

# COMMUNITY ACTION MOVEMENT CLUSTER

## A Citizen-Led Force for Social Justice

In Quebec, the community action movement emerged in the late 1960s, amid social struggles and demands for more accessible, equitable, and responsive public services (Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992). Initially led by citizen committees in underprivileged areas, early initiatives combined advocacy with the creation of services—such as community daycare centres, legal clinics, and housing cooperatives.

These groups fostered a collective vision emphasizing direct participation of those concerned, local democracy, service co-production, and solidarity.

## FROM ADVOCACY TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Rooted in popular, feminist, and labour movements, the community movement is marked by grassroots services developed by and for citizens, often operating outside the public system (Jetté, 2008). It is driven by a vision of social transformation and the belief that those affected should define and manage their services.

## KEY PHASES IN A COLLECTIVE BUILDING PROCESS

Starting in the late 1960s, citizen committees laid the groundwork for the community movement. In 1965, the Associations coopératives d'économie familiale (ACEF) were established by the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), with the credit union network (caisses populaires). The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of organizations like the ACEF, women's centres, and mental health advocacy groups, often supported by unions.

In 1984, the first Community Development Corporation (CDC) was founded in Victoriaville, sparking a movement to root community organizations in local territories. The Community Organization Support Program (PSOC), launched in 1973, marked an early form of public recognition of their role.

The 1990s and 2000s brought significant political gains: the Act respecting health services and social services (1991), the creation of the Secrétariat à l'action communautaire autonome (SACA) (1995), the establishment of an interministerial committee (1998), and the adoption of Government Policy on Autonomous Community Action (2001) (Laforest, 2011; White, 2012).

In 2002, community mobilization led to the Act to combat poverty and social exclusion, crafted by the Collectif pour une loi sur l'élimination de la pauvreté, largely composed of community network actors.

## AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY ACTION: A DISTINCTIVE FRAMEWORK

Autonomous community action (ACA) is rooted in a social and political vision of development, rejecting the state-defined service delivery and advocating for mission-based funding to ensure autonomy. (Jetté, 2008; Lévesque in Bouchard, 2022).

As of 2025, the Regroupement québécois de l'action communautaire autonome (RQ-ACA) unites 77 national and sectoral organizations, representing over 4,500 ACA groups, supported by 54,000 workers and more than 425,000 volunteers and activists (RQ-ACA, 2025).

## STRUGGLES, RECOGNITION, AND TENSIONS

Among the community movement's notable collective achievements are:

- Mission-based funding, an unparalleled institutional innovation globally (Benoît Lévesque, interviews in Bouchard, 2022: 267);
- Community sector involvement in drafting the Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (2002), initiated by the Collectif pour une loi sur l'élimination de la pauvreté;
- Establishment of Community Development Corporations (CDCs), with the first in Victoriaville in 1984 (Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992).

Despite these successes, the movement faces significant pressure from chronic underfunding, limiting its advocacy, mobilization, and social research and development. Philanthropic foundations (such as Centraide, McConnell, and Chagnon) increasingly support these functions (see the work of PhiLab, Fontan & Lefèvre).

## A MOVEMENT STILL IN ACTION

Today, autonomous community action is crucial in defending rights, supporting marginalized individuals, and transforming social relations. It promotes a vision of development rooted in social justice, solidarity, and active citizenship.

Despite ongoing challenges, the movement continues to organize, mobilize, and explore new action methods. With deep local community roots, strong networking capacity, and political autonomy, it remains a key driver of social change in Quebec.

Community organizations are active in diverse sectors: health, popular education, environment, housing, poverty reduction, social justice, and more.

The Regroupement québécois de l'action communautaire autonome (RQ-ACA) unites hundreds of organizations in these fields. A full list of its members is available on the network's website.

The Table nationale des corporations de développement communautaire (TNDCDC) also highlights recent social innovations and inspiring initiatives led by community organizations throughout Quebec.

## References

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