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Mapping the Social Innovation Ecosystem in the Netherlands

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Summary

A Changing Landscape for Social Innovation

Across the Netherlands, a diverse landscape social innovation initiatives, including citizen initiatives, social enterprises, community cooperatives, advocacy groups, and hybrid public–civil collaborations is actively addressing pressing challenges. These challenges span from poverty, inequality, and migration to the energy transition, food systems, housing, democratic renewal, and the future of care.

Social innovation is no longer a marginal or experimental activity. It can be seen as an essential response to problems that neither government nor markets are addressing sufficiently, in many cases by approaching the problem from a different perspective. Yet the Dutch ecosystem in which these innovators operate is fragmented, difficult to navigate, and shaped by complex regulations and sectoral silos. At the same time, interest from policymakers and funders is increasing, but often without a clear understanding of what social innovators need to succeed.

This study maps the current ecosystem through extensive literature analysis, desk research, and 17 case studies. It aims to support the development of a National Competence Centre (NCC) for Social Innovation, which could strengthen and connect actors across this landscape. The cases demonstrate the activities pursued, and challenges faced by social innovators and supporting actors with different roles within the social innovation ecosystem. We organize the findings along four dimensions of the ecosystem: actors and roles, norms, structures, and functions and mechanisms.

Social Innovation and the Dutch Context

Social innovation in the Netherlands is best understood as a set of new practices, processes, and relationships that seek to address societal needs in ways that differ fundamentally from existing systems. These innovations are rarely technological. Instead, they emphasise different forms of ownership, organising, and relating. Social innovators are experimenting with new social arrangements and, in doing so, questioning the dominant logics of existing systems.

Social innovators in the Netherlands address many societal needs, including “wicked” problems, through social, cultural, financial, economic, knowledge and political activities. They are mission and value-driven, using methods and processes that evolve around collaboration, co-creation and knowledge sharing. Common values include community, ownership and equality. In their efforts, they question norms and challenge existing institutions, practices and social relations.

The context of the Netherlands is characterized by a high level of bureaucracy, regulation and organization, as well as a culture of networking, collaboration, lobbying and consensus-based decision-making (‘poldermodel’) in which the interests of various stakeholders are considered. Navigating the complex bureaucracy and regulations can

be challenging for social innovators. Their activities often transcend common categories, sectors and domains, finding that in reality problems are complex and intertwined. As such, the fragmentation, complexity and unpredictability of policies and bureaucracy are commonly experienced obstacles by social innovators, taking up resources they would rather use for social innovation itself. Furthermore, the landscape of networks and coalitions requires social innovators to join groups with shared values and goals in order to be successful, especially on the political level.

The Dutch social innovation ecosystem can be understood as a dense web of relationships among innovators, support organisations, funders, government actors, knowledge institutions, and communities. Strengths of the ecosystem include: the availability of financial capital, the willingness of governments to engage with social innovation and existence of policies such as social public procurement. That being said, financial capital is not always accessible, nor available in every phase of a social innovation and often requires measurable impact. Government attitude is often perceived to be lacking in trust, long-term commitment and long-term policies. The sentiment among social innovators is that social public procurement often favours established economic actors over impact-oriented actors.

Conditions for Social Innovation to Thrive

Although knowledge and awareness of social innovation is growing, as is the development of methods for measuring social impact, needs of social innovators include support in navigating the bureaucracy, communication with (local) governments and access to funding and subsidies. This implies that the Dutch context requires various forms of capital in order to succeed, including political capital and investment in lobbying. Even though the availability of capital differs per social innovator, several patterns emerge across the cases, pointing at the following generic conditions for social innovations to thrive.

First, *trust is foundational*. Innovators depend on trust from communities, governments, funders, and partners. Without it, experimentation and long-term collaboration are impossible. Trust, however, takes time to build and can be undone by political turnover or administrative rigidity.

Second, *social innovation requires long-term commitment*. Many initiatives only show meaningful impact after years of development. Short funding cycles and shifting political priorities therefore hinder progress.

Third, *crises create momentum*. The energy crisis, the housing shortage, the nitrogen crisis, and COVID-19 each opened space for new ideas and accelerated the acceptance of alternative models.

Fourth, *innovators must eventually learn to fit the system* enough to influence it—without compromising their mission. Institutionalisation can be a sign of success, but it also creates risks of co-optation.

Finally, while the ecosystem is not yet fully cohesive, *actors increasingly recognize themselves as part of a broader field*. Shared language, shared challenges, and emerging alliances point toward the beginnings of a collective identity.

Implications for the National Competence Centre

To support practitioners and strengthen the ecosystem, the NCC should focus on several core roles:

- *Bridge-builder*: connect innovators, governments, funders, and knowledge institutions in ways that reduce fragmentation and increase mutual understanding.
- *Navigator and translator*: help social innovators find their way through bureaucratic systems, while helping public institutions understand the realities and logic of social innovation.
- *Capacity builder*: provide training, tools, and support structures tailored to the practical needs of innovators at different stages.
- *System-wide coordinator*: identify gaps, align efforts across transitions, and promote long-term, strategic thinking.
- *Co-creator*: facilitate iterative and inclusive policy design that incorporates the full diversity of social innovators.
- *Signaller and agenda-setter*: highlight structural barriers, support equitable access to resources, and promote shared narratives of social innovation.

The NCC should be careful not to add new layers of bureaucracy, replicate existing initiatives, or impose a narrow definition of social innovation. Finally, managing expectations throughout the process will be important. The NCC should be clear about what it does—and does not do —, and build on what already works. Depending on the resources it may do well to signal a clear thematic focus, at least for the initial phase.

Key Recommendations for the Field

Being clear about what the NCC does – and does not do – should facilitate a realistic understanding of the ecosystem, how it functions and how it can support social innovators. At the same time, freedom, time and space are inherent to successful social innovation initiatives. Hence, successful forms of governing should be especially sought in designing and implementing an open and inclusive process, hence involving social innovators in all its diversity. This also leads to recommendation for several actors in the social innovation ecosystem.

For policymakers

- Reduce regulatory fragmentation, enable integrated approaches across sectors, and design procurement that genuinely rewards social value.
- Prioritize inclusivity, taking into account the diversity of social innovators, their activities, values, goals and impact
- Commit to long-term, stable policy frameworks that support experimentation and community-led initiatives.

For funders

- Provide early-stage and low-barrier funding; invest in organisational capacity, not just projects.
- Value qualitative forms of impact and recognise the long-term nature of systemic change.

For ecosystem builders

- Strengthen cross-sector learning communities, shared narratives, and visibility for diverse innovators.
- Build alliances around societal transitions—not around administrative sectors.

For social innovators

- Invest in partnerships and legitimacy; use networks strategically to gain political and financial capital.
- Choose governance structures that protect mission and values while enabling growth.

Concluding remarks

The Dutch social innovation landscape is rich, motivated, and increasingly recognised. Yet its full potential is constrained by fragmented structures, demanding administrative environments, unstable policies, and unequal access to resources.

What this study ultimately shows is that social innovation is not just a set of projects—it is a way of reorganising society. It is rooted in values of solidarity, fairness, community, and sustainability. It transforms relationships, challenges default assumptions, and invites new ways of thinking about public value.

The Netherlands has many ingredients for a thriving ecosystem. A National Competence Centre can help these ingredients come together—if it prioritises trust, inclusivity, and long-term commitment. Social innovation flourishes when people and institutions work together to create the conditions in which new social arrangements can grow.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Purpose of this study

As part of the European Social Innovation Alliance consortium (ESIA), this mapping study aims to contribute to setting up a National Competence Centre (NCC) on Social Innovation in the Netherlands. The goal of this NCC is to stimulate and support a diverse range of initiatives that can be considered social innovations. The NCC aims to bring together social innovators, such as community-based initiatives and social entrepreneurs, and ecosystem actors such as governments, network and support organisations, and knowledge institutions. The aim of this mapping study is therefore to provide insight into the current state of play concerning social innovation in the Netherlands as well as an understanding of its ecosystem and the enabling and limiting factors for social innovations to develop.

This study understands social innovation, broadly speaking, as new forms of interaction, cooperation, governance, and knowledge generation, typically aimed at addressing an observed societal issue. Social innovations have their origin in the identification of a range of societal “wicked problems”: problems that have no clear-cut solution. As these problems are complex and interconnected, causal relations are often unclear, with many actors involved, often with conflicting interests and values, leading to political and public controversy (Rittel & Webber 1973, Alford & Head 2017). Social innovators are often motivated by personal and collective experiences as they address these wicked problems and try to find alternative ways of doing in order to solve them. Guided by their values and moral principles they find that current systems and practices result in social inequality, have a detrimental effect on the environment or result in other problems. Social innovation means addressing these challenges with a progressive mindset; changing systems, common practices, social relations and power dynamics. It is best seen as a collective process of experimentation, co-creation and collaboration. It relates to changing norms, values and behaviour as well as systems and institutions, for the benefit of people and planet. Ultimately, it relates to the question: what society do we want to live in?

In this report, we examine social innovation activities and their linkages with other actors and factors at different levels through a combination of literature, desk research and based on 16 cases from the Netherlands that involve social innovators as well as actors within the ecosystem, active within nine key transitions. Based on these interviews, several workshops, a literature review and desk research, we provide insights on the ecosystem of social innovation.

Our methodology can be found in Appendix 1. For an overview and description of the cases, see Appendix 2.

1.2 Key concepts

Social innovation

Broadly speaking, social innovation relates to new forms of interaction, cooperation, governance, and knowledge generation (Kleverbeck et al. 2019). It occurs on multiple levels, through non-linear processes of co-creation and collaboration. Within this broader interpretation, we define social innovation as:

a new combination and/or re-configuration of social practices, social processes and social relations initiated by specific actors that is directed at solving a societal problem, or at better answering needs, in a societal field of action.

Social practices, processes and relations

Social practices are practices in everyday life, such as work, consumption or care. This includes the practices of institutions, organisations and companies, such as governance, bureaucracy and production. Importantly, social practices, processes and relations are reproduced or modified by acting subjects (Howaldt et al, 2023). Through their repetition they can create both stability and instability, recreating the status quo or triggering processes of social change (Howaldt et al, 2014). As such, social innovation relates to values and norms, recreated or changed in everyday interactions.

Social innovators

Many different actors are involved in social innovation, either directly or indirectly. Social innovators can be community-based initiatives, social entrepreneurs, social initiatives and different institutions. Supporting actors are those that support social innovation in different ways, through funding and financing, providing networks, sharing knowledge or otherwise. Furthermore, social innovation hardly occurs through single actors, but rather through the involvement of stakeholders, processes of co-creation and collaboration.

Social innovation ecosystem

We consider the ecosystem to encompass the set of actors and factors that influence social innovation. These actors and factors can have an enabling or restraining effect on social innovation efforts. By looking at the four dimensions of the social innovation ecosystem (actors & roles, norms, structures, functions/mechanisms), we analyse the ecosystem in both a subjective (from the perspective of social innovators) as well as an objective (as it appears through policy, rules and narratives) manner. The concept of the ecosystem presumes a relational view on social innovation, in which multiple actors

collaborate at different levels and scales, each with their own role within the social innovation process. However, it is important to acknowledge the plurality of society and the role of conflict and power dynamics within processes of social change. Social innovations are a heterogeneous group in terms of views and ideologies and their innovation exists in a social and political context, resulting in varying degrees of support and implementation.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualization of social innovation

Academic discussion on social innovation

This mapping study aims to gain insight into the current state of play concerning social innovation and its ecosystem in the Netherlands. Describing the state of play first necessitates an understanding of the phenomenon itself, which can be drawn from reviewing the relevant literature.

Several academic disciplines study social innovation, ranging from social sciences to innovation sciences and governance. Social innovation occurs through activities within the domains of the market (e.g. via social entrepreneurship), civil society (citizen initiatives, knowledge institutions) and government. Broadly speaking, social innovation relates to new forms of interaction, cooperation, governance and knowledge generation (Kleverbeck et al. 2019). Schumpeter (1942) already documented the role of innovation in economic growth through the process of creative destruction. Social innovation then, is about a similar process of creative destruction, and challenging the status quo, to achieve social progress.

However, there is no general consensus on social innovation as a concept nor as a practice. Rather, the academic debate on social innovation is ongoing and different definitions and interpretations of the concept reflect a multitude of theoretical approaches, practical uses and ideologies (Philips et al, 2024; Anderson et al, 2014; Terstriep & Pelka, 2016). Although the idea of social innovation has been around for a long time, new and increasingly complex challenges - or so-called wicked problems - require a further development and a better understanding of social innovation as a process and practice (Terstriep et al, 2022; Beckman et al, 2023). However, research on social innovation is challenging as it occurs on multiple levels of scale, many different contexts and is continually evolving as a field (Satalkina & Steiner, 2022).

Performing a mapping study on social innovation and its ecosystem requires a definition of the concept, as well as categories and an understanding of ecosystems. Although there are many different takes on it - reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of the concept - all definitions involve an understanding of social innovation as finding solutions to social problems and ways to better address societal needs (OECD, 2021). Typically, definitions of social innovation involve the development of new practices, emerging as a response to social or environmental needs, engaging a variety of actors (OECD, 2021, p. 10). Pel et al. (2020) define it as a “process of changing social relations, involving new ways of doing, organizing, framing and knowing (p314).

In their recent review of the literature on social innovation of the past decade, Philips et al. (2024) find that social innovation is “at its core, [a] discourse [that] uplifts new solutions to enduring social problems, encouraging the participation of social actors

from multiple sites and sectors, and providing social benefits across the social formation” (p45).

Social innovation has several inherent characteristics that distinguish it from other kinds of innovation. In essence, social innovation is of a public and participative nature (Godin, 2019). It involves a form of collective action and looks to change existing structures, relationships and practices (Satalkina & Steiner, 2022). Important elements are collaboration resulting in collective knowledge building and involvement of diverse actors. As a process, it is goal-oriented, non-linear, often anchored at the local level, and it requires longer timeframes for visible results (OECD, 2021). Although social innovation can be technology driven, it is more often not the case. Furthermore, social innovation can be seen as an inherently complex process as many variables and actors interact in a social reality in which many factors are unpredictable (Oeij et al, 2018b). In regard to the actors involved, social innovation is done by social entrepreneurs, movements, governments, foundations, teams, networks, businesses, and political organizations, each with different ways of working, motivations, and capacities (Berner, 2023). These actors can originate from bottom-up (e.g. social movements), top-down (e.g. governments) or joint-action movements (a combination of both) (Berner, 2023).

Towards a unified conceptualisation

Social innovation implies a form of intended positive social change. However, as there is no academic consensus on the meaning of social innovation, the goal in terms of social impact remains open. There are several different views concerning the intended impact of social innovation. Philips et al. (2024) identify three paradigms, namely: instrumentalist, strong and democratic. The *instrumentalist paradigm* fosters a ‘goal-oriented approach’ in which the goal of social innovation is to “[develop] more effective, efficient or sustainable solutions” and the measure of success “lies primarily in the instrumentality or function of a project” (p48). In comparison, the *democratic paradigm* sees the goal of social innovation as “meet[ing] human needs by focusing primarily on increasing the participation and empowerment of communities, creating more access to resources, and increasing social and political capacities” (p49). Lastly, the *strong paradigm* emphasizes the “process of institutional change or transformation in complex adaptive systems” (p48). It focuses on collaborative processes to restructure extant power relations (Avob et al. 2016).

What these three approaches have in common is the objective of finding solutions for social challenges. Where they differ is whether these solutions necessitate a transformation of systems, institutions, or social relations (Pel et al. 2022). For our mapping study, we will combine all three of the above-mentioned paradigms, using a use a broad understanding of social innovation as transformative of processes, practices and relations.

Social innovation and its transformative nature

As we include transitions in this mapping study, it is important to look at the ways in which social innovation has transformative impact. The sub-field of Transformative Social Innovation (TSI) see the main purpose of social innovation as the transformation of social relations (Pel et al. 2022; Avelino et al. 2017). This perspective puts an emphasis on the distribution of power within society and how this manifests itself in social relations. Along this line, Roy et al. (2023) argue that social innovation is “a process that is [...] inherently political” and that any social change is “a political process with winners and losers” (Roy et al., 2023: 73). This suggests that social innovation is not merely social, but also political in the sense that social change is negotiated. It is within the political arena or ‘strategic action field’ (SAF), that field actors “seek to gain power, influence, and resources from different positions as incumbents or challengers” (Roy et al, 2023: 74). Social innovation can be seen in this light, as challengers of norms, practices and power relations. As such, social innovation itself could be considered “an ‘arena’ where the battle for what the nature of social change *ought to be* is played out” (Roy et al., 2023: 73).

Several methods of analysis have been developed to understand how power relations play a part in societal transitions and social innovation processes, such as the ‘multi-actor perspective’, the ‘seven power contestations’ and the ‘six dimensions of empowerment’ (Avelino et al, 2023). These methods serve to provide insight into the “role of different actors and institutional logics within processes of change”, and to understand how power relations between these actors and logics can shift (Avelino et al, 2023, p. 141). Recognizing the role of power within societal transitions, Avelino et al. (2023) understand social innovation as “changing social relations involving new ways of doing thinking and organizing, and is considered transformative to the extent that it challenges, alters and/or replaces dominant institutional arrangements” (2023, p. 141). This notion of social innovators as challengers aligns with Godin (2019) who notes that: “the concept [of social innovation] originally had an essentially political and contested connotation: introducing change into the political and social order” (Godin 2019, p. 11).

Acknowledging the role of power in social innovation processes can explain why social innovations sometimes fail to become accepted or institutionalized social practices. One aspect of this is resistance to social innovation (Tuur, 2023). As social innovation can involve a change of power relations, resistance can be seen as part of political negotiation within society. After all, aiming for social change is an inherently political and moral endeavour, as it is an attempt to realize a particular conception of the good.

As social innovation occurs within a field or arena filled with both collaborating and competing actors, the result of social innovation efforts is not always as intended. Pel et al. (2022) recognise three paradoxes within TSI, namely: system reproduction, temporality and reality construction. First of all, social innovation can both challenge and reproduce the status quo. Efforts to transform a system can simultaneously reproduce other aspects of the existing social order. Secondly, innovation implies

newness and a situation before and after implementation. However, social innovation can be new and old at the same time and follow “fuzzy cycles of fading and re-emergence” in practices and institutions (Pel et al. 2022, p. 46). It exists over time and across contexts. Thirdly, researchers on social innovation are actively contributing to understanding it as a phenomenon and thereby play a significant part in constructing the reality of social innovation. This leads to “the simultaneous existence of social innovation as a factual process, and as a projection” (49) in which “researchers [...] take part in ‘hype’ dynamics” (Pel et al. 2022: 52).

Relevant to our mapping study, Pel et al. (2022) mention that this paradox is “particularly intensive in the mapping activities undertaken in many EU-funded research projects” in which “they co-shape understandings of what counts as transformative social innovation, and what [does] not” (51). Taking this into consideration, it is important to be aware of the impact that any mapping studies may have on the understanding and practice of social innovation.

Towards a definition of social innovation

Having outlined these theoretical issues, the complexity and ambiguity of social innovation as a concept becomes clear. Social innovation remains hard to define and - as is the goal of our mapping study - a challenge to categorize and analyse. Social innovators are a diffuse and diverse group in terms of organisation, innovation, phase, scale and impact. A first step is to build a definition in accordance with the latest academic insights while also positioning the study within the different paradigms. In that regard we opt for a non-normative definition – including but not requiring social innovation to be transformative of systems, institutions and social relations - in order to remain open to the different ways in which social innovation manifests itself in the context of the Netherlands.

Based on the literature outlined above, our definition allows for different notions of social innovation, such as addressing complex social problems for collective gain (Beckman et al, 2023); being transformative of systems and institutions (Pel et al, 2022; Avelino et al, 2017); changing social relations (Pel et al. 2020; Avelino et al., 2017), and; aiming to improve society along democratic principles such as equality, justice and empowerment (Anderson et al, 2014). We formulate the following definition:

Social innovation is a new combination and/or re-configuration of social practices, social processes and social relations initiated by specific actors that is directed at solving an actual problem, or at better answering needs, in a societal field of action.

By using this definition, we largely align with the definition employed by the ESF¹. Our definition is also compatible with definitions used in other European mapping studies,

¹ See <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/social-innovation>

the ESIA consortium and in particular Germany, on which we based several aspects of this mapping study (Bauer et al. 2002).

2.2 Challenges of Social Innovation

Social innovation poses several conceptual and practical challenges, both universally and specifically for the context of the Netherlands. First, both Beckman (2003) and Phillips et al. (2024) argue that the existing literature on social innovation is heavily dominated by the *instrumental school of thought*, potentially introducing biases in knowledge accumulation. Pel et al. (2022) conclude that social innovation should be reclaimed as a counterhegemonic, transformative concept. They argue that “the ‘pro-innovation bias’ in innovation studies [neglects] not only the innovation-theoretical insights on unintended consequences and path dependency but also the paradoxes and ‘dark sides’ of social change” (Pel et al, 2020, p. 3). These potential negative outcomes of social innovation efforts can result in “disempowerment and ‘capture’ by vested interests” (Pel et al, 2020, p. 2).

Second, as mentioned before, researchers play an important part in the *‘reality construction’* of social innovation. The choices we make regarding categorization and mapping of social innovation practices affect the phenomenon itself. Part of this is the reproduction paradox, which, according to Pel et al. is “not a fringe phenomenon” but a central problem in social innovation (2022, p. 45).

A third challenge is the *scaling* of social innovation, both in theory and practice. Niekerk et al. (2021) show that - depending on the paradigm used - scaling levels can vary from mere participation, to creative solutions through innovation, to empowerment and ultimately to institutional/systems change. With scaling come extra layers of complexity as it moves from a micro-scale towards a macro-scale, hence involving increasingly more actors and ultimately and ideally becoming institutionalised. The process of scaling, however, is a complex issue with many obstacles along the way. Furthermore, in moving towards institutionalisation, the political dimension and support within society come into play. In practice, scaling requires overcoming progression barriers, co-construction, improvisation, adaptation to contexts, and on-going reconfiguring, re-interpretation, and renegotiation with stakeholders (Healy et al, 2024).

A fourth challenge of social innovation is the *measurement of social impact* or value. As social innovation involves the attempt and promise of achieving positive societal change, it sparks the discussion of whether the intent justifies the effort, or whether a social innovation should result in measurable impact. The problem arises in the actual measurement of social impact, which is not easily done and an ambiguous and contested concept in itself (Lkhoyaali & Raufflet, 2023). Social innovation is often a non-linear process in which the effect becomes visible over a longer period of time, and whose impact depends on many different factors (Oeij et al, 2018b).

A fifth challenge is the (theoretical) tension between social innovation having a transformative and path-breaking function within transitions, and the fact that governments and institutions are involved in half of the social innovation activities (Terstriep et al, 2022). They find that “a lot of social innovation activities help to ‘repair’ the system and become an integrated part of the dominant path” (Terstriep et al, 2022, p. 9).

Finally, there is the challenge of preventing social innovation from becoming a *technocratic way of governance*. There is a danger of depoliticizing social problems by using social innovation instead of democratic decision-making or using social innovations to fix issues that the state fails to address. As social innovation involves questions of a moral and political nature it should allow for democratic decision-making in regard to the problems that need to be solved and the way in which transitions progress. Another crucial aspect is the role of power discrepancies within decision making. Smink (2015) finds that incumbent powers and vested interests have slowed down or even stopped certain transitions in the Netherlands, as these would hurt their economic interests. Big companies and interest groups use various strategies to influence policymakers, thereby influencing democratic decision-making processes and opposing social innovation.

2.3 Understanding the social innovation process

Social innovation processes and practices

Social innovation is best understood as a result of collective efforts and collaboration, rather than the sum of individual efforts. It occurs through methods of co-creation and within collaborative spaces. Co-creation can be understood as “a process that aims to improve efficiency, effectiveness and acceptability by involving stakeholders in identifying, developing, implementing and assessing products, services, policies and systems (Smallman & O'Donovan, 2023, p. 107). Even the social entrepreneur, often portrayed as a “lone hero”, collaborates with many different stakeholders such as consumers and depends on many factors (Healy et al, 2024).

Furthermore, social innovation takes place within complex systems and occurs on multiple levels (Cukier et al. 2023). One example can be a social innovation aiming for more equality in the labour market: on a micro or individual level (by providing coaching), on a meso or organisational level (by tackling prejudices towards marginalised groups) and on a macro or societal level (through advocacy for equality). Cukier et al. argue that: “social innovation often emerges from the interactions between individual, organizational and societal level forces” (2023, p. 217).

From a social practice theory perspective, Rabadjieva and Zirngiebel (2023) argue that “social change manifests as a change in practices” (p.12). Therefore, social innovation is aimed at changing social practices. These social practices are best understood as routines or “what people do in a habitualized manner” (Rabadjieva & Zirngiebel, 2023:

12). They argue that these practices are not merely about individual agency or the enabling or limiting influence of institutions. Rather, social practice theory aims at understanding the *relational* aspects in which practices create the social through connections such as collaboration, competition and conflict. The analytical focus should be on “what is being done by whom and why” and on the “perpetrators, practitioners or carriers of practices (Rabadjieva & Zirngiebel, 2023, p. 14).

Towards a typology of social innovation

For the purpose of our mapping study, it is important to develop an understanding of the different types of social innovation and the social practices they address. However, Howaldt et al (2017) note that “while a multitude of innovation typologies with different foci exist, typologies especially focusing on social Innovation and identifying ideal types remain a niche undertaking” (p119). A typology can focus on practice fields, organisational types, objectives of social change, and so on. Therefore, Howaldt et al (2017) propose multiple typologies for social innovation, each with a different focus (p107). The first one is a typology based on different *key activities*, distinguishing e.g. new products & services, new practices, new processes and new rules & regulations.

Another example concerns an actor-centred typology, incorporating different *levels of activity*. For instance, Rehfeld and Terstriep (2017) describe different actors (with economic, social and mixed/balanced objectives) at the micro-level such as workplace innovators, organizations focusing on CSR activities, social enterprises, charities, mutuals, cooperations and associations. Actors at the meso-level include that may contribute to institutional change include e.g. business associations, lobbyists, network organizations, platforms, policy initiatives and community builders. Then, with a focus on the macro-level and aiming for wider social change, organizations such as think tanks, international organizations such as OECD, IMF, international NGO's and World Social Forum play a role.

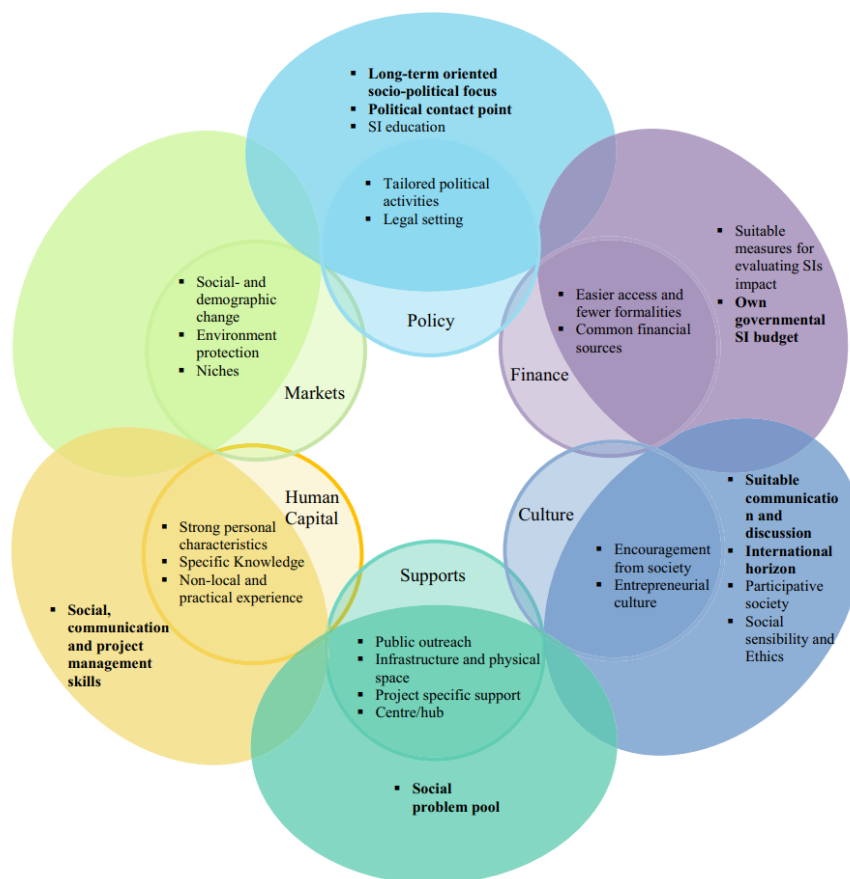
Importantly, Howaldt et al. (2017) note that “social innovations are characterised by a great variety of implementations, subject to constant change, they could be placed anywhere on a continuum of the described types, depending on the objectives, resources, actors and dynamics of the initiatives” (p. 110).

For our mapping study, we combine the above-mentioned typologies to broadly include social innovators from all levels, sectors and transitions within society, such as bottom-up initiatives (community and citizen-based), top-down initiatives (government and institution-based), social entrepreneurs, and various forms of collaboration between these actors, such as public-private, public-civic and civic-private collaboration. These social innovators show a variety of goals, scales, phases of development and impact, including changing practices, processes and social relations. Furthermore, our mapping study will focus on the roles and needs of different actors within the ecosystem.

2.4 Ecosystems of social innovation

The concept of the ecosystem of social innovation presumes that there are certain factors that influence the efforts of social innovation actors. Van Dorsselaer et al. (2024) define social entrepreneurial ecosystems as “an evolving composite community of varied, yet interdependent, actors across multiple levels, which collectively generates positive externalities that contribute to sustainable solutions to social problems through entrepreneurship” (p6). According to Terstriep et al. (2022) limiting factors include “scarcity of resources [...] limited interest in scaling social innovations [...] lack of management capacity and hybrid business models [and] insufficient (policy) support or rigid institutional settings” (p2). Pel et al. (2020) see the ecosystem as a “second-order mode of social innovation activity [that] seeks to create the conditions and support structures for it to flourish” (p312). In that sense, the ecosystem concept encompasses an understanding of a “networked, co-produced agency that characterizes contemporary innovation more generally” (p312). By doing so, it creates a more relational and network-based view of social innovation agency, placing innovators within an environment of different actors and institutions. This is in contrast to notions of the social innovator as a singular ‘innovation hero’ or as a simplified social reality of challengers versus incumbents. Importantly, Terstriep et al. (2022) find that “the ‘ecosystem’ to facilitate social innovation is still rather unknown” and they ask the question: “what does a flexible, dynamic, stimulating, enabling and empowering environment, allowing social innovation to grow and unfold its social and economic impact, look like?” (p2).

Thinking in terms of ecosystems recognizes the systematic, collective and collaborative character of social innovation (Domanski et al, 2023). Understanding social innovation ecosystems is part of understanding how social innovations diffuse and translate to other contexts (Domanski et al, 2023). Philips et al. (2024) argue that ecosystem-thinking “spatializes social innovation and collectivizes the process, elevating the role of social actors concerning social institutions” (p48). An ecosystem for social innovation can be seen as a supportive environment consisting of “sympathetic policy makers, academics, and social innovators who tap into existing human capital” (Philips et al. 2024, p. 48). Audretsch et al. (2021) find that an ecosystem for social innovation differs from the traditional entrepreneurial ecosystem in the sense that it requires more factors to be successful. In the following model they map the needs of social entrepreneurs in terms of the ecosystem:



“Social Innovation Ecosystem Model. The six inner circles represent the traditional entrepreneurial ecosystem; the six exterior circles represent the social innovation ecosystem. Emerging needs largely neglected in the literature are in bold” (Audretsch et al, 2021)

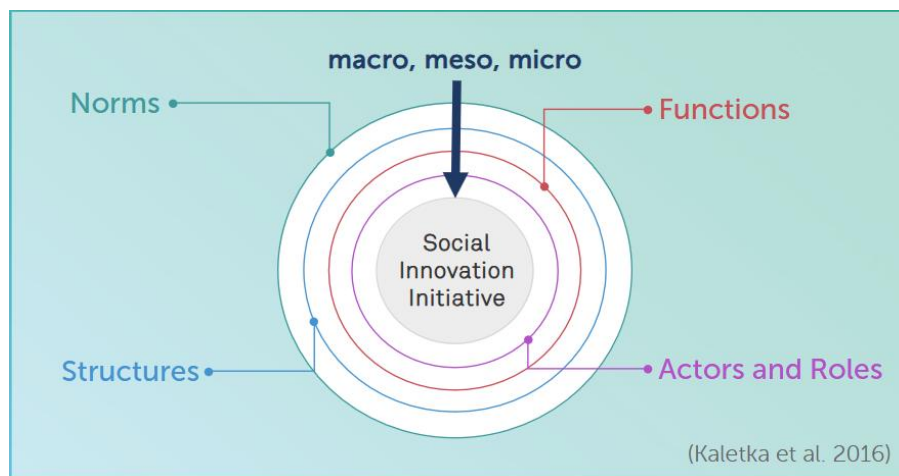
Concerning the idea of a singular, neutral or stable ecosystem, Terstriep et al. (2022) point out that social innovations might actually challenge institutions that are part of the same ecosystem in their attempt to transform systems and social relations. In working towards supportive ecosystems, Terstriep et al. (2022) propose three factors to be essential for ecosystems of social innovation to thrive:

1. a mode of governance needs to be put in place that integrates actors from civil society, and the social, economic, and academic field;
2. the existence of social innovation hubs, labs and transfer centres serving as intermediaries that accelerate social innovation activities; and
3. the integration of different modes of innovation in transformational innovation strategies

In order to analyse the German ecosystem, Bauer et al. (2023) adopt the so-called ‘onion’ model proposed by Kaletka et al. (2016) and formulate four dimensions of analysis as relevant contextual layers of social innovation ecosystems. These layers

represent different categories of factors within the social innovation ecosystem and, in doing so, also discern micro-, meso- and macro- level actors as discussed above:

1. *Norms*: Policies, innovation strategies, standards, laws, narratives
2. *Structures*: Institutions, funding programs, support structures, technology clusters, skills and knowledge
3. *Functions or Mechanisms*: Successful social innovation processes, government practices, cooperation, evaluation, resources, transferable approaches, successful competition
4. *Actors and Roles*: Successful role distributions, key stakeholder groups, higher education institutions, networks



Four dimensions of social innovation ecosystems (Kaletka et al., 2016):

It is important to also incorporate political, cultural and economic factors (or actors) that serve as obstacles for (the implementation of) social innovation, which several authors have found to be considerable in certain sectors (Avelino, 2024; Smink, 2015). When discussing the mini-cases in Chapter 4, we will use this 'onion' model to structure the results. Before discussing these cases, Chapter 3 describes the context of social innovation in the Netherlands.

3. Context of social innovation in the Netherlands

In order to understand the context in which social innovation occurs in the Netherlands, it is important to distinguish between factual and observable factors on the one hand, and subjective or experienced factors, on the other. We will provide an outline of relevant developments and an overview of the socio-cultural, historical and political context in which social innovation takes place.

3.1. Social and historical context

Focus on technological development

Social innovation emerged in the Dutch policy field starting in 2001, with a strong focus on innovating in the workplace, specifically within organizations (Oeij et al, 2018a; Scheffelaar & Kuiper, 2017). Social innovation has not been widely integrated in policy yet, but has been gaining more attention.

The most recent Dutch government programme ('regeerprogramma') from 2024 frequently mentions the goal of stimulating, focusing on, or investing in innovation across multiple domains, such as housing, labor market shortage or agriculture (Rijksoverheid, 2024). However, this program does not differentiate between technological and social innovation. The existence of the National Technology Strategy (NTS) but not a national social innovation strategy shows the government's stronger focus on technological innovation. Currently, the government focusses on "mission driven innovation", with five central societal themes and setting goals for each of these:

- **Climate & energy:** the Netherlands climate neutral in 2050
- **Circular economy:** the Netherlands fully circular in 2050
- **Agriculture, water & food:** a vital rural area and resilient nature in a climate-proof Netherlands. Water and soil are guiding, the agricultural and food system is sustainable and healthy, and the delta is safe.
- **Health & care:** people in the Netherlands live 5 years longer in good health and there are 30% fewer health differences between socio-economic groups in 2040.
- **Safety:** the Netherlands is safe and resilient against external threats and undermining crime, both in the physical environment and the digital domain

The focus on technological innovation is part of a broader strategic economic development, as suggested by reports from SER (2023), TNO² (2020) and Dialogic (2020). These perspectives aim to stimulate overall innovation, but often frame social innovation through a technological lens or exclude it entirely. That said, there has been

² <https://www.tno.nl/en/newsroom/2023/06/powerful-innovation-agenda-needed-dutch/>

growing attention to social aspects of innovation and methods such as co-creation and citizen science,³ which are closely linked to social innovation.

Policy-making and lobbying

Over the last few decades, the so-called ‘poldermodel’ has been the dominant form of consensus-based decision-making for economic and social policy, involving different stakeholders such as labour unions, employers’ organizations and the government. However, lobbying is increasingly becoming a more common way of influencing policy. Both the poldermodel and lobbying are relevant for social innovation: public policies are both factors as well as criteria for social innovation to succeed. Importantly, as the Netherlands lacks an obligatory lobby register, the influence on policy-makers by companies, NGOs and others is not transparent but thought to be vast⁴. Strategies are used to push policy to favour certain interests, often resulting in the obstruction or delay of transitions (Smink, 2015).

New Public Management and social procurement

Since the 1980s, management changes have been implemented by local government and other public organisations as part of New Public Management (NPM) and the aim to become more efficient and accountable, resulting in budget cuts. Furthermore, many public services were privatised, such as the NS (Dutch Railways), postal services and the energy sector. For higher education and schools, policy has increasingly emphasized output indicators, accountability, and performance measurement (van der Sluis et al, 2017). In terms of government spending, in recent years a shift can be seen towards promoting social objectives through the use of social public procurement (Huisjes, 2025).

Active citizenship and the participation society

Several key narratives relate to social innovation. One such narrative is *active citizenship*. Ulug and Horlings (2018) note that “the Netherlands and Europe are currently seeing a push for “active citizenship” and the creation of a “participatory society” through citizen-driven initiatives, which are believed to promote a sense of civic responsibility and involvement in aspects of governance (153). This development towards a “do-democracy”, where citizens participate in solving social problems, provides more room for social initiatives (Oeij et al., 2018a; Scheffelaar & Kuiper, 2017). An example is the policy called “Right to Challenge”, through which (an organized group of) citizens can take over and improve a certain service or task from the municipality.

³ <https://www.wur.nl/en/show/citizen-science-projects.htm>

⁴ Rapport: Nederlandse lobbycultuur dringend toe aan hervorming – Nieuws – Transparency International Nederland

In the Netherlands this narrative is visible in the “participatiewet” or participation law, which requires citizens who receive social benefits to participate in volunteering or work (to their ability) a certain number of hours per week⁵. These kinds of laws are representative of the retreat of the welfare state over the last few decades.

Another related narrative is the neoliberal narrative of *individual responsibility*. As the welfare state has retreated, citizens are increasingly expected to become self-reliant, aligning with the idea of the do-democracy mentioned before, in which citizens are increasingly taking social matters in their own hands, but are also expected and stimulated to do so by the state (Scheffelaar & Kuiper, 2017: 22).

3.2 Societal challenges and key transitions

The case studies used in this mapping study aim to contribute to one or more of the key transitions identified for the Netherlands⁶. The need for these transitions stems from the acknowledgement that many systems currently used are unsustainable and many wicked social problems are lingering. It is important to note that the identification of social problems is inherently political and, to some extent, subjective and arbitrary. However, in terms of demand for social innovation in the Netherlands, we can observe the following societal challenges, within these nine transitions:

1) Social (and labour) transition

- *Migration and labour market*: migration is a contested topic but poses challenges in terms of governance, asylum, education, housing, labour and overall social equality. Furthermore, there is a shortage of labour in certain sectors such as healthcare and education.
- *Inequality, precarity and segregation*: several trends such as a shortage of housing (and rising rent) and an increase in insecure work (flexible employment contracts) have led to greater precarity for many groups in society. Although the Netherlands scores low on income inequality, it scores very high on wealth inequality. Overall, various forms of inequality have persisted or increased over the past few decades⁷. Furthermore, there appears to be an increase in social and political segregation⁸.

2) Healthcare transition

- *Pressure on the welfare state*: The welfare state has been on the decline for several decades, resulting in pressure on the healthcare system.

⁵ [Beleidsregels Participatiewet | Lokale wet- en regelgeving](#)

⁶ [Zo kan Nederland zichzelf opnieuw uitvinden - VPRO](#)

⁷ [Summary Contemporary inequality | Publication | The Netherlands Institute for Social Research](#)

⁸ [De leefwerelden van arm en rijk | Rapport | Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau](#)

- *Population aging*: similar to many Western countries, the population of the Netherlands is aging, which will put extra pressure on the healthcare system and possibly the labour market in the coming decades⁹.

3) Democratic transition

- *Declining trust in politics*: although people in the Netherlands generally have a high rate of trust in democratic institutions, there is a general decline in trust toward the political process and political actors.
- *Increasing complexity of problems*: due to the increasing complexity and urgency of societal and environmental challenges, political decision-making under pressure to address these issues on both a short-term and long-term basis.

4) Spatial transition

- *Housing crisis*: the last decade, the shortage of housing has been growing and persistent problem. With rent prices increasing, there is a need for new affordable housing options for those who get stuck in the market¹⁰.
- *Decline of nature and lack of space*: The Netherlands has seen a steep decline of biodiversity. At the same time, space is becoming scarce, as it is needed for housing, infrastructure and economic purposes.

5) Energy transition

- *Changing from fossil to renewable energy*: the transition to green, renewable energy is set in motion but faces challenges like net congestion, high energy prices, and dependence on other countries.
- *Net congestion*: Due to increasing demand for power, the power grid system is becoming overloaded.

6) Agricultural and food transition

- *Unsustainable food practices*: The Dutch diet is highly based on animal-based food which creates high environmental pressure. Furthermore, there are high levels of food waste¹¹.

9

10 <https://nos.nl/collectie/13960/artikel/2497415-schreeuwend-tekort-aan-woningen-en-hoge-huizenprijzen-hoe-is-het-zo-gekomen>

11 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/voeding/vermindering-voedselverspilling>

- *Unsustainable agricultural practices*: The agriculture sector relies heavily on industrial farming contributing to nitrogen emissions, biodiversity loss and soil degradation, which is connected to high use of fertilizers and pesticides¹².

7) Economic and financial transition

- *Rising amount of people living in poverty*: There are many people living in poverty in the Netherlands, with the government aiming to stop the increase of people living in poverty as well mitigating the long-term consequences of living in poverty^{13, 14}.
- *Need for new ways of financing*: a growing shift can be seen towards sustainable financial practices and alternative financing mechanisms, like impact funds, impact investing, and crowdfunding.

8) Circular and raw materials transition

- *No-waste economy*: The Netherlands has the goal of being fully circular in 2050, reusing products and materials, minimizing resource extraction¹⁵.

9) Educational transition

- *Inclusive learning systems*: An ever-contested sector, education in the Netherlands has been under pressure of a shortage of teachers and forced to scale through new public management ideology.

12 <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/dossiers/circular-agriculture>

13 <https://www.armoedefonds.nl/armoede/armoede-in-nederland/>

14 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/armoedebestrijding/armoede-verminderen>

15 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/circulaire-economie/nederland-circulair-in-2050>

4. Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

How can the Dutch state of the social innovation ecosystem be described? This chapter documents the overall pattern that emerges from combining different data sources, including desk research, focus groups and interviews with key actors in each of the cases on social innovation. It should be acknowledged that the data collection is not an accurate representation of the Dutch situation. It gives an initial indication that may serve as a base to dive deeper and as a starting point for designing interventions that may lead to improvements.

The chapter first provides an overview of the cases and their activities and roles within the ecosystem. Section 4.2 analyses each of the dimensions of the ecosystem by using the onion-model described in section 2.4. Furthermore, we provide an understanding of its dynamics. In section 4.3, we consider the ecosystem from a more strategic point of view and discuss its strengths and opportunities.

Overview of case studies

Phases and scales

For this mapping study we have interviewed 16 cases within the social innovation ecosystem. Some of them are social innovators, while others provide support in different ways. Although these actors are often involved in a range of different activities, based on their main activities we can assign them to different contextual levels and scales.

Local	Regional	National
1: Stichting Stunt: Delft	6: Wij.Land: De Westerse veengebieden (Western Peat Meadow Areas)	10: Energiesamen
2: Torteltuinen: Amsterdam		11: Windunie
3: Kairos college: Amsterdam	7: Butterfly Effect: 15 communities including 's-Hertogenbosch, Amersfoort and Nijmegen	12: Herenboeren
		13: Crowdbuilding
4: Warm Rotterdam: Rotterdam	8: Prins Heerlijk: Amsterdam, Tilburg and Sassenheim	14: FNO Zorg Voor Kansen
		15: Migration Inc
5: Burgerberaad Klimaat Rotterdam: Rotterdam	9: Zorgalliantie: Gelderland, Noord-Brabant, Noord-Limburg	16: Kansrijke Start
		17: All-In Programma

Overview and level of main activities of the cases

In addition to different scales, our cases are in various phases of development, ranging from niche innovations to becoming accepted or common practice, and becoming institutionalised. Although these cases are all relatively stable, successful and established organisations that have existed for multiple years, they have varying amounts of social, cultural, financial, and political capital (or resources) at their disposal, based on the interviews and their recent successes and challenges.

Activities of social innovators

In terms of social innovation, the cases are involved in various activities, which can be categorized as follows:

- *Social activities*: Organizing social events or activities, building networks and community, and creating social connection.
- *Cultural activities*: Activities aimed at changing behaviour, norms and social relations.
- *Financial activities*: Financing or funding social innovation.
- *Economic activities*: Exchanging or selling products or services.
- *Knowledge activities*: Creating or sharing knowledge.
- *Political activities*: Lobbying or otherwise influencing policies, decision-making, and governance.

Organizational types and roles

Our selected cases involve different organizational types and roles:

- *Networks* (Energiesamen, Warm Rotterdam, Wij.land, Herenboeren, Zorgalliantie)
- *(Collaborative) Programmes* (Zorgalliantie, All-in program, Kansrijke Start, Burgerberaad Rotterdam)
- *Social entrepreneurs* (Migration Inc., Butterfly Effect)
- *Government initiatives* (Burgerberaad Rotterdam)
- *Educational institutions* (Zorgalliantie)
- *Non-profits* (Prins Heerlijk, Herenboeren, Stichting Stunt, Wij.land)
- *Citizen initiatives* (De Torteltuין, Kairos College)
- *Cooperatives* (De Torteltuין, Windunie, Energiesamen)
- *Incubators* (All-in program)
- *Funders* (FNO Zorg voor kansen)

In addition, there are several legal entities and ownership models used by social innovators, such as foundations, cooperatives and steward-ownership, reflecting the

values of ownership, collective decision-making and impact over profit that often typify social innovators.

It is important to mention is that these cases are fluid and ever developing in their activities, often occupying multiple roles and are active on multiple contextual levels. Furthermore, although social innovations have their development in a specific context, the underlying ideas or inspiration often have a global origin. In that sense, social innovation is a 'glocal' phenomenon; an interaction between the local and the global.

Dimensions of the ecosystem

The ecosystem can be considered to be the sum of all involved the actors and factors that influence social innovation. As it is impossible to map the ecosystem in its entirety, we have made an effort to identify the most important actors and factors in order to provide an understanding of the *dynamics* of the ecosystem as well as its strengths and challenges.

Using the onion model, we make the distinction between socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, as well as actors that relate to social innovation in different ways, either by being innovators (social entrepreneurs, citizen initiatives, NGOs, etc.) or supporters (funders, incubators, governments, etc.).

A field of players

Actors and roles

The ecosystem can be considered as a field of players involved either directly or indirectly with social innovation. Social innovators are actors that, through social, cultural, economic, financial, knowledge and political activities, create new practices, processes and social relations to address a societal need (see 4.1.2.). The following cases illustrate this.

De Torteltuin is a cooperative housing initiative in which members decide democratically on their collective future housing. As such, they put new ways of ownership, organization (cooperative and steward-owned) into practice, inspired by similar, older initiatives but with their own approach. By doing so, they question the norm of housing being built through real estate projects and the normal tenant-owner relationship. In their activities, Torteltuin are led by values of ownership, solidarity and democracy.

Migration Inc., is an organisation involved in finding innovative ways of serving the needs of migrant communities. This includes knowledge creation through experts-by-experience and the development of projects aimed at supporting and empowering

newcomers in Dutch society. Furthermore, they aim to create awareness on cultural differences and diversity among professionals.

Supporting roles

In addition to social innovators, we can distinguish different roles within the ecosystem:

- *Governing institutions*: creating the legal and regulatory context in which social innovators operate.
- *Networks*: connecting different actors involved in social innovation.
- *Funders*: providing funding or financing social innovators.
- *Incubators*: incentivising and stimulating social innovation through programs, projects, hubs, labs, etc.
- *Knowledge and education providers*: providing knowledge and skills relevant to social innovation.
- *Lobbyists*: influencing policies and political decision-making.
- *Other supporting roles*: communication on social innovation, coordination of social innovation projects or programs.

One example would be **Energiesamen**, an organisation that serves as a network for energy cooperatives. Their activities include lobbying for policies that helps the transition towards locally owned, produced and consumed energy – an alternative to the current centralized energy system. Furthermore, they provide support to energy cooperatives such as loans and knowledge.

Another organisation that supports social innovators is **FNO Zorg voor kansen**, a non-profit social fund that funds different programs within themes that have a societal relevance. By doing so, they invest in sustainable societal impact, and support initiatives long term (up to 20 years). In this sense, they deviate from regular funds by prioritizing social impact over profit and through their efforts of creating connection and networks, as well as providing coaching and training to the actors they fund.

Wij.land work towards nature-inclusive agriculture and support farmers in their new role as caretakers of the environment. In doing so, they form a network of farmers:

"Farmers are eager to learn from other farmers, so we try to connect them to each other [...]. It is important for them to be part of a social structure [...]. We listen carefully to their needs [and] follow up with actions that support the farmers." - Wij.land

Collaborations, programs and networks

Different kinds of collaborations and networks exist within the ecosystem, including interest groups, programmes and projects. **Kansrijke start Meppel** is a project funded by the municipality of Meppel which involves professionals from different sectors, brought together in their mission to provide better care for children in their first years. They provide structural support for families in financial precarious situations. Through seeking collaboration and creating a network of professionals, they are able to provide more personalized and efficient care in a field that is often characterized as fragmented.

The **All-in** program is a collaboration of several networks (e.g. Social Enterprise NL) and funds with the goal of stimulating and supporting social entrepreneurs with a migration background. One of our cases, Migration Inc., participated and benefited from this program. The All-in program aims for the change of norms and narratives, namely; the way social entrepreneurs with a migrant background are perceived by funders and others. By creating a different narrative, All-in tries to empower this group of entrepreneurs. Furthermore, they try to increase the knowledge of both the entrepreneurs as well as the funders in order to create more equal opportunities and a more inclusive ecosystem.

"Social entrepreneurs with a migration background face several specific obstacles [such as] not being recognised as social entrepreneurs, [...] not being valued for having a different background, [...] lived experience [and] skills". - All-in program

Within the dimension of actors and roles it needs to be mentioned that there are many stakeholders and beneficiaries involved with social innovation, often through a process of co-creation and the creation of collaborative networks. **Zorgalliantie** (or 'alliance for care') is a strategic network and public-private collaboration that brings together actors across different domains, such as healthcare, education and housing. It brings together many different organisations and stakeholder within these domains including the HAN University of Applied Sciences and its students. They aim to tackle the impending issue of population aging and the resulting pressure on the healthcare system. Their aim is to strengthen networks, local ecosystems and communities through learning: by organising events that involve knowledge sharing and participating in different collaborative programs.

Identity and status

An important part of the position of actors within the ecosystem and society in general is the role, identity and status they have. One example is **Warm Rotterdam**, an interest group and network for organisations involved in reducing poverty in Rotterdam. Their

activities include lobbying, creating networks of stakeholders and creating and sharing knowledge on poverty by involving experts with firsthand experience. Their political activities involve creating awareness on poverty and putting it on the political agenda. In their activist role, they are sometimes considered a thorn in the side of politicians and others. Their position means it can be difficult to find funding. Similarly, **Migration Inc.** has experienced difficulty in getting recognized as a knowledge provider and social innovator, feeling that they had to prove themselves as a reliable business partner until recently. Now they are in the process of becoming acknowledged in their role as social innovators, getting more opportunities to share their insights and collaborate with institutions such as municipalities.

"Smaller organisations that are close to society and communities are more innovative than larger organisations. When all organisations were closing their doors during covid-19, we started – together with some other organisations – a helpdesk for non-Dutch speakers in just two weeks. That is how we proved our innovativeness." - Migration Inc.

Importantly, social innovators go through different phases, and part of this is their relation to other actors and getting recognition for their efforts. Obtaining a sense of legitimacy and status is important for social innovators. Status is a sign of success in terms of becoming accepted or institutionalised as a social innovation (actor). However, as mentioned before, the position of social innovators within the system can also become an obstacle in finding funds or getting invited to participate in collaborations.

Energiesamen went through the process of becoming a system-recognised and arguably institutionalised actor; several of their lobbying efforts have resulted in new legal statuses (e.g. Energy communities) and incorporation of their ideas into policies (e.g. Heat act). Furthermore, they are invited to meetings with ministries and policymakers to share their point of view. In that regard, Energiesamen support the development of social initiatives to social innovations as new ways of local energy production and consumption are slowly developing from niche to accepted or common practice.

From these examples we can gather a sense of the diversity of actors and roles that exist within the ecosystem. In addition, there is a cultural and social dimension to the ecosystem.

Norms, culture and narratives

Bureaucracy, policies and regulations

In their aim to change common practices, bureaucracy and regulations are sometimes experienced as obstacles for social innovators. **Prins Heerlijk** tries to apply a holistic approach to the inclusion of troubled youth in the labour market. As their activities transcend different domains (education, healthcare, housing), they often run into the reality of fragmented and context-dependent regulations and bureaucracy, making it difficult for them to implement and scale their social innovations. For example, the creation of desired legal statuses – an important phase in the institutionalisation of social innovations – can be a struggle and needs long-term effort to achieve.

The fragmentation of the bureaucracy is an issue that is mentioned often by our cases. Government policies are structured in a way that compartmentalises social issues. Social innovators, however, do the opposite and often use a holistic approach which reflects the reality and complexity of social issues better. Furthermore, social innovation requires both long term commitment, investment and vision as well as flexibility and open mindedness - aspects that current bureaucratic systems and politics, according to our cases, often lack.

*“The government works and thinks sectoral. There seems to be a fundamental sluggishness and perhaps even apathy in the system, which is an obstacle for a comprehensive approach to societal challenges.” -
Butterfly Effect*

Even though regulations exist that should benefit social innovators and social impact, this does not always work out in practice:

*“Public procurement does not take into consideration societal value much as they should or are legally obliged too. This is an obstacle for social innovators, as they have to compete with other market actors on price [which is difficult].” - **FNO Zorg voor kansen***

Narratives and attitudes

Narratives surrounding social innovation are diverse and developing. Being a relatively new and continuously developed concept, definitions and interpretations of social innovation are diverse. Social innovation is not a well-known or accepted concept within the political arena nor for the general public. Social entrepreneurship – although growing steadily - is still a niche within the overall economy. That being said, awareness of the concept seems to increase and initiatives are increasingly identifying as social innovators, aided by the increased use of the concept by knowledge and government institutions.

Furthermore, more success stories and good practices of social innovation are being shared and communicated. **Torteltoin** actively share knowledge and stories by, for example, attending international conferences and participating in research. **Energiesamen** regularly receive visits from politicians and attend meetings with policymakers in which they can attract attention to their cause. Lastly, visibility of social innovation is aided by the existence of networks (e.g. SENL), funds (e.g. Oranjefonds, Stichting Doen) and government projects (e.g. NCC SI). However, the increasingly positive narratives around social innovation and social impact creates a potential danger: corporate capture and washing.

“As energy providers are taking over our language of locally produced energy, one of our biggest fears is corporate capture. The consumer cannot tell what is really energy produced by local cooperatives [and what is not] so we try to counter this with creating a legal standard [of what constitutes a cooperative energy community]”. - Energiesamen

Attitude and willingness to engage in social innovation is important. Based on our cases, the attitude of different government institutions varies from positive (interested, willing to engage and support social innovation) to negative (lethargic, rigid attitude towards social innovation). A positive example is the willingness of the city of Rotterdam in organising the **Burgerberaad Klimaat** (citizen assembly regarding climate). This being a relatively new method of democratic decision-making, several practical and bureaucratic difficulties were encountered and overcome in organising this event, such as dealing with privacy, compensation and randomly selecting and inviting citizens to participate. Another positive example is the willingness of individual public servants to engage and give opportunities to social innovators, the downside being this support lasts as long as these persons hold their position. **Warm Rotterdam**, being a network that engages in lobbying for the cause of poverty-reduction, has experienced this person-dependency. The willingness of politicians to engage with them often depends on their political affiliation or personal interest in their cause. Furthermore, Warm Rotterdam has experienced a lack of structural funding for their organisation as well as the social innovators in their network, resulting in an insecure future.

Norms, values and collective behaviour

An important aspect of social innovation is the questioning of norms and practices, either by holding other values or proposing alternatives to what they see as the negative effects of certain norms or practices in society. **Torteltoin** question the cultural norm of prioritising individual home ownership, instead proposing collective ownership.

"The housing cooperative movement is part of a larger social protest regarding the housing situation. Cooperative housing can be a solution for the current housing situation in the Netherlands. The biggest challenge is mobilising people [to think differently about cooperative housing]." - Torteluin

In similar fashion, **Herenboeren** try to reform the food system, emphasising the connection between people, nature, food production and consumption. By doing so, they question norms and practices of consumerism.

Several cases emphasise the importance of using a *people-oriented* approach. **FNO Zorg voor kansen** mention the importance of acknowledging the needs of the individuals behind the projects they fund, in terms of mental health or business support. Similarly, **Prins Heerlijk** and **Wij.land** start their projects from a demand perspective; by identifying the needs of their clients or beneficiaries.

"Everything Prins Heerlijk does started at the request of the young people involved. A problem or demand arises and we start from there." - Prins Heerlijk

Aiming for change

In regard to their goals and mission, we find that social innovators often have a clearly defined mission and goal in which they identify systemic problems and social challenges they wish to address. The solutions they look for relate to either cultural and behavioural change (norms, social practices, views), social change (relations, inequalities, power-dynamics) or systemic change (processes, structures). Their social innovations are often motivated by personal and professional experiences which led them to identify flaws or gaps in current systems. The founder of **Butterfly Effect** has first-hand experience of working in the healthcare system and finds it results in unequal power relations between healthcare professionals and clients. They aim to increase the autonomy of clients and strengthen communities of care:

"[Healthcare professionals] always think with their professional logic and this hinders equal collaboration [with volunteers]. How can we place residents at the core of our communities and have the healthcare

professionals as guests of the community [in contrast to current practices]?" - Butterfly Effect

Social innovators are guided by values such as ownership, community and co-creation. Certain principles such as fairness, equality and human-centredness can be seen as foundations in their mission and utopian vision. **Herenboeren** try to change ideas about agriculture towards a more holistic view on production, consumption and nature. Other values that drive our cases are: ownership (Torteltuinen, Energiesamen), solidarity and equality (Warm Rotterdam, Windunie), autonomy (Prins Heerlijk), community (Butterfly effect, Torteltuinen), inclusivity (Migration Inc, Prins Heerlijk, Stichting Stunt). Stichting Stunt call for a different perspective on value:

"We see worth in both people and materials that are not seen as valuable within the regular economy." - Stichting Stunt

Furthermore, cultural norms and common practices are questioned. These can also be experienced as obstacles in the vision of social innovators. Both **Energiesamen** and **Windunie** work towards local energy production and consumption. This is a vastly different take on the current energy system in which the transmission grid and distribution grids are monopolised and the generation and selling of electricity is liberalized with several large commercial companies having the biggest market share. They find that the already congested energy grid will have to provide four times the demand in the coming twenty years, should we continue using a centralized system. Therefore both Energiesamen en Windunie support a system of energy cooperatives in which energy is locally produced and consumed:

"We want to make locally produced green energy available and affordable for everyone. We go for as much local ownership [of the energy production] as possible". - Windunie

Social relations and power dynamics

Several of our cases display how social innovators question social relations and power structures, such as the relations between; professionals – clients (Butterfly Effect), consumers – producers (Herenboeren), owners – tenants (Torteltuyn), government – citizens (Burgerberaad Klimaat Rotterdam) and non-migrants – migrants (Migration Inc.). By doing so, they question the status quo and contribute to the empowerment of certain groups in society.

The social, cultural and economic status quo can also be experienced as obstacles by social innovators. As mentioned before, bureaucracy and government unwillingness to engage with social innovations can be obstacles. Economic competition is also an important factor. As social innovators put priority on social impact instead of profit and cost-reduction, this often results in a relatively less favourable market-position. Furthermore, they experience competition over resources, contracts, public procurement and the purchase of land or real estate.

Structures

In terms of relevant structures and systems that encompass the ecosystem, we have identified the following categories: government policies and programs, societal support, and funding and financial support.

Government policies and programs

In terms of policies and programs initiated by the Dutch government to accelerate (social) innovation there are several important ones:

- *Socially Responsible Contracting and Procurement policy (Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Opdrachtgeven en Inkopen, MVOI)*: the Dutch government has committed to minimise climate impact, improve working conditions, and stimulate a more inclusive labour market through procurement (Pieters et al., 2024). With this policy, the government wants to motivate the market to become more sustainable.
- *National program circular economy 2023-2030 (NPCE)*: a plan with the vision of the Netherlands becoming fully circular in 2050.
- *National program for a sustainable industry (NPVI)*: a program to accelerate the industry to become more sustainable faster.

Locally, there are many examples of government institutions actively involved in organizing or supporting social innovation. One example is the 'Rotterdam Impact Coalition'; a collaboration between the municipality of Rotterdam, Voor Goed Agency, Thrive Institute and Social Impact Fonds Rotterdam with the goal of strengthening the local ecosystem for social entrepreneurs and other social innovators.

Regionally, *City Deals* are a multi-level cooperation between the government, municipalities and (local) stakeholders, working on innovative solutions for social issues.¹⁶

On a national level, the collaborative project for creating a 'National Competence Centre for Social Innovation' brings together government, knowledge institutes and networks.

Societal support

Many societal support organizations exist in different forms:

- *Platforms and hubs.* One such organization is *CrowdBuilding*, a platform and helpdesk for housing cooperatives. Other examples of hubs or labs are *Stichting de Kleine Aarde*, *Future Society Lab* and *Social Impact Factory*; all places where social innovation is incentivized and stimulated through social meetings, networking and interactions between stakeholders. There is also the European network of living labs (ENoLL); open innovation ecosystems using co-creation around certain themes, with several members and partners in the Netherlands¹⁷.
- *Supportive collaborations;* collaborations exist between knowledge institutes and different stakeholders, such as *Project Quilt / Kwilt* and *Zorgalliantie*.
- *Networks* that play a supporting role such as Social Enterprise NL, EnergieSamen and Warm Rotterdam.

Funding and financial support

An important factor in realizing social innovation is funding and financing. Multiple funds and actors exist, both public and private. Different subsidies and funds are available for social innovators in various phases, including:

- *Invest-NL:* investments primarily for scaling up startups working on social transitions
- *Nationaal Groeifonds:* invests in projects that contribute to the sustainable growth of the Dutch economy

¹⁶ <https://www.rathenau.nl/en/digitalisering/innovating-societal-aims>

¹⁷ <https://enoll.org>

- *Klimaatfonds*: investing in measures contributing to achieving reduction targets from the Klimaatwet and supporting a transition towards a climate-neutral energy supplying economy and society, and a fair climate transition
- *Sociaal innovatiefonds*: helps employers invest in hiring employees who face barriers to the labour market
- *Subsidy Programme for Responsible Business*: aims to support companies and their local producers and suppliers in socially responsible business practices
- *RVO financing for innovation*: stimulates innovation through programs such as the WBSO subsidy
- *Social impact bonds*: a financing instrument where private funders invest in solving a social issue, with government repayment dependent on performance
- *Regionale Ontwikkelings Maatschappijen (ROMs)*: organisations strengthen regional economies through allowing entrepreneurs to innovate, invest and internationalize

Beyond public financing instruments, many private organizations within the social innovation ecosystem offer various types of financing. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but some key organizations include:

- *Social Finance NL*: offers advice in measuring and quantifying impact to show the value of organizations as well as helping with receiving funding, for example through impact bonds.
- *Start Foundation*: invests in organizations working toward a just and inclusive labor market
- *Social impact fonds Rotterdam*: a place-based impact investing fund investing to make social impact, primarily focused on employment and labour market inclusion
- *Rubio Impact Ventures*: an impact fund investing in enterprises creating solutions for circular solutions, empowering people, and healthy food, agriculture and health systems
- *Stichting DOEN*: a foundation supporting organizations focused on systemic transitions toward circular economies and inclusive societies.
- *Oranje Fonds*: provides funding, knowledge, and networking opportunities for organizations working toward social inclusion.
- *Anton Jürgen Fonds*: supporting initiatives helping people in vulnerable situations with (financial) support.
- *Goldschmeding Foundation*: supports organizations that work on a more inclusive labor market, future resilient work, and a humane economy.

- *Code V*: an organisation promoting female entrepreneurship by making financing more inclusive and accessible through gaining insights, intervening and investing.

Functions and mechanisms

Functions and mechanisms encompass the practices, processes and methods of social innovation. We distinguish the different themes of knowledge and impact, methods for social innovation and governance of social innovation as the most relevant within the ecosystem.

Knowledge & Impact

A positive factor is the fact that many transition thinkers, experts and organisations are involved with the topic of social innovation in the Netherlands, working on developing the concept further and creating knowledge of the phenomenon. Multiple tools and instruments are available, such as the biennial 'Social Enterprise Monitor' by Social Enterprise NL¹⁸, and maps such as the 'Impactkaart' which offers a regional overview of different impact actors¹⁹. Many more of these maps exist, serving different purposes and audiences, helping to increase the visibility of social innovators and share good practices.

Knowledge on impact, measurement and management is steadily growing, involving knowledge institutes and many different societal stakeholders. In the process of knowledge sharing, however, there are still needs within particular themes such as increasing the practical know-how for social innovators when it comes to applying for funding, financing and subsidies. In addition to addressing knowledge for innovators, it is important to acknowledge the knowledge needed for funders and governments to understand and support social innovation and its process and challenges in terms of scaling, funding and implementation.

Increasingly, importance is put on impact measurement. However, it remains a challenge in practice, as well as contested conceptually. It is uncertain to which extent impact can be measured, and what role this should play in funding social innovation. Providing measured impact is becoming common practice and is often required in order to receive funds and subsidies. However, impact measurement remains a challenge for social innovators as it requires a lot of resources. For this reason, especially smaller social innovators happily collaborate with knowledge institutes to measure their impact. Impact measurement is also used in the (internal) learning process of social innovations; to evaluate their organisation, to assess stakeholder and community involvement, to create and share knowledge and as part of their branding.

¹⁸ <https://social-enterprise.nl/en/nieuws/social-enterprise-monitor-2024/>

¹⁹ <https://impactkaart.nl/>

Measuring impact comes with some inherent challenges. The impact of social innovation often needs longer periods of time to become visible or assessable. Furthermore, not all kinds of impact are easily quantified or measured, such as social-cultural change or the way one social innovation paves the way for another. That being said, new methods for impact measurement are being developed and used, giving social innovators and funders an instrument to aid their decision-making and better understand and communicate their progress and impact. Whether the tendency to measure impact is a good development remains a contested topic.

Methods for social innovation

Within the process of social innovation, different methods are being used, of which several stand out:

- *Co-creation and other participatory methods* involving stakeholders and beneficiaries in the process of social innovation and identification of problems.
- *Organisational models* such as cooperatives and steward-owned companies bring a renewed view on ownership, responsibility and decision-making, involving community and stakeholders.
- *Learning processes and feedback loops* involving stakeholders, community and networks in the evaluation and development of social innovation.
- *Collaborations* between different stakeholders and sectors is becoming more common, often organised around a shared goal or topic.
- *Ecosystem-thinking* is becoming an increasingly popular perspective, taking a relational view on social innovation and emphasizing its collective nature.

Governance and political sphere

Another factor that influences social innovators is practices of governance and the political sphere. We find that the short-termism of politics, lack of long-term vision and the lack of continuity of policies are obstacles for social innovation.

"As politics is often about issues of the day, you want to make [your goals as social innovators] a-political and long-term. The biggest obstacle is [...] the short-termism and quick fixes [instead of long-term solutions]" -

Energiesamen

4.3. Conditions for social innovation

In addition to the different dimensions of the ecosystem, it is important to mention the necessary conditions for social innovators in order to thrive.

Importance of trust and commitment

Several cases mention the importance of *trust*, both for the process of social innovation as well as in their network and collaborations. Equally, trust by funders and government institutions in social innovators is important. **Wij.land** mention the importance of building trust with their stakeholders:

“The trust that nature organisations, government institutions and especially farmers give us makes it possible to create impact. In order to receive that amount of trust, it is important to communicate clearly about what is possible and what is not, as well as responding quickly to the needs of our stakeholders.” - Wij.land

In similar fashion, **Migration Inc.** mention that trust and reputation as a reliable knowledge partner and social innovator is to be earned. For them, the Covid-19 crisis served as an opportunity to build a trustworthy reputation as social innovators.

“Nowadays, we get to give feedback on policy documents from the government. Finally, organisations and ministries see the added value of involving migrant organisations in this process.” - Migration Inc.

Within collaborations, networks and the ecosystem as whole, trust seems to be an important condition as well as a factor for success.

Importance of momenta

Several cases mention the importance of crises in their success. Crises function as windows of opportunity for social innovators, as the flaws or shortcoming of existing systems become apparent. For **Energiesamen**, this was the energy crisis (2021 – 2023):

*“In the end, you need a crisis in order to really change things” -
Energiesamen*

Other crises such as the housing crisis (2019 – onward), the Nitrogen crisis (stikstofcrisis, 2019 – onward) and the COVID-19 crisis (2020 – 2022) are mentioned by our cases as important momenta for the relevance and development of their social innovations, as well as opportunities for their organisations to distinguish themselves as social innovators and obtain a certain stature.

Fitting the system

Social innovators can have different statuses (e.g. unrecognized, accepted, institutionalised), reputations (e.g. idealists, activists, radicals), identities and roles. Therefore, the extent to which they fit existing systems and how they relate to other actors is a factor in their success.

*“Once you are included in legislation you are taken seriously [by other actors]. We are being invited and heard more [than before], members of parliament come over to visit us. We are getting more recognition” –
Energiesamen.*

However, as social innovators are, in a sense, disrupters of systems and institutions, herein lies a paradox. On the one hand, the institutionalisation and common acceptance of social innovations is considered a success. On the other hand, in order to achieve this, you need a degree of collaboration and compatibility with these systems and institutions. In order to collaborate, you have to reach a level of acceptance and trustworthiness, convincing others of the value of your social innovation. This also applies to applying for funding and subsidies. In that sense, fitting the system – becoming acknowledged, trusted and accepted - is required for social innovators to succeed.

Favourable political climate

Political climate is often mentioned by our cases, citing the current cabinet as unfavourable to their values and fearing the development of certain policies that can hurt their efforts or their beneficiaries. However, in terms of direct impact on the work of social innovators, political climate is just one of many factors. Although a favourable political climate is helpful, it is not a necessity for social innovation. However, continuously adapting to bureaucratic reality is challenging for social innovators who prefer continuity and long-term policies.

Cohesive ecosystem

Thinking in terms of ecosystems – or even identifying as social innovators – is relatively recent and this research adds to the formation of this identity and perhaps sense of community for some social innovators. That being said, the contours of a loosely cohesive ecosystem are visible and our cases mention the importance of the social aspects of social innovation; networks, collaboration and community. A growing awareness of shared goals, values and challenges will strengthen the idea of being part of an ecosystem.

4.4. Strengths, challenges and opportunities of the ecosystem

To sum up, the different dimensions reveal several strengths, challenges, and opportunities of the ecosystem.

High level of collaboration

Due to the highly networked and organized nature of Dutch society, collaborations around shared goals and values are common. As such, many collaborations can be found that either support social innovation or can be categorized as social innovations themselves. Examples of these new forms of collaboration involving different institutions, public and/or private actors are **Kansrijke Start** and **Zorgalliantie**. In addition, many coalitions exist for the purpose of lobbying, and social innovators often join these groups with shared political goals.

Availability of capital

There are many structures and actors supporting social innovation either directly or indirectly, through funding or otherwise supporting social innovators. In addition, financial capital is widely available, and social impact is increasingly acknowledged as an acceptable and valuable investment. Furthermore, different financial instruments, such as social impact bonds and Place-Based Impact Investment (PBII), are available and becoming more commonly used.

However, from the experiences of our cases we get a sense of the importance of financial, cultural, social and political capital in succeeding as social innovations. This involves practical know-how and social relations in obtaining the necessary resources in different phases of social innovation. On the one hand, these forms of capital are gained over time. On the other hand, they are conditions to succeed as social innovators. Although all our cases are successful examples of social innovation actors, some seem to have more success in certain areas than others, such as finding funding, scaling social innovations, or becoming institutionalized. Several cases mention the difficulty of obtaining funds and long-term investment or subsidies, describing the financial sector as still prioritizing return on investment and not serving the needs of social innovators. Equally, public funding is often fragmented in a way that hinders social innovators, having to navigate the bureaucratic system for funds. The challenge

for both private and public funding is acknowledging the diversity of actors that pursue social innovation and making funds available for different kinds of impact, including impact that is long-term or difficult to quantify. It should also take into account that social innovators often have to compete economically with actors that prioritize profit. Most importantly, funding should fit the needs of social innovators, in terms of flexibility, commitment and trust.

Governance & legislation

As mentioned earlier (4.2.3.), many government institutions exist that function as structures within the ecosystem, including municipalities, ministries, programs, and collaborations. In terms of legislation, social innovation is not often mentioned specifically. This is despite several advisory reports presented to the government, advising on ways to stimulate social entrepreneurship and social innovation^{20 21}. That being said, there is a growing attention and awareness about social innovation, as shown by the involvement of the ministry of social affairs and employment in the NCC project as well as other municipalities and knowledge institutes involved in different projects and collaborations. Another important factor is the promotion of social objectives through social public procurement. Social Return on Investment (SROI) has become standard policy (Huisjes, 2025). However, in practice many of our cases still feel there is unfair or harsh competition with established economic and profit-oriented actors within this process.

Although there seems to be an increased awareness and acknowledgement of social innovation by governments on different levels, a sense of unpredictability of politics and policies remains, as was mentioned by our cases. They often feel politics lack the long-term vision necessary for social innovation and social impact.

Acknowledgement & good practices

Increasingly, examples of successful social innovators are becoming known and good practices are being shared. This creates a higher awareness in society of existing social innovations and realized social impact, as well as inspiration or blueprints for new social innovators. Increased impact measurement, new communication strategies, and successful branding all aid this development.

Sustainable success & scaling

20 AWT, 2014. [Advies: De kracht van sociale innovatie](#) | Advies | Adviesraad voor wetenschap, technologie en innovatie

21 OECD, 2019. [Boosting social entrepreneurship and social enterprise development in the Netherlands](#) | OECD

As the impact of social innovation is becoming more acknowledged, there is a creeping danger of "impact washing" and corporate capture, meaning; the positive connotation of social innovation can be used for other purposes than creating social impact. At the moment, there are no criteria or legal statuses to keep this in check.

Increased attention to the potential of scaling and diffusion of social innovations is a positive aspect of the ecosystem. However, scaling has some inherent challenges, which were mentioned by our cases. First of all, scaling is not always possible. Social innovations often arise from the need in a particular context and as a result of the involvement of local stakeholders and community, as well as local collaborations. As such, it is not always possible to make a blueprint that would work in another context. Secondly, scaling is not always desirable, depending on the case, its stage of development, and the nature of the social innovation and organisation. Growing as an organisation has an effect on internal processes.

"[Scaling] is always a dilemma. How large do you want to become [as an organisation]? How we work [currently] - with 120 employers - has a lot of advantages. If that number would increase, we would become a different kind of organisation. At the same time, we want to help as many young people as possible." - Prins Heerlijk

Another example of the challenges that scaling brings are experienced by **Wij.land**, who like to work intuitively, starting from the individual needs of farmers. However, as they have grown as an organisation, they are required to work in a more planned manner, through projects and programs, in order to receive funding. Thirdly, even when scaling is actively pursued, it comes with challenges and obstacles, requiring resources and different kinds of capital. Although **Herenboeren** are steadily growing and are starting new farms every year, they experience financial and economic obstacles:

"As every farm starts unprofitable, hybrid financing is needed [combining] our collective income and loans. [In addition] our biggest obstacle [for scaling] is the acquisition of land" - Herenboeren

Fourthly, in some cases, scaling is expected or required of social innovations. This has been the experience of **Kairos College** who are required by law to grow into a bigger school over the next few years.

“The law for new schools makes a lot possible. [However], it requires us to grow quickly, and this is not good for the stability of an organisation and the quality of education [...]. We want to grow slowly [...]. We started out as an initiative of parents, citizens; how do you maintain their sense of ownership?” - Kairos College

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, successful example of scaling can be found. One way of scaling is providing lessons learned, sharing good practices and further developing social innovations through knowledge exchange. The **All-in** program is an example of developing and sharing knowledge that was gained during the process of their project. Several challenges were overcome, and lessons were learned in achieving an inclusive selection process in funding promising projects:

“I am currently working with the Municipality of Amsterdam, to give advice on co-creation of a social impact fund. So everything [we learned from the All-in program] is now applied on a bigger scale. Essentially, [the All-in program] served as an experiment and good practice [for co-creation and supporting social entrepreneurs]. It has been very valuable to have first done that at Social Enterprise NL and at a smaller scale.” - All-in program

Similarly, **Burgerberaad Klimaat Rotterdam** has added to knowledge on organising citizen assemblies, as they evaluated the process and results of their citizen assembly and subsequent social and political effect²². In that sense, it can serve as a good practice for future citizen assemblies.

Social innovation as a work in progress

It is important to acknowledge the fact that social innovation is still very much in development. As a growing sector or movement it forms a loosely cohesive ecosystem, consisting of different branches growing together and separately. As a concept, practice and phenomenon it is continuously developing with different meanings and interpretations attached to it. For an ecosystem of social innovation it is important to have some shared understanding of what social innovation entails and at the same time it should leave space for this development and diversity of interpretations. Most

²² Rapportages | Evaluatie van het Rotterdams Burgerberaad Klimaat | Onderzoek010

important is a common awareness of the shared needs of social innovators. Although many networks and collaborations are already in place, a higher degree of cohesiveness and shared goals within the ecosystem is recommended. Furthermore, *strategic thinking* about social innovation is still early days, with most of the incentives coming from the European level and topics such as standardisation or a national strategy for social innovation have yet to be considered.

5. Conclusion

Social innovation is carried out by a wide array of different actors such as citizen initiatives, public and non-profit organizations, government and knowledge institutions, private actors and collaborations between these groups. Social innovators are involved in social, cultural, political, economic, financial and knowledge-creating activities, contributing to new practices, processes and social relations. For this, they use – as for instance the cases described in this report show – a wide array of organisational models, methods and processes that evolve around collaboration, co-creation, knowledge sharing and holistic- and people-oriented approaches. They provide services, products and knowledge aimed at social and environmental impact. Furthermore, they create networks and coalitions with shared goals of social impact and values such as ownership, community, equality and sustainability. Collaboration and knowledge sharing is common practice amongst social innovators and networking and community play essential parts in their success.

Thinking in terms of ecosystems is a relatively new approach and development. That being said, many structures, collaborations and networks that constitute part of a successful ecosystem exist in the Dutch context; these form a loosely cohesive ecosystem, based on shared goals, interests and values. It reflects the high level of organization as well as the consensus-based decision-making practices and stakeholder involvement in policy-making (poldermodel) that typifies the Netherlands. Collaboration between knowledge institutions, local, regional and national governments, the (semi-) public and private sector is common and widespread, with ever developing new coalitions and alliances. These are often politically active through lobbying or otherwise influencing policymaking, representing various interests and goals.

Within this relatively rich but also fragmented and complex context, social innovators must navigate existing bureaucratic and institutional structures, as well as position themselves within the economic, social and political landscape. In that sense, social innovators both compete and collaborate with established social, economic and political actors. However, as is the disruptive nature of social innovation, social innovators question cultural norms, common practices and social relations and this can create tensions or conflicts of interest with these established actors and institutions.

The bureaucratic, regulated and organized context of the Netherlands, as well as the culture of networking and collaboration, can be both a blessing and a curse for social innovators. Navigating this context requires a certain level of social and cultural capital and resources, which are not equally distributed among social innovators. Furthermore, due to the disruptive nature of social innovation, trying something new in such a context means dealing with fragmented and rigid policies, regulations and

practices such as subsidies and criteria for funding and finance that have yet to adapt to the needs of social innovators.

In terms of strengthening the ecosystem, three points stand out:

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that social innovation is still very much in development. As a growing sector or movement, it forms a loosely cohesive ecosystem, consisting of different branches growing together and separately. It consists of a wide array of actors, perspectives and ideals. Although some shared understanding of what social innovation entails is important, at the same time it should be open for a diversity of opinions and actors.

Secondly, it is important to increase the *understanding within the ecosystem*; amongst social innovators and actors that support social innovation through governance, funding or otherwise. Knowing each other's perspectives, interests, logics and challenges can improve the dynamic and collaboration within the ecosystem. Social innovators are a heterogeneous group, and the ecosystem consists of many different roles. Although collaboration over shared goals and values are common, actors will always have their own interests and perspectives. Acknowledging this political dimension of social innovation creates a more realistic understanding of the ecosystem, how it functions and how it can support social innovators.

Thirdly, strategic thinking about social innovation is still early days, with most of the incentives coming from the European level and topics such as standardisation or a national strategy for social innovation have yet to be considered in the Netherlands. Although countries have implemented or considered national strategies, these have not led to any convincing outcomes.

Governing and stimulating social innovation through the National Competence Centre (NCC) has to take into account the following. The NCC should fit the needs and wishes of social innovators, involving them in decision-making and the support that is offered. It should take into account the diversity of social innovators and their values, perspectives and needs. Strategically, the NCC could be involved in communication on social innovation within the ecosystem and outside it, as well as organising events to strengthen its cohesion. Most importantly, the NCC could stimulate mutual understanding within the ecosystem as well as inclusivity for different social innovators.

6. Recommendations & Reflection

6.1. Policy recommendations

“Nothing is more powerful than a strong ecosystem” - Butterfly Effect

Even though limitations in data availability hinder drawing an accurate picture on the size and scope of social innovation in the Netherlands, it is clear that a substantial number of initiatives emerge. From our research and conversations with social innovators it appears that strategic thinking about social innovation, as well as thinking in terms of ecosystems for social innovation, is still in its early stages. At this point, attention should be given to creating *mutual understanding within the ecosystem* - amongst social innovators and actors that support social innovation. This includes awareness of the needs, challenges, resources and goals of social innovators and other actors within the ecosystem. Acknowledging the societal roots of social innovation and the wide range of actors and stakeholders involved in the process, the ecosystem should be inclusive and accessible. Also, it should allow and stimulate healthy discussion on the meaning of social innovation and what it requires. In terms of the needs of social innovators, these should be heard through the process of co-creation and feedback, leading to an iterative process of policy-making and implementation. This might require social innovation in itself; new ways of collaboration between institutions, public and private actors, civil society and citizen initiatives.

How and to which degree social innovation can or should be governed, is open for debate. Governance, rules and regulations are factors in the success of social innovations. At the same time, freedom, time and space are essential to its process. Governing successfully most likely comes down to an open and inclusive process which includes the participation of social innovators in all its diversity. The fragmentation, complexity and unpredictability of policies and bureaucracy is an often-mentioned obstacle.

“Social innovation is about people, [...] you cannot direct [or control] something like that.” - Herenboeren

The ways in which social innovation can be better supported and stimulated are still to be explored and researched. Funding and financial support seem obvious, and this in the Netherlands fairly accessible and available for social innovation in different stages and sectors. However, social innovation does not always require (large amounts of) resources. It requires energy, motivation and the involvement of community and stakeholders. The easier it is to navigate, for example, bureaucratic systems, the more energy and resources remains for social innovation. In terms of visibility and awareness of social innovation and the issues that have to be tackled, the NCC could play a role (see 6.2.).

6.2 NCC recommendations

Based on the input of our cases and workshops there is no consensus among participants on what a NCC should look like in terms of its role, form or activities. However, in general, the need is expressed for a NCC that aligns with the following criteria:

- The NCC should build on existing structures and incorporate existing organisations, networks and institutions as much as possible. Bringing together these structures and actors on a national level is one of the possible tasks for the NCC.
- The NCC should have a degree of independence in the sense that it should be flexible, adaptable and able to address the needs of social innovators.
- The NCC should not be an enforcer of top-down policies that would define or limit social innovation but rather ensure a healthy and inclusive ecosystem.
- Methods of co-creation and participation are recommended; involvement of stakeholders, the acknowledgment of different perspectives, opinions and types of social innovation (actors).

In terms of the role that NCC should play within the ecosystem, we find that:

- The NCC should stimulate trust, commitment and freedom to experiment as these are important conditions for social innovators.
- The NCC should increase the understanding within the ecosystem.
- The NCC should bring together existing structures, coalitions and networks as well as involving actors from 'outside' the ecosystem.
- The NCC should communicate about, and create awareness of, social innovation within society. It could showcase the added value of social innovation, share good practices and create positive narratives around social innovation. Communication within the ecosystem is also important.
- The NCC should be involved in national and international knowledge exchange concerning social innovation.

In terms of supporting social innovators, the NCC could:

- Provide knowledge and training on funding, regulations, procurement, etcetera, for both social innovators as well as government institutions and funders.
- Stimulate further research on social innovation and its ecosystem.
- Organise social and knowledge events, stimulating a sense of community and shared goals and values.
- Provide financial support, allocating national and European funds.
- Be a one-stop-shop for social innovators, bringing together already available knowledge, maps, platforms and so on. It could make information available and easily accessible for (new) social innovators.

In terms of form, the NCC could be:

- A physical place that allows for social gatherings or a hub, lab or one-stop-shop.
- A digital place, like website, platform, helpdesk, map, etc. that makes that facilitates connections to various physical places in the country.

Finally, the NCC could play a role in a strategic approach to social innovation, through policymaking, lobbying, coordinating projects or otherwise.

6.3. Reflections

Based on the results of this mapping study, several questions arise that are relevant for the further trajectory towards setting up a Dutch NCC for social innovation:

- What should the main purpose of a NCC be?
- Who 'owns' the NCC, in terms of decision-making on activities, support and strategies?
- To what extent can methods of co-creation and stakeholder involvement be applied?
- Should the NCC play a role in 'empowering' social innovators lacking the required resources and capital?
- To what extent can a mostly bottom-up phenomenon, such as social innovation, be effectively governed without signalling a top-down perspective?

Furthermore, this mapping study brings up questions of an epistemological nature:

- As social innovations go through many stages, what can be considered as socially innovative and what criteria do we use?
- How do we categorize and assess social innovation and what do we consider to be a success or good practice?

Finally, it should be acknowledged that researching social innovation may affect the phenomenon itself. By defining, categorising and analysing social innovation, this study

may influence the way social innovation is perceived and developed further. As social innovation is an emerging field, it is important to be aware of any biases or tunnel visions that steer its development in a specific direction, rather than acknowledging its diversity (Beckman et al. 2023).

Acknowledgements

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Appendix I: Methodology

A1.1. Mapping approach

Our definition of social innovation allowed for the inclusion of broad variety of social innovators and support actors. By collecting qualitative data, we aimed at developing an understanding of these initiatives, their needs and challenges, as well as the ecosystem as a whole. For this we used several methods:

- *Case studies and interviews*

Pelka & Terstriep (2016) find that “the prevailing instrument of collecting data for mapping social innovations is the case study, making qualitative research the dominant approach” (12). Similarly to other mapping studies, we have used case studies in combination with interviews about said cases. As the goal was to create an overview and understanding of social innovations and the ecosystem, this serves the purpose of understanding both the subjective experience of social innovators as well as the observable aspects of the ecosystem in which they reside. We conducted the interviews in a semi-structured manner, which allows for follow-up questions and an iterative approach to data collection and analysis through coding.

In selecting our cases, we aimed for diversity in terms of transition and goals, type, scale and phase of development (with all initiatives active for at least some years and with some degree of success). Furthermore, we have taken into account location, gender and migration background as these aspects are often overlooked in research. In the end, we were able to achieve a sufficient level of diversity on these aspects.

- *Literature review and desk research*

The literature review has been done with the purpose of understanding the current academic debate and insights on social innovation. It serves not as a comprehensive overview of the literature, but rather to gain insights on social innovation as a phenomenon and finding the right research methods, avoiding biases and pitfalls.

- *Four dimensions of social innovation model*

For the purposes of understanding the social innovation ecosystem, we have used the “onion model” or four dimensions of social innovation as used by Bauer et al (2022). This model consists of structures, norms, function/mechanisms, and actors/roles.

- *SWOT analysis & workshops*

We have used the method of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, applying it in three workshops consisting of experts in the field of, or closely to, social innovation. Through this we have been able to identify commonly perceived challenges and opportunities of the ecosystem as well as conflicting opinions on certain aspects.

A1.2. Case study selection and analysis

Social innovation suffers from “silos” and (academic) fragmentation, where different disciplines use the concept in different ways and develop it in different directions (Beckman et al, 2023). For our mapping study we wanted to be aware of any dominant paradigms or framing of social innovation in the Netherlands and to what extent these influence our mapping endeavours through bias, wishful thinking or the interests of certain actors. As mentioned before, any typologies and classifications of social innovation depend on the focus of the mapping study. As our goal is to gain insight into the ecosystem of social innovation in the Netherlands, and its strengths and weaknesses, we strived for a varied selection of cases that allow for diversity in terms of:

- Type of social innovation (community-based, top-down, collaborations, social entrepreneurs, etc)
- Scale of the social innovation (local, regional, national)
- Phase (starting, established/institutionalized, etc)
- Transition and societal problem they address

It has to be acknowledged that all cases have been active for at least some years and with some degree of stability and success. In addition, we analysed these cases, through coding, in terms of:

- Methods and process of social innovation
- Mission, goals and values: what is their vision of a better society or a solved social problem?
- Roles and activities: what activities are these cases involved in and how does this relate to the social innovation ecosystem?
- Perceived obstacles, challenges, needs and support
- Funding, financing and business-model
- Impact (measurement)

A1.3. Research limitations

Due to limited scope of this research, it is best regarded as an explorative effort to understand the state of play of social innovation in the Netherlands, its ecosystem and the most important factors for social innovators. Although selection of the cases has been done with diversity in mind, it still reflects the experiences of relatively successful initiatives based on a small sample of the many social innovators active in the Netherlands.

Appendix 2: Overview and description of cases



Local	Regional	National
1: Stichting Stunt: Delft	6: Wij.Land: De Westerse veengebieden (Western Peat Meadow Areas)	10: Energiesamen
2: Torteltuin: Amsterdam		11: Windunie
3: Kairos college: Amsterdam	7: Butterfly Effect: 15 communities including 's-Hertogenbosch, Amersfoort and Nijmegen	12: Herenboeren
4: Warm Rotterdam: Rotterdam		13: Crowdbuilding
5: Burgerberaad Klimaat Rotterdam: Rotterdam	8: Prins Heerlijk: Amsterdam, Tilburg and Sassenheim	14: FNO Zorg Voor Kansen
		15: Migration Inc
	9: Zorgalliantie: Gelderland, Noord-Brabant, Noord-Limburg	16: Kansrijke Start
		17: All-In Programma

Energy transition

A2.1. Energiesamen



Transition: Energy

Contribution: They serve as the national umbrella organization for energy cooperations in the Netherlands. Their mission is to ensure that everyone can participate in and benefit from a green, stable and affordable energy supply.

Type: National cooperative network and advocacy body

Scale: National, with 700 energy cooperatives as members throughout the Netherlands

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Supports and connects energy cooperatives; Offers practical training, webinars, and toolkits to cooperatives; Advocates for citizen energy at the national level; Coordinates innovation and pilots for new energy solutions

Target groups / beneficiaries: Citizens and communities involved in cooperatives; Policy makers

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Advocate for energy systems where citizens have control and ownership; Offers support for these energy cooperations and through them drive innovative approaches to energy challenges

A2.2. Windunie



Transition: Energy

Contribution: Active for more than 20 years in the Dutch renewable energy sector and provide support from concept to operation for new wind and solar parks. They also focus on integrating production and consumption of green energy. They work on connecting energy supply and demand locally, making green energy locally available and affordable, striving for 90% local ownership

Type: Cooperative organization

Scale: National (involved in supplying electricity to approximately 3 million households)

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: *Wind Energy:* Participation in about 50% of Dutch onshore wind projects, with plans to engage in offshore wind projects. They are specialists in developing and operating wind farms; *Solar Energy:* Development of solar parks, including combined wind-solar projects and innovative solutions for energy conversion and storage; *Energy Systems:* Creation of smart energy systems to address grid congestion and volatile energy prices, promoting local solutions

Target groups / beneficiaries: Landowners, energy providers, policy makers, local communities and small and medium-sized enterprises

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: A connector, bringing together various stakeholders, such as citizens, companies and social parties to collaboratively develop sustainable energy solutions; Developing smart and community-based systems that align energy production with local consumption needs.

Raw materials and circular transition

A2.3. Stichting Stunt



Transition: Raw materials and circular

Contribution: It contributes to social reintegration, personal development, and the circular economy, using a learn-work organization model (leerwerkbedrijf) to create ecological, social, and economical value

Type: Foundation and Public Benefit Organization

Scale: Local, active in Delft

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Runs a learn-work organization where participants gain hands-on skills in meaningful jobs; Focuses on sustainable production, reusing materials and promoting circular practices; Organizes community events and partnerships with local actors.

Target groups / beneficiaries: People on social assistance, limited formal education and who are long-term unemployed; Young adults and volunteers

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Models circular entrepreneurship, turning waste into value working with local waste streams; Creates employment opportunities and inclusive workspaces that build confidence and employability

Agricultural and food transition

A2.4. Herenboeren



Transition: Agricultural and food

Contribution: By establishing cooperative farms, they empower communities to take control of their food production, recovering their connection with nature, emphasizing the principles of the farms being nature driven, socially connected, and economically self-sufficient.

Type: Foundation

Scale: National, 23 farms with over 9000 'Herenboeren' (farmers). 35 groups are working on creating new farms

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: They support cooperative Herenboeren farms where members invest in and co-manage farms. They organize meetings, workshops and open days to encourage member participation and education. The farms are nature driven, working on increasing soil and water quality, increasing biodiversity, and empowering nature. The foundation Herenboeren spreads knowledge on setting up these farms, support farmers, work on access to land, and do advocacy work for sustainable food production and agriculture

Target groups / beneficiaries: Individuals and families seeking sustainable, locally-produced food; farmers looking to engage in agriculture within a supportive, cooperative framework

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Herenboeren Nederland redefine food production through cooperative ownership and ecological practices. Herenboeren facilitates and empowers the movement of Herenboeren

A2.5. Wij.Land



Transition: Agricultural and food

Contribution: Working toward a future-proof landscape that delivers ecological, economic, and social value for future generations. By creating a learning network together with farmers, nature organizations, municipalities, provinces, scientists, water boards, and entrepreneurs.

Type: Foundation and Public Benefit Organization

Scale: Regional: Western Peat meadow areas (veenweidegebied) around Amsterdam and Utrecht

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Focus on four values, namely; social value, natural value, financial value and inspiration; They are committed to conduct projects in the peat meadows area for at least 20 years that pursues landscape restoration. Projects that run directly fulfill the needs of farmers from the network; they also finance projects of farmers and entrepreneurs working on future-proof landscapes

Target groups / beneficiaries: Farmers interested in transitioning to regenerative practices through resources, training, and community support; Policy makers

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: network, supportive partner of farmers, funder

Spatial transition

A2.6. Butterfly effect



Transition: Spatial

Contribution: Helps strengthening “bruisende gemeenschappen” (vibrant communities) through educating community members to become “buurtverbinders” (community connectors), who are intrinsically motivated community members that want to contribute to the community with their talents. Living in a vibrant community enhances social cohesion, well-being of residents, and quality of life in neighborhoods, and decreases loneliness and individual dependence of (health care) professionals. Butterfly Effect works with residents, housing corporations, care organizations and municipalities.

Type: Social enterprise

Scale: Regional: spread across regions (active in 15+ communities across the Netherlands, which include 's-Hertogenbosch, Amersfoort and Nijmegen)

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: They activate and train community connectors who activate resident involvement

Target groups / beneficiaries: Residents, vulnerable groups, professionals and housing corporations and care providers

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Catalyst for social cohesion in residential areas; Bridges formal institutions (care/housing) with informal resident networks; Creating innovative community roles like community connectors to promote local ownership and inclusion

A2.7. De Torteltuyn



Transition: Spatial

Contribution: A housing cooperative in Amsterdam offering an alternative to market-driven housing by collectively building and managing the house, fixing low, stable rents; Promotes affordable, sustainable, and socially connected living; There is also a solidarity principle investing in new housing cooperatives once loans are paid back, working on a movement of new forms of living.

Type: Cooperative

Scale: Local: Centrum-eiland, IJburg, in Amsterdam

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: The residents designed their future home together and also manage it together; They focused on an energy-neutral, climate-resilient, and nature/social inclusive building and shared spaces and community-based living models; They ran a community investment campaign via bonds and donations and created a parallel foundation to protect public investment and ensure transparency

Target groups / beneficiaries: Residents looking for affordable, socially connected, and sustainable housing

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Offers a bottom-up, community-led housing alternative; Part of Amsterdam's broader "Actieplan Wooncoöperaties", aiming for 40,000 cooperative homes by 2040; engaged in (international) knowledge exchange

A2.8. Crowdbuilding



Transition: Spatial

Contribution: CrowdBuilding aims to radically transform housing by making it more sustainable, social, and affordable. Their mission is to grow the collective self-build movement in the Netherlands

Type: Platform, Steward-owned company

Scale: National: involved in cities such as Amsterdam, 's-Hertogenbosch and Delft)

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Working on a full ecosystem for initiating, planning, and building housing cooperatives or communities: Matching individuals and forming groups; Access to building plots and co-design frameworks; Financing tools (info on subsidies, loans, crowdfunding); Legal advice and governance support; building digital platforms for municipalities offering building sites.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Individuals, families, and groups who: Want to live sustainably and affordably; Seek more control over how and where they live; Value community living and collective ownership. They also can target and benefit professionals and municipalities looking for innovative housing partnerships

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Supports housing (starting) cooperatives. Enables citizen-led housing development in line with social values (affordability, participation, sustainability); Challenging market-dominated housing models

Financial and economic transition

A2.9. Warm Rotterdam



Transition: Financial and economic

Contribution: Work with a network of persons with lived experiences, informal and formal partners from the municipality of Rotterdam and organizations to raise awareness on poverty and debt.

Type: Network and advocacy body

Scale: Local: focuses on Rotterdam

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Giving a voice to persons with lived experiences, create and share knowledge on poverty and debt, influencing policy to be more effective, created the “Deltaplan Armoede en Schulden” (Deltaplan Poverty and Debt) as an integrated approach to poverty based on knowledge, ideas, experiences and recommendations from experts by experience and the rest of the network.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Individuals experiencing poverty and debts in Rotterdam; Experts, companies, institutions and organizations; Politicians to influence policies and instruments to tackle poverty and debt problems

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Warm Rotterdam serves as a network for collaborative efforts, bringing together diverse stakeholders to develop and implement innovative solutions to poverty

A2.10. FNO Zorg Voor Kansen



Transition: Financial and economic

Contribution: FNO works with, by, and for people in vulnerable positions on increasing health, quality of life and future prospects through long-term programs. The programs are set up from perspectives of what is needed for society, setting future goals of what should be changed, also leaving room for adjusting the activities with what is happening in society, possibly extending programs or handing them over to other parties.

Type: Social asset fund

Scale: National

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: *Ruimte voor Geestkracht*: Promotes sustainable mental health systems for young adults; *Impact door Groei*: Encourages participation of vulnerable individuals in society; *Klein Geluk*: Enhances quality of life for people with long-term health disabilities. They also hire people with long-term health disabilities in their team; *Samen Kansrijk en Gezond*: Improves health outcomes for families in vulnerable situations

Target groups / beneficiaries: Families and individuals in vulnerable situations; Young adults; People with long-term health disabilities

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: FNO acts as a long-term funder and catalyst for systemic change, supporting collaboration between local initiatives, professionals, and public institutions to create inclusive structures for health and participation

Education transition

A2.11. Prins Heerlijk



Transition: Education

Contribution: They offer education in hospitality and care for students who need extra learning support, aiming to create opportunities for them to gain work experience and develop skills in a real-world environment. Prins Heerlijk works with an integrated approach, determining per student what someone needs in terms of living, personal development, and education to ultimately enter society as independently as possible.

Type: Foundation

Scale: Regional: Broader Tilburg region

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Hospitality and retail training: Where students can earn a diploma in the field; Healthcare and elderly care assistant training; Development-oriented day care Hospitality & retail training

Target groups / beneficiaries: Individuals aged 16 to 27 with learning disabilities; Students facing challenges entering the labor market or who fell out of other educational settings

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Their model creates inclusive work environments and demonstrates innovative approaches to workforce development

A2.12. Kairos College



Transition: Education

Contribution: Started by parents and teachers in 2019, Kairos College is in the process of becoming a fully realized school with classes of students of different educational levels. In their approach they value the importance of heterogeneous classes, personal attention and small-scale education, reducing inequality and segregation, and the 'vrijeschool' (Waldorf/Steiner) educational style

Type: Citizen initiative and foundation

Scale: Amsterdam

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Initially taking part in the 'new school challenge' - a one-time initiative by Kennisland and the Municipality of Amsterdam to create more schools - Kairos College started independently, supported by existing a school foundation.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Teachers, students, parents, prospective school founders

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Creating a new school and adding a new approach to the educational landscape and within the context of Amsterdam-Noord

Care transition

A2.13. Zorgaliantie



Transition: Care

Contribution: Through cross-sectoral collaboration in the areas of housing, welfare, care and education with current and future professionals (HAN students), they co-develop practical solutions to social challenges.

Type: Network-based collaboration platform hosted by the HAN University of Applied Sciences

Scale: Regional (active in Gelderland, Noord-Brabant and Noord-Limburg)

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Creating different programs and projects around learning, community and care; setting up and supporting hubs; organizing masterclasses; developing and sharing knowledge.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Students; Organizations in housing, welfare, education or healthcare; Researchers and teachers

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Acts as an intermediary and innovation hub, bridging practice, policy, and education

Social transition

A2.14. Migration Inc



Transition: Social transition

Contribution: Empowering newcomers through first-hand experience and knowledge as well as working with organizations to spread knowledge and awareness on culture- and gender sensitivity.

Type: Social Entrepreneur

Scale: National

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Knowledge and experience spreading for newcomers; Intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity training for those working alongside or for newcomers; Consultancy and advocacy for designing inclusive policies; Cultural interpreters and translation services; Cultural counseling programs

Target groups / beneficiaries: Newcomers; Professionals working with newcomers; Policy makers and businesses

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Bridging cultural divides by facilitating understanding between diverse communities and service providers; Advising on and advocating for policies that promote inclusivity and equity

A2.15. Kansrijke Start Meppel



Transition: Social transition

Contribution: Kansrijke Start aims to give every child in the Netherlands the best possible start in life by improving care and support during the first 1,000 days, especially for families in vulnerable situations

Type: Government-led program (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport) and carried out locally by the Municipality of Meppel

Scale: Local implementation of a national program

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: It builds and supports local coalitions in order to strengthen child support during the phases of before, during and after pregnancy, promoting preparedness, equips vulnerable parents for caregiving and seeking to reduce the number of children placed in out-of-home care

Target groups / beneficiaries: Families in vulnerable socio-economic or health situations

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Creating new collaborations with shared goals. By aligning national policy with coalitions across the Netherlands, it strengthens early intervention capacity and bridges medical and social domains to improve long-term health and equity outcomes of children

Democratic transition

A2.16. Burgerberaad Klimaat Rotterdam



Transition: Democratic

Contribution: A citizens assembly to create citizen-generated climate policy proposals, involving citizens in decision-making and stimulating participation

Type: Government-led initiative

Scale: Local: city of Rotterdam

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: After selecting a diverse group of 100 citizens through lottery, sessions were facilitated with expert input and group deliberation. They then proposed ideas for a greener and healthier city to the municipality, of which most have been accepted and are being implemented.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Citizens that participated as well as the general population; Policy makers and city officials

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Adding to practices of, and knowledge on, citizen deliberation and democratic experimentation. Demonstrating the value of citizen participation in policy-making and tackling complex issues.

A2.17. All-In program



Transition: Democratic

Contribution: The All-In program aims to make the social enterprise sector in the Netherlands more inclusive and diverse, by supporting and creating equal changes for social entrepreneurs with a migration background.

Type: Program hosted by Social Enterprise NL

Scale: National

Portfolio of experimentation / activities: Social Enterprise NL launched the call to make the Dutch social entrepreneur field more inclusive and diverse. The process from application to financing was developed in co-creation with social entrepreneurs with a migration background, creating an informal approach also coaching applicants, with much attention given to broad competences like lived experiences, anonymizing the applications to take away biases of the jury, working with a diverse jury, and more.

Target groups / beneficiaries: Social entrepreneurs with a migration background

Role within the SI ecosystem and social economy: Acts as a changemaker within the social enterprise ecosystem by addressing systemic exclusion and enabling more equitable access to opportunities, networks, and resources