriculture and food. Much as Gatineau, Laval and Sherbrooke, the regional social economy pole, the Pôle de l'économie sociale de

l'agglomération de Longueuil, collaborated in elaborating this social economy policy under the leadership of the municipal administration.

By adopting a policy for the social economy for the first time, the city of Longueuil has:

- Institutionalized its support for the social economy
- Placed social innovation, sustainability and citizen participation at the heart of its development agenda
- Identified the social economy as an intersectoral pillar cutting across all municipal interventions.

The principal objectives of this social economy policy initiative are to:

- Recognize the significant role of the social economy in vital sectors including housing, childcare, health, the arts, food security, the environment
- Reinforce institutional support for collective entrepreneurship
- Integrate the social economy into all spheres of municipal policy
- Stimulate social innovation by encouraging citizen participation, the collective mission of the city and sustainability.

Furthermore, the policy adopted is founded on principles which require concrete and direct intervention to:

- Formalize dialogue between the city and the social economy
- Value collective initiatives
- Adapt existing municipal tools to the needs of the social economy
- Create opportunities for innovation and the development of structured partnerships.

Montreal

With a population of approximately 1.8 million (2021) on the island of Montreal and over 4 million in the greater metropolitan area, it is the second largest metropolitan area in Canada. The city is divided into 19 administrative boroughs, each with their own borough council and mayor with responsibility for local affairs and infrastructure. There are currently approximately 2800 social economy enterprises in Montreal, employing 67,684 people. An Office of the Social Economy was established in 2006 with a Commissioner for the Social Economy for the first time, recognizing the need to better understand and collaborate with the social economy. At first, within the division of Social Development, this office was subsequently transferred to Economic Development

As noted earlier, the 2020 UNRISD working paper provides detailed analysis of Montreal's social economy and policies adopted for the period 2013-2019. In this paper, we revisit some important milestones for the social economy in Montreal prior to 2019 and summarize some of the policy initiatives that have emerged since that either address the social economy directly or indirectly within broader policy measures. This also includes the devolution of measures and funding to organizations and/or institutions that engage directly with the social economy.

The first early milestone we note is the partnership agreement with social economy actors, local development agencies, solidarity finance representatives and academic researchers signed in 2009 to create a dialogic inter-sectoral space to better communicate and understand the needs and tools necessary for the development of the social economy in recognition of its contribution to the socioeconomic development of Montreal and to the well-being of its citizens and residents.

Social Economy Partnership for Community-Based Sustainable Development (2009)

The partnership, stemming from a commitment by players in the social economy and the city administration, is a true lever for economic growth based on four main strategic directions, which was developed to build an increasingly open and inclusive society by:

- Supporting for community-based entrepreneurship to strengthen local roots, support community-based entrepreneurs and foster major social economy projects
- Recognizing the contribution by the social economy to major projects, to encourage its integration from a sustainable development perspective
- Recognizing the contribution by the social economy to improving quality of life, so as to continue innovating in such areas as culture, sustainable development, housing, community-based property development, recreation and tourism
- Providing business support to encourage the growth of social economy enterprises.

Several significant milestones prior to 2019 are noteworthy. They include:

- *City of Montreal Action Plan for Social Innovation 2028-2022* acknowledging the need to support the social economy as part of the city's commitment to fostering all forms of entrepreneurship (Ville de Montréal, 2018)
- "*L'économie sociale j'achète*" from 2013 (Pôles régionaux d'économie sociale du Québec, n.d.)., demonstrated a significant commitment by the City to directly support collective enterprises through a procurement process
- Since 2019, the City is committed to favour social economy enterprises within regulatory limitations on bidding for public contracts, under its *Responsible Procurement Policy* (Ville de Montréal, 2021)

Important legislation adopted by the Government of Quebec prior to 2019, increased the autonomy of the City of Montreal with important implications for the social economy. These include:

- *Bill 121* (2017) officially designates the City of Montreal as the province's metropolis with new powers, including control over social housing, operating hours of businesses and fiscal benefits to businesses in street construction zones without prior consultation with the province.¹⁰
- *Bill 122* (2017) recognizes municipalities as local governments with increased autonomy and powers including the possibility to invest directly in certain enterprises, in particular in solidarity cooperatives for the first time, opening the way to financial partnerships with social economy enterprises.¹¹

Of note as well is the support provided by the Government of Quebec to social economy regional hubs across the province, including, the regional hub of Montreal, CESIM (Social Economy Council of the Island of Montreal) (Gouvernement du Québec, 2025 July 10).¹² Deployment of these provincial funds in Montreal is often done in concert with programs, policies and funds available at the municipal level. In particular, PME MTL, established in 2015, to support business development in the island of Montreal, offers technical support and certain financial tools (investments and grants) for social economy enterprises (PME MTL, n.d.). The City of Montreal funds the 6 PME MTL organizations across the city which, in turn, support approximately 120 collective enterprises annually.¹³

PME MTL Financial and Business Development Support for Social Economy Enterprises

- Fonds de développement de l'économie sociale (FDES) which was created in 1996 in a different context, was restructured in 2016. This fund offers subsidies to emergent social economy enterprises, ranging from \$ 5000 to \$ 50,000, including \$ 5000 for young entrepreneurs (Fonds jeunes entreprises collectives) in partnership with the Caisse d'économie solidaire Desjardins, an example of public/social economy partnerships that characterize financial support for collective enterprise
- Pilot project promoting community bonds by creating a subscription fund matching contributions from citizen investors

¹⁰ Bill 121 (2017) An Act to increase the autonomy and powers of Ville de Montréal, the metropolis of Québec. Government of Québec.

¹¹ Bill 122. (2017) An Act mainly to recognize that municipalities are local governments and to increase their autonomy and powers. Government of Québec.

¹² There are 19 regional poles in all regions of Quebec, and an additional 3 poles representing indigenous communities. Each pole is an official interlocutor on social economy issues and promotes cooperation between various community stakeholders.

¹³ For more detail, please see Mendell and Neamtan, 2020. We briefly revisit this here to put recent initiatives by the City of Montreal in context.

- Fonds locaux de solidarité managed by PME MTL invests up to \$ 100,000 in collective enterprises.

These are but a few examples of financing available to collective enterprises through PME MTL, demonstrating the commitment by the City of Montreal to support financial and business development services for the social economy through support for proximity institutions better able to identify and meet the needs of their communities.

Housing, Construction and Renovation

In 2021, City of Montreal passed “A Diverse Metropolis”, an inclusionary bylaw requiring developers to allocate a percentage of new housing projects to social, affordable and family-sized units as follows: 20 % for social housing, 20 % for affordable housing and 20 % for family housing. While some of this was somewhat relaxed in 2024, as of September 2025, the city has signed almost 250 agreements with developers since 2021 with commitments to construct 1072 housing units, 159 affordable housing units and 1299 family housing units (City of Montreal, 2025).

Recently, federal, provincial and municipal governments contributed \$ 303 million to the construction of 900 non-market housing units to be occupied by over 570 households by the end of 2025 including a co-housing project with 42 units to be occupied by the fall of 2026. The city is committed to fast tracking this project by continuing to use city owned land.

Other examples of financial support include up to \$400,000 for the purchase of land or a building or for construction projects to renovate or enlarge existing buildings or spaces for social economy enterprises.

Scaling Social Economy Enterprises

A program to finance scaling of existing social economy enterprises provides subsidies up to \$ 200,000 (City of Montreal, 2024). The City allocated a budget of \$ 800,000 to this program for 2024-2025.

Participatory Budgets

The city of Montreal has also contributed \$ 45 million for participatory budgets across Montreal in its third edition 2024-2025, empowering citizens to allocate budgets according to their priorities. More than 880 ideas were proposed involving 28,000 citizens. The 7 winning projects were all part of the urban commons which intersects with Montreal’s social economy in that both are grounded in citizen participation.

The above summary of many programs targeting the social economy directly or indirectly indicates the growing commitment of the City of Montreal to collective enterprise. Unlike the previous examples of Gatineau, Laval, Sherbrooke and Longueuil, Montreal does not have an overarching integrated social economy policy as such, but there are policies favouring the social economy embedded within policies and strategic plans. This requires some unpacking.

Strategic Plans City of Montreal from 2018 Embedding the Social Economy

- *Action Plan on Social Innovation 2018-2022*

There is direct reference to the social economy including procurement, emergence and consolidation of social economy projects and social innovation. A significant budget of \$ 16.9 millions was allocated to support the social economy and social enterprises (City of Montreal, 2018).

- *Strategic Plan for Montreal 2030*

The social economy is included in this 10 year overall vision for an “inclusive and green economy”. Broad objectives embedding the social economy include accelerating the green transition, reinforcing solidarity, equity and inclusion, amplifying democracy and participation and stimulating innovation and creativity. The city must intervene on a human scale, within neighbourhoods and at the level of the metropole (City of Montreal, 2021).

- *Economic Plan 2030*

In its identification of Montreal as prosperous, green and inclusive, the “inclusive economy” includes social economy actors (City of Montreal, 2021b). The plan addresses the various supports by PME MTL financed by the City of Montreal and integration of the social economy into the goals of sustainability, local economic development strategies. There is some financial allocation to the social economy out of \$ 1.2 billion committed to meet the objectives of this plan. It also includes an increased role for PME MTL in promoting green jobs and accompanying labour market transformation (City of Montreal, 2025b).

- *Action Plan for Solidarity, Equity and Inclusion 2021-2025*

Provides support for housing, employment, food security, services deployed by social economy enterprises/organizations. This is a global plan for social inclusion in continuity with earlier initiatives taken by the city and civil society stakeholders underscoring the role of collaboration with community organizations (City of Montreal, 2021b).

- *Special Urban Planning Programs (PPU)*

These are specific plans for urban development across Montreal that are the outcome of public consultations and involve all aspects of urban life from land use to facilities, construction plans, etc. The social economy is clearly embedded within these PPU (City of Montreal, n.d.).

- *Urban Planning and Mobility 2050*

This plan summarizes the commitment of the city to building the city of the future by transforming the urban development model on the basis of achievements in improving the quality of life over the next 25 years (City of Montreal, 2025c).

It is in this vision for the next 25 years that the social economy can and will play a significant role drawing on its democratic governance and collective actions. It is a very broad agenda bringing together every aspect of urban life. The agenda can best be achieved through a process of democratization of policy design and implementation with a large role for the social economy and for citizen participation.

In the programs and policies summarized above, the social economy is either mentioned explicitly and at times with budgetary commitments. One can infer that the social economy is included in broader goals when sifting through the details of the programs and plans.

Perspectives

Given that two of the four municipal social economy policies have been adopted very recently, it is impossible to evaluate their long-term impact. For example, in Gatineau, the evaluation of the five-year action plan that followed the policy's adoption will be completed in the coming year, along with the preparation of a new action plan. Although certain concrete results of the initial plan can be identified, it is difficult to isolate the overall effect as the municipal government was already working actively with social economy actors prior to the adoption of the social economy policy. In the case of Montreal, there is still no official all-encompassing policy but the social economy is well integrated into several sectoral and territorial approaches led or coordinated by the city.

For this reason, we have chosen to focus on potential perspectives for the development of the social economy in these five municipal environments and to identify some of the necessary conditions for success.

The first and major element that unites the experiences of Gatineau, Sherbrooke and Laval, Longueuil and, to a lesser extent, Montreal, is that these policies were based on a process of co-construction between civil society and municipal authorities. These processes resulted in the design of innovative policies that challenge certain traditional approaches to development in a constructive and open process. Collaboration between the city and social economy actors in the implementation of these policies is a second critical element in each municipality. This partnership approach is key; the initiatives and innovations at the heart of these policies can only succeed if there is ongoing complicity in setting and realizing common objectives.

A third element that paves the way to potential success is that social economy policies must be rooted in an interdepartmental or horizontal approach within municipal government. If the lead department or division within the city administration in the elaboration and implementation of these policies is the economic development department or commission,

involving a wide range of other divisions within the administration, is essential to better understand the cross-cutting and intersectoral nature of the social economy. This challenges the traditional silo approach within public administration.

In the case of Montreal, while an integrated social economy does not exist, there is strong and continuous recognition of its role in all aspects of urban life. As well, the devolution to certain institutions, organizations, such as PME MTL, recognizes the strong advantage of subsidiarity as a policy measure supporting the social economy.

Despite what appears to be a continued practice of more top-down approaches to plans, programs and policy design, the actions taken by several mayors across Quebec, the alliances and partnerships with new civil society coalitions are significant signs that transformation in governance and policy design is occurring. That said, processes of co-construction are inevitably confronted by the difficulties in modifying the organizational culture, the mindset, within institutions of public administration. Today's complex realities are disrupting embedded ways of doing within long established administrative structures. The traditional silo approach is not adapted to today's challenges where economic development cannot be considered without its social, environmental and cultural dimensions. This is particularly true in the design and implementation of social economy policies.

The four municipal social policies outlined in this paper, have taken on this challenge, integrating clear intentions to adopt new approaches and institutionalize interdepartmental collaboration. However, recognition that breaking down barriers within administrative structures is insufficient without also institutionalizing partnerships with civil society without which it will not be possible to design effective social economy policy. The trend towards a new municipalism is being tested in the four cities we have discussed and will be key to the ability of the city of Montreal, as Quebec's metropole, to meet the complex challenges it faces in the coming years.

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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

Founded in 2013 in Seoul, the GSEF – Global Forum for Social and Solidarity Economy – is a global organization of local governments and civil society actors committed to promoting and developing the social and solidarity economy. Its 90 members, present in 35 countries, represent the diversity of SSE stakeholders: local governments, networks of actors, associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, universities, etc. The GSEF supports the development of the SSE around the world by promoting dialogue between public authorities and SSE actors in order to jointly develop local public policies that contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the emergence of ecosystems conducive to the SSE.

The GSEF thematic working groups (WGs) were voted on at the General Assembly on May 5, 2023. The WG on “The Impact of SSE Public Policies on the Achievement of the SDGs” brings together some fifteen researchers from all continents. It is led by Marguerite Mendell (Karl Polanyi Institute) and Timothée Duverger (Chair Terr’ESS, Sciences Po Bordeaux) and supported by the GSEF General Secretariat employee working on his CIFRE thesis.

Following on from research already conducted by the GSEF in partnership with UNRISD, which led to the production of guidelines for local SSE policies, in January 2024 the Research WG launched a call for contributions to gather proposals for working papers focusing on three recurring processes in public action: development, implementation, and evaluation. Through the analysis of these processes of SSE public policy development, the authors of the papers (both researchers and SSE actors) were asked to examine two fundamental dimensions: the contribution of these local policies to the achievement of sustainable development goals, and the paradoxes associated with the institutionalization of the SSE.

A reading committee composed of GT members evaluated more than forty proposals, including the seventeen working papers now published under the title *Local SSE Policies enabling the Socio-Ecological Transition*. Each paper is available on the GSEF website, free of charge, in its original language (English, French, or Spanish) and in English. This publication and the English translations were made possible thanks to financial support from Caisse des Dépôts.

The concrete examples provided by these working papers will feed into programs to strengthen the capacities of local authorities and support the development of public policies favorable to the SSE.



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