

# Bologna Summer Program for Co-operative Studies

## **The Lessons of Emilia Romagna**

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By John Restakis

Over the last decade, there has grown in North America an awareness that something unique has taken shape in the economy and society of Emilia Romagna in north Italy.

For those who have worked in the co-operative movement, whether as researchers, educators, developers, or practitioners this awareness is beginning to recast how we understand the nature of co-operatives economies in the modern world, and how co-operatives and the operations of the social economy are emerging in a new light for changing times.

One of the outcomes of the increased exchange that has developed between this unique region and Canada, in particular the province of British Columbia, has been the creation of the Bologna Summer Program for Co-operative Studies.

Now entering its fourth year, the program is a partnership between the BC Co-operative Association, Vancity Credit Union, and The University of Bologna to explore the operations and dynamics of co-operative economies and to apply the lessons of Emilia Romagna to the economic and social challenges confronting our societies.

In this article, I wish to outline the nature of this program and its relevance to the work of co-op leaders and practitioners in the co-operative movement and as actors within the broader social economy.

The Emilia Romagna region of northern Italy has been widely recognized as one of the world's leading examples of a successful co-operative economy, with one third of the region's GDP deriving from co-operative enterprises. With over 15,000 co-operatives in the region, the use of co-operative systems both in the commercial and civil sectors has produced what may be considered a living laboratory for the understanding and application of the co-operative model in a modern market economy.

In addition, this region of 4 million people has over 400,000 enterprises providing a ratio of one enterprise for every ten residents. Emilia Romagna and its capital city of Bologna, now produces the highest GDP per capita, the lowest unemployment rate, the highest citizen satisfaction, and the highest output in research, innovation, and overall economic performance in Italy. In Europe's 120 economic regions, Emilia Romagna is in the top ten.

Clearly, something is going on.

In British Columbia, as in other parts of Canada and the United States, there is a growing recognition of the need to apply the lessons of successful co-operative economies to the commercial and civic realities of North America. It has also been widely recognized by the co-operative and CED community, that the opportunity for advanced level studies in both the theory and application of co-operative economic models has been lacking.

The absence of such study, the expansion of fundamentalist free market ideology, and the lack of a sustained exchange of new co-op ideas and best practices abroad within the main body of the co-op movement have served to cripple the advancement of the co-op model in North America.

The Bologna Summer Program grew out of a series of study tours that were organized first in Ontario and then in BC in an effort to expose co-op and social economy leaders to the new models of co-operation being used in northern Italy.

These models applied not only to the operations of the co-op sector and the social economy, but also to the manner in which the private sector economy of small and medium firms organized its economic relationships and operations to succeed in a global marketplace.

What is now known as The Emilian Model refers to the use of co-operative principles for the joint production and distribution of goods and services by private firms within their respective industrial sectors. This strategy of mobilizing co-operative relations among private enterprises is a new formulation of the co-op model within the context of a small firm economy. It is also a unique instance of the co-op idea

migrating beyond the confines of the co-op movement to influence, at a structural level, the operations of a mainstream capitalist economy.

As a regional response to globalization, The Emilian Model has emerged as a clear alternative to mainstream ideas about how modern economies must adapt to the pressures of global corporate capitalism. That this highly successful alternative is based on the co-op model is of immense significance to the co-op movement. Co-operators need to understand the potential of this alternative not in terms of the past, but in the cross currents of the profound economic, social and political changes that are unfolding today.

The Bologna Summer Program was established to explore the theory and practice of co-operation as a model for economic and social progress, using Emilia Romagna as a test example. The purpose of the program is to understand and articulate a view of economics and social relations from a contemporary co-operative perspective and to fashion a viable theoretical and practical framework rooted in the co-operative idea.

We intend a broad audience for the program. It is targeted to co-operative and credit union leaders, practitioners, and students of co-operative studies and to leaders from the non-profit sector and the wider social economy, as well as key leaders from business and government. The instructors include some of the world's leading academics in co-operative economic theory, management, history, and international trade.

Program participants acquire a solid grounding in co-operative economic theory and in the practical uses of the co-operative model in a broad variety of settings, both entrepreneurial and social. Indeed, the balance between co-operative theory and practical application is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the program.

The areas of study in the program include: The Economics of Co-operation: The Civil Economy; Management in Co-operative Enterprises; Co-operation in the Global Economy: The Emilian Model; Special Topics: (offered in conjunction with co-op site visits).

In addition to structured lectures at the University of Bologna (Europe's oldest university) program participants have the opportunity to learn first hand from experienced practitioners in highly successful

co-operative enterprises operating both at a local and an international level through co-op site visits in Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Trentino.

Many of these co-ops are selected as part of the program's focus on the use of innovation and the creation of excellence in such areas as artisan foods, research and technology transfer, and social service delivery.

The program also provides participants with ample opportunity to share perceptions and ideas in structured dialogue sessions and through informal social gatherings.

Finally, in addition to the four-week course, The Bologna Summer Program offers a Leadership Study Tour of one-week duration that is oriented to the needs of leaders from business, government and the non-profit sector that share an interest in innovative strategies for economic and social development but are not able to devote the four weeks required by the full program.

In the past three years, over 140 individuals have taken part in the program. They have come from a very diverse background of organizations and specializations within the public, private, co-operative and social economy sectors. And this diversity has served not only to widen the understanding of the co-op model to new areas, but also to enrich the content and quality of the program through the contributions and interactions they make possible. The social aspect of the program is one of its strongest features.

In closing, it would be a mistake to view the value of this region solely within the dry terms of economic theory and social development. The lessons of Emilia Romagna and the magical city of Bologna extend beyond economic success, impressive as that is.

The lifeblood of the region flows through the conduits of its culture, its culinary excellence, its wondrous architectural and artistic heritage, the abiding sense of beauty, and most of all, in the profound sense of community and sociability that is evident in the piazzas, the packed cafés, the festivals and celebrations.

It is not possible to separate the economic and social achievements of Emilia Romagna from these deeper roots of community and the

cultivation of quality in life. The genius of this region has been its ability to transmute the ancient sustenance of these people in their food, crafts, culture, and enterprise into a thriving economy that is the envy of Europe.

Emilia Romagna and its neighboring regions did not take the route of mass industrialization for the production of low cost and low quality goods to maximize corporate profit. Instead, they took what was best in their culture and brought it to the world's table through a combination of innovation, quality, small-scale entrepreneurialism and co-operation.

These are lessons that are worth learning for those whose view of the future includes both economic prosperity and a humane society.

The Bologna Summer Program allows us to learn what this can mean in relation to our co-operative values and as a viable response in our troubled times.

Note: John Restakis is Executive Director of the BC Co-operative Association, co-founder and Co-ordinator of the Bologna Summer Program for Co-operative Studies, and Sessional Instructor teaching a course on “Co-operative Economies and Globalization” at SFU.

### **Bologna Summer Program Timeline - Summer 2005**

The Bologna Summer Program will take place from:

June 27 – July 15 Non-credit stream

June 27 - July 22 Credit stream

Week 1: June 27 – June 30 Vancouver, BC

Weeks 2-4: July 4 – July 22 Bologna

### **Program Cost**

The Bologna Summer Program includes both credit and non-credit streams.

June 27 - July 22, 4 week credit program: \$3,500 CDN

June 27 - July 15, 3 week certificate program: \$3,200 CDN

### **Vancouver Sessions (Lecture Series) – Simon Fraser University**

June 27 – June 30: \$375

### **Leadership Study Tour - Bologna**

July 15 – July 22: \$3,200

Registration fee includes: accommodation, insurance, instruction, interpretation, and travel in Italy.

For further information on the Bologna Summer Program, please contact John Restakis at 604-662-3906 ([restakis@bccacoop](mailto:restakis@bccacoop)), or visit the BCCA web site: [www.bccacoop](http://www.bccacoop)