

**Moses Coady and The Antigonish Movement:
What is its relevance for community development today?**

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This is an important question and, as we proceed through the Coady International Institute's 50th anniversary year, there is an imperative to answer it well. Nonetheless, I am daunted by the task, very aware of my status as a CFA ("Come From Away") in Antigonish where some people still remember Moses Coady and guard his legacy with fierce devotion. I am also aware that this question has been addressed over the years by various scholars from their vantage points in the field of Adult Education (such as Alex Laidlaw and Ann Alexander), Sociology (Dan MacInnes, Dr.A.A. MacDonald), Economics (Santo Dodaro and Leonard Pluta), and biography (Jim Lotz, and Michael Welton). They are all more deeply steeped in our local history than I am.

What I can offer, however, is a perspective on Moses Coady and the Antigonish Movement from the vantage point of my own experience in international development. In the few minutes that I have this morning I would like to give you a sense of the kind of leader Moses Coady was and the significance of the Antigonish Movement in the context of his day. I will then talk about how those same central messages inform our work at the Coady International Institute, now in its 50th anniversary year.

Moses Coady was a diocesan Catholic priest, born in 1882 in Margaree, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, home to predominantly Scottish and Irish immigrants. He was one of the few who earned an opportunity to study in Rome – graduating there with a PhD in theology and philosophy in 1910. This education was very much informed by progressive social teachings – radical teaching in its time – promoted through Pope Leo XIII in the 1890s, that called for attention to be paid by the Church to the plight of the working classes – the new proletariat that had emerged in the Industrial Revolution.

The historical context of Moses Coady's work is important to understand. The industrial revolution had generated extreme social divisions. The Russian revolution had taken place in 1917. The cooperative movement was building momentum in Europe, and offered a more palatable alternative to what was presented as the spectre of communism. As Moses Coady himself would write in 1958, rural North America including the Canadian Maritimes, had been contributing millions of people to the proletariat over several decades. People had moved out of rural areas in search of work, and rural livelihoods were increasingly governed by middlemen working for large companies. As the Great Depression of the 1930s wore on, he recognized a new type of feudalism: "the dictatorship of business and finance".

Moses Coady was one of the few priests, educated in the progressive social teachings of the "Rerum Novarum" who attempted to put this official Church policy into action. He

did this in collaboration with other enlightened and radical priests – notably the firebrand Father Jimmy Tompkins who rattled the establishment while Moses Coady tried to find ways to work with it and through it from his position as Director of St. Francis Xavier University’s Extension Department. They introduced the idea of study clubs where farmers, fishermen, miners could come together learn about their economic situation and learn strategies for pulling themselves out of poverty. This mass adult education movement, taking place at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish and in kitchen meetings throughout the province came to be known as “The Antigonish Movement”. Confident of the contribution that the Sisters of St. Martha could make, Coady actively sought out their participation as educators, and gave these women recognition that was unusual in its day, and particularly in the Catholic Church. Education revolved around an understanding of the local economy, innovative farming techniques, and the potential of cooperation. A concrete expression of the Movement was the mushrooming of cooperatives and credit unions. By 1938, study clubs numbered 1,110 comprising 10,000 members, and the number of cooperatives was 220.

But the movement was about more than cooperatives and credit unions – it was about a fundamental belief in the intelligence and capacities of working people to be “Masters of their own Destiny.” In the language many of use today, it was all about “agency”. Moses Coady believed firmly that the basis for social reform was through education, that education needed to focus first on the economic, material conditions of people’s lives, and that education should lead to group action, ultimately to attain “a full and abundant life for all”. Pre-existing legislation permitted cooperative formation and new legislation that he and Jimmy Tompkins pushed for in the area of credit unions created new opportunity for wealth creation among the working poor. A large, imposing figure, with powerful skills of oratory, he would challenge people with: “You are poor enough to want it, and smart enough to get it”. He was confident that people could “use what they have to secure what they have not.” It was all about taking responsibility, ownership and control.

What relevance does the work of Moses Coady and the Antigonish Movement have today? To answer this question, I want to turn now to the Coady International Institute and speak particularly about lessons we have drawn from cases of community organizing around the world that we have recently published in *From Clients to Citizens: Communities changing the course of their own development*.

The Coady Institute was established in 1959 shortly after Moses Coady’s death and has served ever since as a place where development practitioners from low income countries come to reflect on experience and learn new strategies for stimulating social and economic change at home. At first, priests and sisters from the missions came to learn about the Antigonish Movement and the formation of cooperatives and credit unions. Gradually, our constituency broadened so that today our participants are principally from the NGO sector, including member-based organizations and social enterprises, with a smattering of government representatives, journalists, and donors. To date we have over 5000 graduates around the world. The content of our educational programs has evolved and changed with the times.

Those of you who have worked in international development, as well as those of you who are working locally, are at ease with the language of empowerment and participation and have internalized an analysis of the causes of poverty, inequality and injustice. The NGO sector, from which we draw most of our participants, has often been cast as a problem solver, a gap filler, with a mission (and I use that word advisedly) to help the disadvantaged – delivering services, building capacity, helping to organise, advocating with the poor, or on their behalf. The problems are immense, the challenges real, the urgency great. Yet into this discourse has crept an assumption that the agents of change are primarily external. As a result, the language of problems, needs, deficits, has generated leaders in communities who have learned how to project the failings and problems of the communities they represent in order to get assistance - so much so that, people have often internalized this view of themselves. Instead of empowerment, we have witnessed an encroaching paralysis. On the part of NGOs, instead of asking “What are you proud of? What are your strengths and capabilities?” many of us have been conditioned only to see their weaknesses and failings, asking only “What do you need?” How can we fill this gap? Instead of empowerment, this instills dependency.

In a course I run with a colleague, we start with a challenge:

Tell us about a community in the area where you work where people have organized to bring about change without any assistance from the outside.

Often this is met with silence and bewilderment, since our participants are so focused on their role as professional development workers to bring about change, but eventually the stories begin to flow. They are stories about communities that have built schools, organized rotating savings and credit schemes, managed communal resources. Interestingly, often they tell stories about their own communities (where they live or where they grew up) rather than the ones they work in.

We then took this idea further and looked for communities around the world that had been successful in sustaining this kind of citizen-led development over a long period of time, where people organized themselves around their strengths and capacities to either respond to a crisis, to insure themselves against risk, or meet economic opportunity. They might seek help from outside agencies but it was very much on their own terms, and it was on the basis of their accomplishments that they asked for *investment* not charity.

We included both communities of place – rural villages, urban neighbourhoods – as well as communities of identity. For example, the Self Employed Women’s Association, now 1 million strong in India, and the migrants from the Moroccan Souss, working in France and returning to their villages of origin to establish basic infrastructure for electricity and irrigation. We asked: How did they put their social, cultural and material assets to work to build community, how did they sustain this over time, how did they get others to invest in them. In Moses Coady’s terms we asked “How did they use what they have to secure what they have not”? We were able to see how people organized to survive in times of crisis, how they organized to demand basic government services, and how they organized

to stimulate their local economies. They produced livelihoods and community at one and the same time.

In our analysis we could identify parallels between Moses Coady's philosophy and what has inspired communities to organise in other parts of the world.

First of all, in all these stories there is leadership that motivates people to act but it moves quickly from that charismatic and individualized style to a much more dispersed model and a collective sense of ownership. Sometimes this leadership is generated from within, but usually it is from "native sons and daughters" who have gone away earned experience but returned with fresh ideas and a vision of possibility and opportunity. While few had the weight of status that Moses Coady had as a priest, they had "gained weight" in the metaphorical sense of the word!

Second is inspiration by faith, a well articulated set of values that inspire collective action; a "master narrative" of responsibility towards others; a strong sense of "active citizenship." We see this in the Gandhian principles that galvanise women to organise in the Self Employed Women's Association in India, or the Islamic principles that guaranteed inclusiveness in the case from Egypt, the solidarity felt in a common place of worship for the Latino immigrants who revitalized the downtown economic core of Minneapolis St.Paul, or the notion of Ubuntu ("I am because we are") in South Africa.

Third is the capacity to innovate socially, technically and institutionally.

On this last point, people who study social movements trace an evolution from less formal to more formal structure in both leadership and organizational form. It is almost a truism that passion and energy that so characterizes the initial phases is lost in the process of this "routinisation". Sometimes as social and economic circumstances change, communities outgrow particular organizational forms. Yet, from what we have learned from these cases around the world, that belief in their own capacity to organise reasserts itself in new forms of organizing, a regrouping and refocussing of their organizational efforts in new ways.

In 2009, the crisis and dysfunction of capitalism that Moses Coady recognized in the 1920s and 30s has once again shaken all of us out of any delusions we might have held about the trickle down effects of the wealth of a few or about the capacity of our international or state institutions to redistribute the means by which we produce and reproduce our livelihoods. This is a time when we can expect to see new forms of cooperative enterprise emerging, whether informally or formally.

Even before the current crisis, we began to see renewed interest in organising in reaction to excessive individualization of production and consumption, and as a way of buffering against the precarious nature of engaging in a global economy. There are New Generation Cooperatives, Federations of Self-Help Groups, Community Based Institutions Member-Owned Financial Organisations offering savings and insurance schemes, Community Foundations, Residents Associations etc. This is what we at the Coady Institute are

interested in turning our attention to now to find out what innovations and adaptations there are in the way people are organizing to cope with or take advantage of social and economic trends.

In this way, the fundamentals of Moses Coady's work find continued relevance today. As community development workers, we can take from this the importance of recognising the histories of organizing in the communities where we work, nourishing that capacity to act, and helping to shape an institutional environment that allows formal and informal expressions of community organizing to flourish.