

Credit union and co-operative members generous even throughout a recession

By Trudy Kelly Forsythe

There's no doubt charitable giving in Atlantic Canada is strong, especially in the credit union and co-operative sectors. La Caisse Populaire Acadienne in Chéticamp, Nova Scotia, is a great example of this as it immediately began accepting donations for the Red Cross as soon as the devastating earthquake hit Haiti on Jan. 12.

The co-op movement kicked off the effort with a \$2,750 donation and La Caisse set a target of \$10,000. By Feb. 12, the final day the Canadian Government would match donations, La Caisse had collected \$19, 587.50.

It's interesting to note the generosity following the financial stresses of the 2008-2009 recession. Indeed, at the end of 2008, as Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) executive director Carol Hunter looked forward to 2009, she expressed concerns that the continuing recession might affect charitable donations.

But here it is a year and half later, the recession is officially over in Canada, and those involved in fundraising in the co-operative and credit union systems found the impact was negligible – at least in the amount of funds raised. It did impact how funds are raised and disbursed, however.

\$1.2 million goal

Nationally, for example, the Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada (CDF), which raises money for CCA's international co-operative development programs, took the recession into account when setting its fundraising goals. It decided not to set a higher fundraising target for the year because of the recession, remaining with the \$1.2 million goal it had set in 2008.

Laurie Tennian, CDF interim manager says they met that target because CDF has such a strong connection with the co-op sector. She is optimistic that connection will help them reach their immediate goal of \$1.395 million in 2010 and the longer term goal of \$1.5 million annually by 2012.

The recession did have other impacts on CDF such as a decrease in grants it receives from other organizations like the Irish League of Credit Unions Foundation grant for support work in Ghana. It dropped from \$150,000 to \$90,000.

On the positive side, it appears the recession may have assisted CDF by forcing it to rethink the way it raises money.

"Everything we do, we do as cost effectively as possible," says CDF manager Julie Breuer.

Individual donors

That has meant dropping programs that were not raising a lot of money, increasing major gift solicitation and bringing in more individual donors. While most donors are corporate, the number of individual donors has risen dramatically in recent years going from 32 regular individual donors in 2003 to the current 700.

It has also meant that special events that are often people heavy have been handed over to supporters to run and new partnerships have been forged. An example of a new partnership is with the World Council of Credit Unions and the launch last year of the global women's leadership initiative. This initiative aims to help women around the world become involved in the credit union system. In a new direction of fundraising, CDF has held three online auctions to help raise the profile of the initiative along with some funds – \$20,000 so far.

Closer to home, the Nova Scotia Credit Unions Charitable Foundation saw a slight decline in the funds it raised, dropping from \$78,000 in 2008 to \$72,000 in 2009.

Largest funder

The foundation's largest funder is Credit Union Central of Nova Scotia (CUCNS), which donates approximately 2.5 percent of its before-tax earnings to the foundation each year. Credit unions in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, individuals and corporations top up the pot which the foundation uses to provide support to three main programs: Early Intervention Nova Scotia, the Kids Eat Smart Foundation and the Nova Scotia Credit Unions and Newfoundland and Labrador Credit Unions Bursary Programs.

Bernie O'Neil, director of the foundation and president and CEO of CUCNS, said the foundation tried to ensure its giving was in line with previous years believing organizations needed assistance even more than usual as other forms of giving were impacted by the recession.

Casual day charities

Casual day charities have supported a number of community organizations and CUCNS members give generously of their time and funds outside of the foundation. In 2009, they donated 75 units of blood to the Canadian Blood Services through its Partners for Life program, raised \$16,000 for the United Way, collected more than 4,000 pounds of food and more than \$1,200 for local food banks, raised \$2,000 for Kids Help Phone and pledged \$33,000 to the IWK Bowl-a-thon.

O'Neil was not surprised at the recent charitable generosity. It just demonstrates that giving back is one of the cornerstones of the credit union, and co-operative, network.

“Credit unions were founded in times of recession so not to see a slowdown in giving is consistent with our values and commitment to community,” says O'Neil. “It is also a testament that we walk the talk.”