

# Perspective of the Pioneer

Why social entrepreneurs should have  
a seat at the decision-making tables



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Vision Paper Social Enterprise NL  
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# Executive Summary

Social entrepreneurs and other sustainable innovators play a crucial role in the transition towards an economy where social value takes center stage: the Impact Economy. They create direct impact by, for example, helping vulnerable people to paid work or reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. But their role goes further: they identify systemic obstacles to change and develop solutions. Social enterprises stand for radical improvement of systems. Within broader societal transitions their role is significant because they show what change can look like, they speak out, and they serve as an example to others.

And yet, social entrepreneurs and other sustainable innovators still have too little presence at the decision-making tables. Their voices are not sufficiently heard in political and policy processes. In the Netherlands, with its tradition of consensus-building and lobbying, all interests are weighed in policy decisions. Literature research and interviews show, however, that established interests, focused on preserving the status quo, often dominate decision-making. These interests influence policy and can slow down essential transitions.

We identify two ways innovators can be involved in decision-making: participation and lobbying. Participation includes involvement in organized structures such as the SER (the national Social and Economic Council), ministry working groups, or advisory bodies. Lobbying means proactively influencing policy.

Social entrepreneurs operate in a challenging environment, often facing larger companies and other actors with much greater resources and lobbying power. This does not mean they cannot exert influence. There are several examples of social entrepreneurs who have successfully shaped policy from the decision-making table. These cases offer valuable lessons.

To ensure social entrepreneurs and other sustainable innovators have more consistent access to decision-making processes, we make the following recommendations:

Om te zorgen dat sociaal ondernemers en andere duurzame vernieuwers vaker aan de beslistafel komen doen wij de volgende aanbevelingen:

- **To government:** Always involve social entrepreneurs in policy decisions, drawing on their social vision and solutions. Structure and regulate participation processes to promote transparency and a level playing field.
- **To social entrepreneurs:** Present yourself as a valuable and reliable dialogue partner. Increase the visibility of your enterprise and mission. Speak out through (social) media and build alliances and lobbying collectives to exert influence together.

# Colofon

**Title:** Perspective of the Pioneer. Why social entrepreneurs should have a seat at the decision-making table

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## About Social Enterprise NL

Social Enterprise NL is the national network for social enterprises, businesses whose primary goal is to create social value (impact). The network has over 450 members. For more information, see: <https://www.social-enterprise.nl/>

### *Vision*

At a time of growing pollution and inequality, we stand up to create a better world. Today's and tomorrow's social entrepreneurs work together to achieve radical systemic change. We guide industry, politics, and society toward a new economy where not shareholder value, but social value is central: the impact economy. Without waste. Without poverty. Without exclusion. Together we create a better world: with everyone, for everyone.

### *Mission*

Together, we achieve radical systemic change.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Rationale

This vision paper addresses the question of how social entrepreneurs and other sustainable innovators can gain greater influence on policy, with the goal of achieving more successful and lasting positive social impact. In short: *how can social entrepreneurs secure a place at the decision-making table more often?*

*Social entrepreneurs* are business leaders whose primary purpose is to create positive social impact. This impact goes beyond the interests of the enterprise itself, which could even become redundant once its mission is fulfilled. Through the products and services they provide, they contribute to long-term social change in areas such as sustainability, inclusion, and other public values. Social entrepreneurs form a diverse group in terms of scale, focus area, and the products or services they offer.

By *decision-making table*, we refer to the moments when the solutions and insights of social entrepreneurs can influence policy. Our call is simple: make sure social entrepreneurs are included in these dialogues, and ensure their voices are heard. The term decision-making table is both concrete and abstract. On the one hand, it refers to the formal settings where social entrepreneurs can take part in discussions on decision-making that directly affects them and their missions. On the other hand, it also points to the way decision-making itself takes shape: the procedures of participation and the processes through which policies are developed. To sit at the decision-making table means taking part in dialogue on specific issues. The Netherlands is known for its consensus model, institutionalized in the Social and Economic Council (SER). The SER is a decision-making table where employers, employees, and government negotiate socio-economic policy. But there are also other forms, such as temporary or issue-specific tables. Examples include roundtable discussions or participation moments such as Accountability Day in Parliament<sup>1</sup>. We will explore the different types and levels of relevant decision-making tables in Chapter 3.

Social entrepreneurs have the unique and challenging position of operating within a competitive market environment while simultaneously serving the public good. They aim to contribute to societal challenges but often run up against practical barriers and entrenched beliefs. In other words, they work within existing systems. Social entrepreneurs are not only focused on creating positive impact through their products and services but also on changing these systems, for example, by advocating for new laws and regulations to promote circularity, or by challenging

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden\\_en\\_commissies/commissies/ru/v-100-verantwoordingsdag](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden_en_commissies/commissies/ru/v-100-verantwoordingsdag)

cultural norms around meat consumption. This ambition is captured in their *theory of change*. Viewed broadly, social entrepreneurs are innovators: they propose alternatives, design new solutions, and represent a critical and committed voice.

The relevance of ensuring that social entrepreneurs have more access to decision-making tables plays out at multiple levels. On the *individual level*, entrepreneurs benefit from government policies that support their businesses and remove obstacles. On the *societal level*, the voices of social entrepreneurs advance the missions they pursue, contributing to structural changes in sustainability, inclusion, and other values.

The call for social entrepreneurs to join decision-making tables is therefore grounded both in practical and in idealistic terms. Many societal challenges could benefit from their contribution. Yet they sometimes experience government and regulation as barriers to achieving their missions. Including their voices in policy design can improve outcomes. Moreover, as Robbert Bodegraven calls it, social entrepreneurs engage in the “long battle of ideas”: the societal debate that precedes any major transition (2021). They carry visions for the society of the future, but to participate, they must first secure a place at the table. For now, it is mainly established interests that enjoy close ties with government, politicians, and administrators. According to the Social Enterprise Monitor 2024, half of all social enterprises would like to be at the table more often to contribute to these debates.<sup>2</sup>

This vision paper aims to shed light on the opportunities and pathways for social entrepreneurs to increase their influence on policy. To this end, we conducted a literature review and interviews with social entrepreneurs and experts in government, lobbying, and social enterprise.

## 1.2. Reading guide

This study explores the question of how social entrepreneurs can gain more influence in the policy-making process.

**Chapter 2** outlines, based on literature, how social entrepreneurs act as pioneers of the impact economy and can be seen as agents of change. It also explains the context in which they operate and how they relate to institutions and other market players. Finally, it argues that social entrepreneurs should be seen not only as economic but also as political actors, active in an arena shaped by power and ideas.

**Chapter 3** makes the concept of the decision-making table concrete with illustrations and examples. It examines where and how social entrepreneurs succeed, or fail, in gaining access, and highlights opportunities to expand participation.

**Chapter 4** presents recommendations for government and politics, for social entrepreneurs, and for the wider movement of social enterprise.



## 2. Insights from the literature

### 2.1. Social entrepreneurs as agents of change

Social entrepreneurship is a relatively new phenomenon, and the concept itself continues to evolve (Teasdale et al., 2023). What social entrepreneurs share is an awareness of the urgent need for social and sustainable change. They do not, however, form a homogenous group in terms of the problems they identify or the approaches they take. They also hold a specific position in society and in relation to the market and government.

The first characteristic that distinguishes social entrepreneurs from conventional businesses is their focus on impact: they put the creation of social value first. While diverse in background, motivation, and goals, they all seek solutions to pressing societal problems (Abebe, Kimakwa & Redd, 2020). Their social engagement often stems from personal experience or their own life paths. Some became disillusioned with careers in the corporate sector, while others were motivated by social issues they observed in their communities. As a result, social entrepreneurs can emerge both from grassroots activism and from the corporate world. They are typically highly knowledgeable about social issues, want to put these issues on the agenda, and strive to raise awareness. Offering a product or service to address the problem is therefore a central part of their identity.

A second key characteristic is their focus on systemic change. They advocate for an economy built on different values and try to contribute to the transition needed to achieve this. They are acutely aware of their indirect impact, which often involves seeking to change the system itself. For instance, they may push for policy reforms or encourage other businesses to adopt more sustainable practices (Hillen, Panhuijsen, Sprong & van Dijk, 2020). In essence, social entrepreneurs aim for win-win situations, where both society and their enterprise benefit (WRR, 2023).

Because of this focus, the role of social enterprises is different from that of traditional market players. They operate partly within the civic space and partly within the market, transcending these traditional categories (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016). Their relationship with government is also complex. Like any business, they are affected by rules and regulations set by government. But governments can also be partners or clients, while at the same time social entrepreneurs often act as critics by pointing out institutional shortcomings (Muldoon et al., 2022). Where government fails, social entrepreneurs feel compelled to offer solutions. The relationship is therefore both cooperative and complementary, often shaped by shared interests.

From this perspective, social entrepreneurs can be understood as *agents of change*: actors who aim to bring about social transformation. They identify systemic problems and attempt to solve them through their products and services. This means

that social entrepreneurship also has a political dimension, as explained later. The economy is not a neutral space but rather an arena where players act based on competing values and interests (Ollson, 2023). Social entrepreneurs express their values through the products and services they offer and thereby voice a vision of what a good society should look like. Often, they swim against the tide by questioning dominant norms and assumptions. Recognizing the political dimension of social entrepreneurship helps us better understand their role in societal change.

## 2.2. Institutional change and transitions

In periods of transition, stakeholders play different roles and contribute to solving societal challenges (TNO, 2023: 13). According to TNO, it is essential to maintain “dialogue with all stakeholders” and to ensure transparency in decision-making processes in order to build and maintain public support (2023: 6). Social entrepreneurs can play a role here by helping identify and articulate societal values in a policy context (TNO, 2023: 6). This is crucial in transitions, where new values must be discovered and articulated to enable systemic change.

System change is complex, and social entrepreneurs are only one actor among many. They are part of an ecosystem of governments, knowledge institutions, companies, and civil society organizations, all of which contribute to social innovation (TNO, 2023). To understand systemic change, it is necessary to examine the role of *institutions and power*.

Social change cannot take place without institutional change (Smink, 2015). Institutions can be understood as the practices and beliefs that shape daily behaviour and thinking. They include laws and regulations (regulative), infrastructure and the built environment (material), and societal norms and cultural values (normative and cultural). Institutions function to stabilize systems. They both enable and restrict behaviour, which means social change follows certain patterns. Transitions often move slowly at first, constrained by path dependency, where past political or economic choices make it difficult to change course, even if the old path no longer serves the public interest (TNO, 2023). At the same time, old systems can collapse rapidly, creating space for new ones. This dynamic is described in the X-curve (DRIFT, 2022). According to transition theory, change begins with a small group of frontrunners, but once a certain tipping point is reached, new norms can replace old ones (Rotmans, 2023).

Social entrepreneurs can therefore be seen as institutional entrepreneurs: actors who question and challenge the logic of existing institutions (Chatzichristos & Nagoopoulos, 2021). Opposing them are actors who defend the status quo because they have more to gain from continuity than change. Institutions, after all, often reflect the interests of the past (Smink, 2015: 15)..

Social entrepreneurs typically occupy a niche position relative to dominant institutions (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016). Although a minority, they possess *prefigurative power* (Avelino, 2024): the power to start something new, new ideas, -solutions or -organizations. Social movements, including social enterprises, embody this power by not only criticizing existing systems but also offering concrete alternatives for the future.

If we view the economy as an arena, social entrepreneurs share the stage with businesses, governments, and NGOs, each wielding power to maintain, defend, disrupt, or create institutions (Smink, 2015). Transitions are therefore inherently political and shaped by power struggles (Avelino, 2024). In practice, this means that incumbents, such as established industries, actively protect their economic interests and sometimes work against change (Smink, 2015). For example, companies in the fields of LED lighting and biofuels have resisted innovation to protect their markets, thereby delaying the energy transition. Their strategies include publishing pseudo-scientific reports, setting restrictive technical standards, influencing policymakers with selective information, and creating negative public perceptions of new technologies.

### Conservative power in the agricultural sector

An article in the magazine “de Groene Amsterdammer” highlighted how the agricultural sector has slowed down the sustainability transition by exerting political power.<sup>3</sup> Farmers’ interest groups have historically had automatic access to decision-making tables, and their strong political connections have enabled them to resist reforms to the subsidy system. As a result, the EU’s Green Deal was weakened on pesticide use and biodiversity restoration, largely due to agricultural lobbying. This illustrates the types of power dynamics that social entrepreneurs face in certain sectors.

The WRR (the scientific advisory council for national government policy) concludes that government policy too often protects incumbent businesses, “sheltering them from change at the expense of innovators who want to address societal challenges” (2023: 32). This means the potential contribution of businesses to society remains underutilized. According to the WRR, government should use its power to “adapt the rules for businesses, consumers, employees, and financiers to make socially desirable entrepreneurship more attractive” (2023: 32).

The fact that self-interested companies wield such strong political influence makes the call to include social entrepreneurs at the decision-making table even more urgent. While Dutch policymaking is based on broad consultation, power relations remain highly unequal. To sit at the table as a social entrepreneur requires a degree of access and influence, which begins with identifying relevant decision-making spaces.

### 2.3. The decision-making table in depth

In the Dutch context, the *consensus model*, alongside parliamentary democracy, plays a key role in decision-making. The model is based on different interests negotiating until they reach agreements that serve the common good. This consensus-based process<sup>4</sup> is institutionalized in the Social and Economic Council (SER), which advises government on socio-economic policy.<sup>5</sup> Within the SER, employers, unions, and government representatives negotiate on issues such as collective labor agreements, but also provide advice on broader topics such as environment, healthcare, and education. The SER also has a mandate to encourage companies to take the public interest into account. While some social entrepreneurs are indirectly represented through their membership in employer or employee organizations, their voices are often marginal.

Several criticisms can be levelled against the consensus model and the SER. First, one may ask whether social entrepreneurs and sustainable innovators are adequately represented and heard. The model is often criticized for its conservative outcomes: compromises tend to favour stability over radical change (Keune, 2016: 10).

Second, the process lacks transparency and raises questions about its democratic legitimacy. As Professor Caelesta Braun notes: “The focus on the outcomes of the consensus model overlooks the negotiation process, who participates, why they are included, and how the process unfolds” (2016: 37). This raises concerns about the *input legitimacy* of the process.

Third, questions remain about the effectiveness of the SER in serving the public good. The global context has changed dramatically: financialization, the rise of multinationals, and increasing political polarization have all reduced the SER’s influence (De Beer & Keune, 2018). Former Dutch National Bank director Lex Hoogduin even argues that the model has become hollowed out, as big business wields disproportionate influence and much decision-making now occurs outside traditional institutions like the SER and Parliament, through direct lobbying of ministers.<sup>6</sup>

Although the SER is not the only decision-making table, it is emblematic of Dutch policymaking and highlights the challenges innovators face in influencing policy. Ideally, the consensus model would give voice to diverse stakeholders. In practice, however, social entrepreneurs are too often absent. Improving this situation requires identifying other relevant decision-making spaces and learning from both obstacles and success stories of social entrepreneurs in lobbying and participation.

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4 [Consensus decision-making – Wikipedia](#)

5 [https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrq7yaq/sociaal\\_economische\\_raad\\_ser](https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrq7yaq/sociaal_economische_raad_ser)

6 De Nieuwe Wereld TV – 17 Juli 2024 - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhN\\_UWu8la8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhN_UWu8la8)

Although the SER is not the only decision-making table, it is emblematic of Dutch policymaking and highlights the challenges innovators face in influencing policy. Ideally, the consensus model would give voice to diverse stakeholders. In practice, however, social entrepreneurs are too often absent. Improving this situation requires identifying other relevant decision-making spaces and learning from both obstacles and success stories of social entrepreneurs in lobbying and participation.

## 3. Beslistafels in de praktijk

### 3.1. Identifying decision-making tables

What types of decision-making tables exist? They take many forms, and each dialogue can be an opportunity for a social entrepreneur to exert influence or contribute to policy discussions. One way to distinguish them is by level of governance.

- **Municipal level:** Municipalities may set up covenants, declarations of intent, or “city deals,” designed as collaborations between government and entrepreneurs around shared goals<sup>7</sup>.
- **National level:** Examples include parliamentary roundtables between MPs, social entrepreneurs, financiers, and government representatives.<sup>8</sup> Another is the “Formula-E Team” (FET), a partnership led by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO), involving businesses, government, and knowledge institutions to promote electric mobility.<sup>9</sup> RVO also runs DuurzaamDoor, a program bringing together national and local governments, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, researchers, citizens’ initiatives, and civil society organizations<sup>10</sup>.
- **Ministerial level:** Ministries host their own tables, such as the Taskforce VIA (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment), focused on improving labour market integration of migrants<sup>11</sup>. Another is the Pact Ondernemingsklimaat, where government, business experts, social partners, and academics work together to strengthen the entrepreneurial climate.

Decision-making tables also differ in *timing*: some are one-off events, others periodic or ongoing. The reasons for setting up decision-making tables can also vary, ranging from social crises to new political developments. The extent to which policymakers are open to input from social entrepreneurs varies by context.

If we broaden the concept to include other forms of influence, decision-making tables also include national agreements, such as the Climate Agreement, with its

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7 Convenanten van de gemeente Amsterdam: <https://openresearch.amsterdam/nl/overview/31871>

8 <https://www.g40stedennetwerk.nl/tweede-kamer-gesprek-met-sociaal-ondernemers>

9 <https://www.rvo.nl/onderwerpen/elektrisch-rijden/formule-e-team>

10 <https://www.duurzaamdoor.nl/>

11 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2021/11/17/bijlage-1-info-graphic-via>

numerous working groups spanning ministries and sectors<sup>12</sup>. And democratic innovations, such as citizens' assemblies, where experts, including social entrepreneurs, are invited to provide input<sup>13</sup>.

In short, “decision-making table” is a broad term covering various forms of consultation where government brings together market and societal actors to make decisions or design policy. There is no exhaustive list, so the challenge for social entrepreneurs lies in identifying relevant tables and then gaining access.

The next section explores to what extent social entrepreneurs succeed in gaining access and what obstacles they face.

**Criteria for identifying relevant tables could include:**

- Is the topic part of the social entrepreneur's value chain?
- Is the topic directly related to the enterprise's mission?
- Can the entrepreneur offer expertise and practical insights?
- Does the dialogue have potential to shape laws, regulations, policies, or government behavior?

### 3.2. Between consensus and lobbying models

We can distinguish between *participation*, structured involvement in decision-making processes, and *lobbying*, actively approaching policymakers to persuade them with arguments. Both serve similar purposes: raising issues, sharing ideas, or providing feedback on policy. Both are ways for social entrepreneurs to make their voices heard and increase their impact. In practice, they can overlap and reinforce each other: lobbying can raise visibility, which in turn can lead to invitations to join formal decision-making tables.

Dutch politics has seen a gradual shift from a consensus model (*poldermodel*) to a *lobbying model*. The latter has the advantage of being more open: in principle, anyone can gain access, provided they take the initiative to reach out to policymakers (Vink, 2015). Lobbying requires more direct participation compared to consensus-based or representative models. In theory, this means every interest can be heard.

But lobbying also has downsides. Access depends heavily on whether powerful individuals have the time or interest to engage with a particular issue, and whether they can be persuaded by the social entrepreneur's message. Lobbying is also selective and sometimes arbitrary: there are no procedures ensuring equal participation. In practice,

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12 <https://www.klimaataakkoord.nl/klimaataakkoord>

13 <https://www.rotterdam.nl/burgerberaad-klimaat>

the lobbying landscape in The Hague lacks transparency and offers unequal access. Established businesses tend to have far more frequent and privileged access compared to NGOs or social entrepreneurs<sup>14</sup>. The risk is that a “lobbocracy” emerges<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.3. Challenges and opportunities for social entrepreneurs

This section describes the challenges and opportunities for social entrepreneurs in gaining access to decision-making tables. It begins with lessons from successful cases, highlights unequal power dynamics, and concludes with broader challenges.

Interviews with social entrepreneurs and experts underline the importance of personal relationships with policymakers. Some entrepreneurs excel at building strong networks, while others struggle. Knowing the culture and language of policymakers matters greatly. The concept of *socio-cultural capital*, knowledge, networks, and cultural alignment, helps explain why some succeed more than others (SCP, 2023).

Some social entrepreneurs working on labor participation and inclusion say they have little trouble reaching policy makers, civil servants, and politicians. They built good relationships, know how to approach government, and understand the ‘unwritten rules’, such as handling information confidentially. Their missions also fit current political priorities, which helps them *frame* their story effectively. Enterprise size and sector also matter: larger players are more often invited to join discussions. Several entrepreneurs even report being approached directly by ministries. As one put it: “We are a testing ground to show politicians and policy makers how things could be done differently. They often see us as a source of practical stories”. From this position, they are asked to contribute to government strategies. Their approach: “Many social enterprises try to be an alternative to the system; we try to be a partner within the system”.

The relationship with government can take different forms. For some, lobbying follows naturally from their daily work. Sharing this knowledge is a logical step to keep it relevant, which earns them a seat at decision-making tables. One entrepreneur said they want to contribute to “evidence-based policy on integration and asylum”. How much impact this has depends on the political climate. Another example comes from an innovator in the energy sector who was able to push a key issue into the Climate Agreement.

Voor een sociaal ondernemer in de afvalsector is het belang van lobbyen in de loop van de tijd heel duidelijk geworden. Voor hen is dit nu een cruciale activiteit om wet-

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14 <https://openstate.eu/nl/openlobby/>

15 Zie onder andere De lobbocracy - Follow the Money - Platform voor onderzoeks-journalistiek (ftm.nl)



en regelgeving te krijgen die hun missie ondersteunt. Zij ervaren hierbij wel “scheve verhoudingen”, waarbij grote organisaties gericht op eigen belang behoudend zijn en verandering die in hun nadeel is tegenwerken. Deze sociaal ondernemer heeft zelf deze tegenwerking ervaren waarbij een concurrent actief voor wetgeving lobbyde die het voortbestaan van de sociale onderneming in gevaar heeft gebracht. Het resultaat is dat door de lobby van de behoudende partij de ambities op het gebied van duurzaamheid en inclusie lager liggen.

Overall, entrepreneurs who gain real influence at the decision-making table are still rare. The Social Enterprise Monitor 2024 shows that half would like more access. They name major issues linked to their missions, but rarely specific tables, showing how hard it is to find the right ones. Lobbying is also tough: the relationship between government and entrepreneurs is poorly structured, meaning social enterprises must usually take the initiative themselves unless they already have strong networks.

The experience varies. Some succeed more easily than others. As one entrepreneur advised: “If your message is clear, your branding is solid, your story is sharp, and you consistently bring it to MPs and policy staff, you’ll get in”. But even then, the question remains: how much real influence do you have?

## 4. Recommendations for the future

Based on our research, we present the following recommendations for different actors who can strengthen and expand social entrepreneurship and increase participation in policy-making.

### 4.1. Recommendations for government and politics

#### **Recommendation 1: Proactively engage with social entrepreneurs**

To ensure social entrepreneurs have more opportunities to join decision-making tables, government and politics must create more moments of participation. Social entrepreneurs bring valuable practical knowledge and insights, which should be included early and consistently in policy design. It is essential that all innovators with relevant expertise are invited to contribute.

Social entrepreneurs can serve as both signallers and role models. Because they operate within existing systems, they can provide government with crucial practical experience. To benefit from this knowledge, structural participation opportunities are needed, preferably throughout policy-making and evaluation phases. A continuous dialogue is most effective.

Sociaal ondernemers kunnen een signaal- en een voorbeeldfunctie vervullen. Doordat zij de bestaande systemen in de praktijk kennen en hierbinnen werken kunnen zij de overheid van waardevolle ervaringskennis voorzien. Voor deze kennisoverdracht zijn wel momenten van inspraak nodig – het liefst structureel en binnen verschillende fasen van beleidsvorming- en evaluatie. Een continue dialoog levert het meeste op.

#### **Recommendation 2: Structure and regulate participation for a level playing field**

Building on the Dutch consensus model, new structured forms of participation should be created, with a critical eye on who sits at the table and which interests are represented. For example, the quadruple helix model brings together government, industry, academia, and civil society to provide input on innovation (Schütz et al., 2019). Yet the question remains: how are citizens and the public interest represented, and how are power imbalances addressed? It is essential that the voices of social entrepreneurs and other innovators are not drowned out by conservative forces defending vested interests. Policymakers must remain aware of this dynamic.

To democratize lobbying and participation, rules and agreements could be developed regarding:

- Representation of interests in Parliament.
- Frequency and form of contact between interest groups and policymakers.
- Transparency about the purpose, format, and outcomes of participation processes.

Clear agreements could also prevent conflicts of interest. For lobbying specifically, records could be kept of which groups meet with ministers or civil servants, and on what topics. Transparency and structure are vital to creating a fair playing field, allowing social entrepreneurs better access and enabling them to increase their impact<sup>16</sup>.

## 4.2. Recommendations for social entrepreneurs

What can social entrepreneurs themselves do to gain access to decision-making tables? As discussed in Chapter 3, differences in scale and socio-cultural capital influence access. Larger enterprises or those better connected are often more effective in translating their missions to policymakers.

### Recommendation 1: Present yourself as a valuable and reliable dialogue partner

Social entrepreneurs should position themselves as credible and knowledgeable partners. What expertise, ideas, or experience can you bring? Can you *signal* issues or provide best practices? Both government and business value concrete examples that demonstrate alternative approaches.

*Reliability* is just as important as expertise. Government actors need to trust that you genuinely represent the public interest. Avoid the perception that you are only pursuing self-interest. Be transparent about whose interests you represent and make sure to communicate clearly in meetings with policymakers. Measuring and presenting your impact can also strengthen your credibility.

### Recommendation 2: Increase visibility of your enterprise and mission

In line with Dutch traditions of consensus, social entrepreneurs must often claim their seat at the table. Strong communication and lobbying skills are crucial. Understanding the political narrative, knowing which civil servant manages which dossier, and being aware of the timing of policy development are all essential.

As a movement, social entrepreneurs also need a clearer collective identity. Many policymakers still lack a precise understanding of what social entrepreneurship entails. Strengthening criteria and articulating the philosophy behind it can help. Explaining how you apply this philosophy, for example, how profits are reinvested or why certain operational choices are made, can make your case stronger. Demonstrating measurable impact goes beyond good intentions and helps build recognition.

### Recommendation 3: Organize and build alliances

*Organization and collaboration* are crucial. Experts emphasize the importance of avoiding fragmentation and self-interest. Social entrepreneurs should unite with

each other and form broad coalitions with NGOs, mainstream businesses, and civil society organizations that share common goals.

For policymakers, broad-based visions are more persuasive and trustworthy. Moreover, societal challenges are interconnected. Issues such as integration, housing, and labor participation for newcomers are linked, and coalitions are more effective when they reflect these connections.

# Nawoord

In recent years, we have seen more and more social entrepreneurs raising their voices. They have visions for societal change and recognize that influencing policy is essential to achieve these visions. The aim of this vision paper has been to better understand the position of social entrepreneurs within the dynamics of decision-making. What role can they play in the Dutch consensus model and lobbying landscape? And why is it so important for them to sit at the decision-making table?

This paper makes clear that established interests have disproportionate influence, slowing down necessary transitions. Based on interviews with entrepreneurs and experts, we have identified ways this can change. Still, social entrepreneurs who manage to gain a seat at the table and truly shape policy remain the exception rather than the rule.

We are deeply grateful to all the experts and entrepreneurs who generously shared their time and knowledge for this publication. Special thanks also go to Joris de Jong, the author of this vision paper, who quickly grasped this complex topic and laid out a clear knowledge base.

Knowledge development on this issue is far from complete. On the contrary: we encourage researchers to continue exploring this theme in greater depth.

For Social Enterprise NL, this paper provides the foundation for an action agenda that we will develop in the coming months. Social entrepreneurs will not automatically be included at decision-making tables. Targeted interventions will be required—and that is exactly what you can expect from us in the coming years.

Stefan Panhuijsen  
Director, Social Enterprise NL  
Amsterdam, October 2024

Appendix I List of Interviewees

The following individuals were interviewed for this publication. Responsibility for all content rests with Social Enterprise NL.

Naam	Organisatie
Henk Bos	WEEE Nederland
Bart de Bart	SWOM
David Jansen	Social Capital
Marthe Hesselmans	WRR
Wouter Langendoen	NVDE
Monique Lempers	Fairphone
Pepijn Tielens	Open Embassy
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