Partner voor de publieke sector

D009.020 – NL: Expert Session Report

An expert session on social innovation and the broader meaning and impact for the Netherlands.
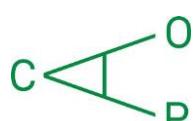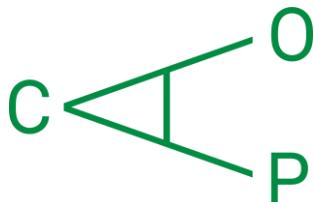
Expert Session

Partner for the public sector

D009.020 – NL: Expert Session Report

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Introduction

Context

The European Social Innovation Alliance (ESIA) is a network of currently 25 member organisations from Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. ESIA believes that social innovation provides effective and efficient methods and tools for solving the urgent and fundamental social challenges and crises we face today. To that extent, they aim to improve the political and economic framework conditions for social innovation in our respective countries and in the EU - through advocacy, public awareness, capacity building, networking and research. In doing so, ESIA brings together the perspectives of a wide range of social innovation actors from civil society, the private and public sectors and academia. More concretely, ESIA aims to establish and improve National Competence Centres (NCC's) for social innovation. These NCC's serve as hubs for supporting, exchanging and implementing effective practices for social innovation. This strengthens national ecosystems and contributes to the broader objectives of the EU. The Dutch consortium is made up of four partners: the Ministry of Social Affairs, Utrecht University, Social Enterprise NL and CAOP (formerly Kennisland).

In an earlier study, the Dutch consortium maps the current status-quo of social innovation in the Netherlands, including a literature review and an overview of key players, and assessed perceived strengths, opportunities and challenges.[1] In another study, CAOP provides an in-depth analysis of three cases.[2]

Objective

This study aims to provide relevant insights for the establishment of a National Competence Centre (NCC) for Social Innovation in the Netherlands, by describing why we innovate, what social innovation is, and how social innovation can lead to (more) societal impact. It also discusses grounding principles for a Dutch NCC, and how to establish a Dutch NCC. Finally, the activities described in this report aim to contribute to the forming of a national network

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[1] See D009.018 – NL: Mapping report performed by Utrecht University

[2] See D009.019 – Case study report.
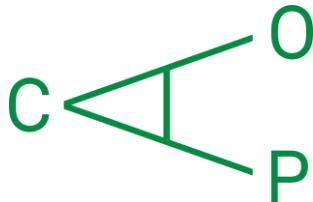
around social innovation. This is done in interviews with experts and an expert session on social innovation and the broader meaning and impact for the Netherlands.

Approach

Interviews

We held 11 semi-structured interviews with experts on social innovation in the Netherlands between September and November 2025 (see Appendix I for an overview of the interviewed experts on social innovation). The interviewees are a mix of academic experts, who research social innovation, and practical experts, who support others in socially innovating. The interviews were conducted by an experienced researcher and were either in person or online. The duration of the interviews was approximately 60 minutes. In the interviews, we presented three short examples of social innovation to the interviewed experts, based on the case study as executed for D009.019 (Case study report) by CAOP.

The main question during the semi-structured interviews were:
- What do you consider social innovations?
- How can they contribute to societal transitions?
- What do you think is needed to support and/or scale up social innovations?
- What is the role of the government in this?
- What do social innovations require from the governmental system?

Expert session

The expert session was held on the 20th of November 2025 at the Ministry of Social Affairs in The Hague. Again, we chose to invite both academic and practical experts, as well as representatives of different domains of government who work on social innovation. The Dutch consortium partners were also present (Utrecht University, Ministry of Social Affairs, Social Enterprise NL and CAOP). A total of 27 persons attended the session. Before the session, each expert received an extended summary of the mapping study (D009.018). The expert session consisted of 5 workshops, which also form the chapters of this study.

In the expert session, we started by giving a brief overview of the knowledge we gathered through the mapping study, case study and expert interviews. After a brief introduction, experts were given a card with the five main questions we aimed to answer.
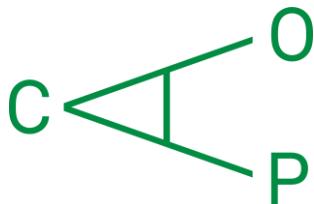
The five key questions were:
1. Why should a National Competence Centre be established?
2. What is needed to strengthen, accelerate, or scale up social innovation?
3. What could a National Competence Centre be or do?
4. Which stakeholders should we involve?
5. How can we make a National Competence Centre sustainable?

Next, the experts were invited to participate in a first round of workshops, consisting of three workshops:
1. Why social innovation?
2. What is social innovation?
3. From social innovation to broader impact

Each expert participated in each workshop. After a break, experts were invited to join a second round of two workshops:
4. Guiding principles for a Dutch NCC
5. Establishing a Dutch NCC

During the workshops the experts wrote down their thoughts and left notes for the researchers. Researchers of CAOP guided the workshop at each poster.

After the workshops, researchers led a group discussion with all experts in which each of the five themes was discussed in turn, based on the earlier input experts had given in the workshops. Finally, experts were invited to stay in contact with the Dutch consortium in their way to a Dutch NCC. This led to expanding our academic and professional network in the field of social innovation in the Netherlands.
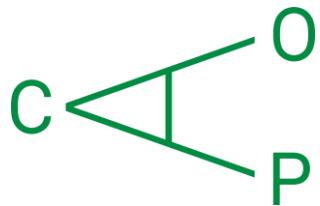
Figure 1: Overview of expert session on November 20, 2025
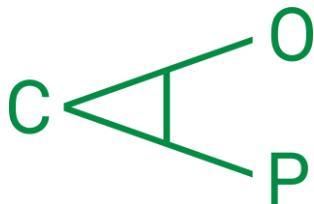
Workshop 1: Why social innovation?

In this section, we discuss the need for social innovation in the Netherlands. What are the reasons we have to promote social innovation as a way of solving societal problems, according to experts?

Solving complex problems
The public sector faces complex challenges that can no longer be solved by institutions, administrators and policymakers alone. To tackle these challenges, we need everyone's practical knowledge and innovative capacity.

> *"The Netherlands is highly bureaucratised. The government is not future-oriented. It works reactively, using information from the past, and focuses on major challenges in collaboration with the business community and academia. However, it does not properly consider how major problems affect people and what their needs are, and certainly not with a view to future generations."*

System change
In many cases, complex tasks require systemic change. Social innovations can contribute to these changes by trying out new connections and out-of-the-box solutions, thereby challenging dominant ways of thinking, working and organising.

> *Social innovation is designing a context in which things can be done differently.*
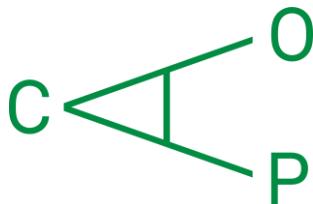
Discussion

> During the workshop, this was explained through examples such as social benefits and homelessness. The people who are affected by these problems struggle, try to find their way into the correct institutions for help. They often fail because there is no space for them within the system because of underlying norms: When one has no money or home, they get no recognition, no right to exist. It leads to distrust, and they become excluded from society. The right to exist, however, should not be based on your financial worth. It was determined that social innovation needs to happen in order to change the system that thinks and operates in this way.

Restoring relationships

Social innovation focuses on restoring relationships between people and society, people and nature and their natural environment, and people and government.

In Western culture, we have lost sight of social values. There is too much focus on economic values and growth. It is about inclusivity, sustainability and justice; this is how social innovations can have an impact and be transformative.

Different ways of thinking

Social innovations emphasise relational skills, innovative processes and the innovative and entrepreneurial capacity of the actors involved, which is fundamentally different from the dominant thinking based on structures, domains and positions.

We must be careful that a national competence centre for social innovation does not itself become an institution with its own dominant system characteristics that actually hinder innovation.
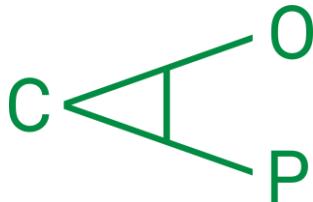
Discussion

During the workshop it was mentioned that social innovation works against systems, but the experts during the session tend to think very systemically
in the approach towards a national competence centre. We should be aware of the friction between social innovations and institutions and constantly be aware of our own ways of thinking within the dominant system.
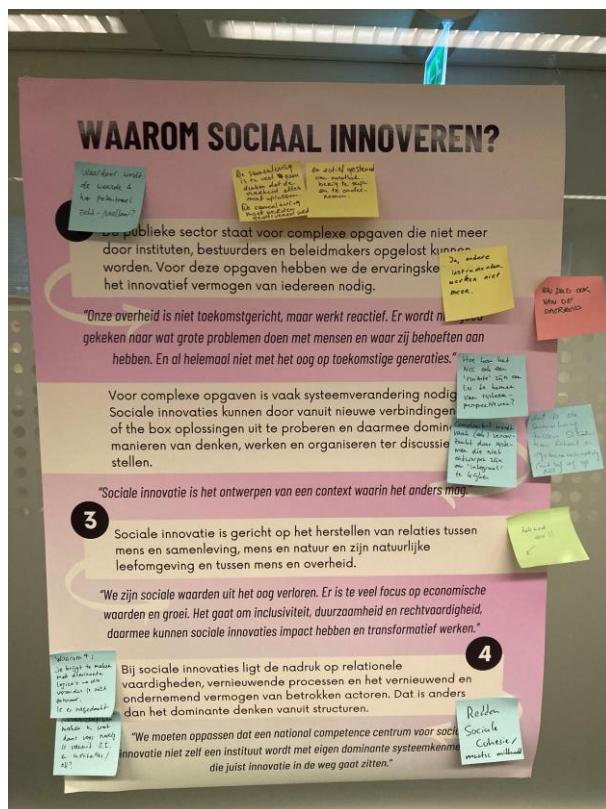

Figure 2: Poster Workshop 1: Why social innovation?
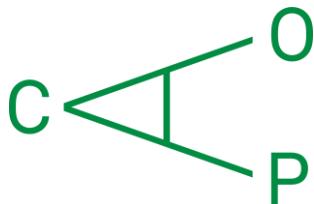
Workshop 2: Wat are social innovations?

In this section, we discuss what social innovation is, according to experts.

Definition of social innovation
Based on the literature on social innovation, the Mapping Study provided the following definition of social innovation:

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

Discussion

According to experts, this definition captures the core of what social innovation is. They did, however, stress that this definition is a technical one. In order to promote social innovation and talk about it in a practical sense, we would need a more accessible and intuitive definition. In line with this, we propose a practical definition for social innovation.

Social innovations are new ways of working (together), organising, learning and making decisions aimed at tackling social problems or better responding to social needs, together with all actors involved in that social problem.
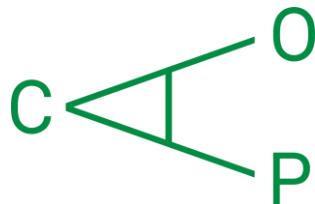
The ecosystem of social innovation

Social innovations do not exist in a vacuum but always exist within a broader ecosystem in which different actors work together. Social innovation occurs in the interplay between state, community and markets, as is visualised in the model figure 3.
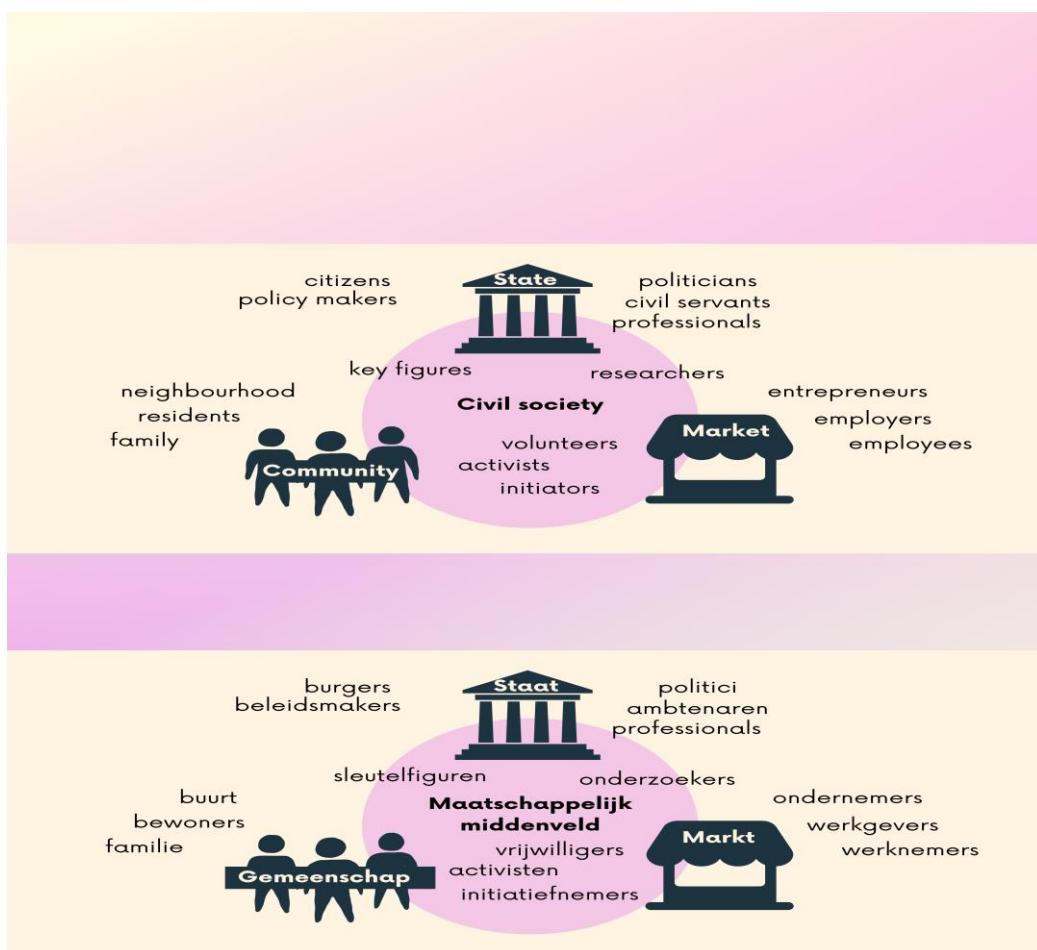

Figure 3: Position of social innovation in the ecosystem .
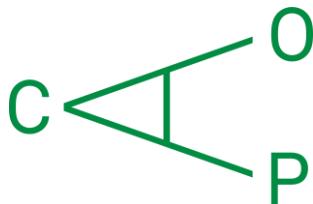
To illustrate this model, we will now give three examples. These examples correspond with the case studies from the Case Study Report [**D009.019**].[3]

In the first example, Kairos College, actors from the *state* and *community* worked together to create a new type of school. The Municipality of Amsterdam provided a theoretical starting point by issuing the 'Our New School' challenge. In this challenge they invited citizens that felt involved to create new places for education. This challenge evolved from the need to have more schools in the city. The municipality provided the invitation, as well as professional support by advisors on social innovation. A group of parents and teachers from the local community provided the ideological and practical start: they worked to establish Kairos College. At first, they did so within the 'Our New School' challenge, using the municipality's support. In the later stages, they facilitated the legal start of the new school by working with an established school and the national government.

The second example, Kansrijke Start (Promising Start), is launched by the national government. In this programme, the government, municipalities, health insurers, professional groups, interest groups and knowledge institutes work together to facilitate better natal care. Among them are the national, regional and local government (*state*), health insurers and childcare (*market*) and groups such as the library, health care providers (*public sector actors supported by the state*).

The third example, Maak Oosterwold (Make Oosterworld) was initiated by civil society and (future) residents. Later, property developers (*market*) got involved. Together with the Local government/municipality of Almere, the local residents initiated a special zoning plan that provides ample space for residents' initiatives. It is up to the initiators to demonstrate that their plans comply with legal requirements.

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[3] See D009.019 – Case study report (Nabben, Van Rijn, Wisse, De Rooij & Spijkers, 2025)
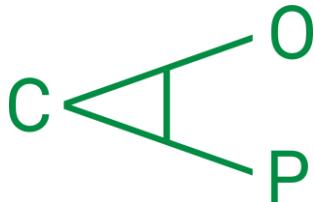
Discussion

The discussion focuses on the fact that social innovations require collaboration between different parties, such as citizens, government, businesses, and social organizations. It was mentioned that policies should provide room for experimentation and flexibility. The government should act as a facilitator rather than a restrictor. Responses highlight the importance of trust, shared responsibility, and creating a safe environment for initiatives. Social innovations need to be structurally embedded, for example through funding, knowledge sharing, and involving local communities. Social innovations do not only take place in formal institutions but also in neighbourhoods, networks, and informal groups.

Figure 4: Poster workshop 2 - What are social innovations?
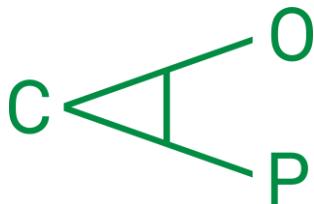
Workshop 3: From innovation to impact

In this section, we discuss what is needed to get from social innovation to broader, sustainable societal impact.

Awareness
Social innovations do not see themselves as social innovations. They focus on improving something in and for practice. They are not interconnected, are often hyperlocal and therefore have too little impact on systemic change.

> *How can we contribute to the renewal of the education system? We are not concerned with that at all. We do not want to become a large school or a large movement, but rather to provide the best education that the children in this part of the city deserve, right here in this place with these pupils and parents.*

Discussion

During the workshop, it was discussed that not everyone who works on social innovations is aware that they are. Many actors within the ecosystem such as volunteers and neighbours are working on ways to fix the problems that they encounter within their communities. The role of other actors such as the state or market could be to support the innovators in the work, they are already providing in order to create more awareness and impact.

Capture the change
We need to take a close look at what is happening in practice; what is being done differently in social innovations or innovative initiatives and what is working well there.

> *For governments, this means that they must move with social energy and place their trust in local initiatives.*
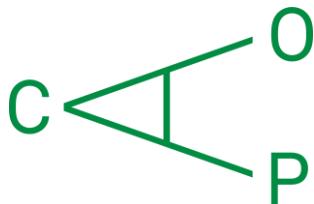
Discussion

> It helps to capture the core of the (desired) change. What are we doing to solve problems? Which (power) structures and patterns are standing in the way of new ways of working? What can we learn from each other? Asking these questions breaks the illusion that one single measure can fundamentally change a system. Transition only occurs through interdependencies and coordinated interventions.

Skills

All stakeholders need new skills to make a real contribution to sustainable transitions. This applies to social innovators, decision-makers and implementers. There needs to be mutual understanding between social innovators and the parties that support social innovation.

Citizen initiatives would benefit from design skills. How can you unlock that knowledge?

Strategy

Social innovations must be linked to strategic long-term goals and be less dependent on individuals. They must be able to influence the dynamics of an ecosystem and gain access to governance and policy.

Social innovations require direction, support and networking; otherwise, they are too vulnerable to personnel changes, the disappearance of subsidy schemes and the loss of people who are willing to put energy into them.
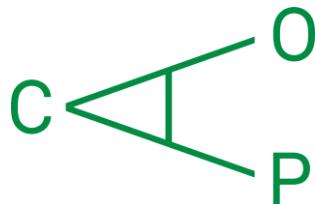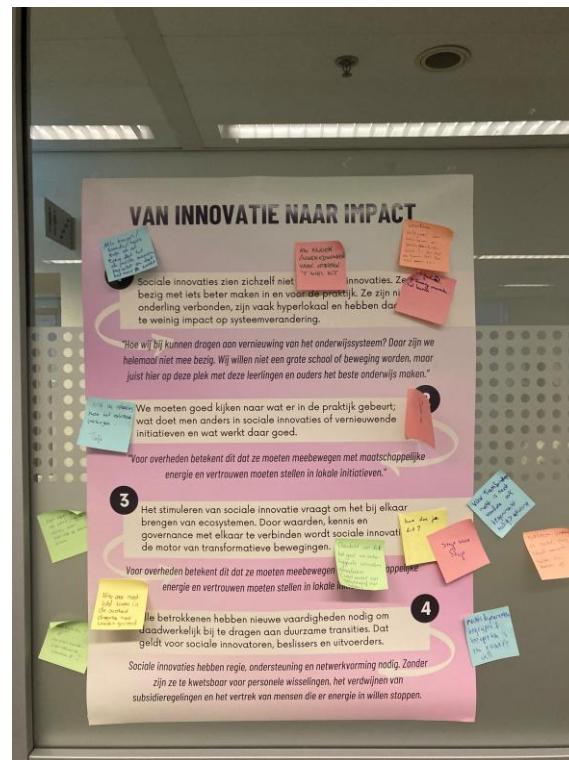
Figure 5: Poster Workshop 3 - From innovation to impact
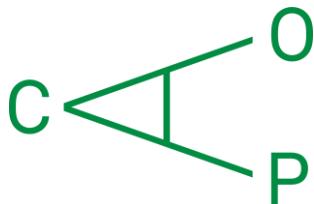
Workshop 4: Grounding principles for a Dutch NCC

In this section, we discuss grounding principles for a Dutch NCC, based on the interviews with experts on social innovation and the workshops during the expert session.

A supportive ecosystem for social innovation requires building on existing structures, fostering co-creation, investing in knowledge and skills, and encouraging collaboration across stakeholders. With targeted research, strong coalition, and accessible funding, governments can help promising initiatives grow and achieve lasting impact.

Therefore, a National Competence Centre should:
- ensure a healthy and inclusive ecosystem where social innovations can emerge, grow and scale up;
- build on existing structures and integrating existing organisations, networks and institutions;
- embrace co-creation and participation: involving stakeholders and recognising differences;
- provide knowledge and training on financing, regulations and tenders — both to social innovators and to government agencies and financiers;
- conduct research into the core of desired changes and the impact of social innovations;
- work on coalitions to increase clout and stimulate community building and shared goals and values;
- provide financial support, for example by allocating national and European subsidies.

Discussion

During the workshop, the metaphor of an ncc as landscape management was brought forward. Social innovations should be seen as a power in itself, such as nature. Nature knows its job, it is an organic process, and we should trust that it knows what it is doing. Sometimes it could use a little help and interventions such as pruning, or a little extra water when there is not enough rain can do that. However, nature should never have to explain its actions. Because we see nature already as a force in itself, and trust is already established,

there is no need for her to explain. The suggestion was made that we view social innovations in the same way, where we trust in the activities that they undertake. AN NCC should then only intervene when necessary, lending a helping hand when asked without the innovations having to explain their course of action. In this metaphor the NCC becomes a landscape artist, a forester: an actor that tries not to overrule, but to manage what is already there.
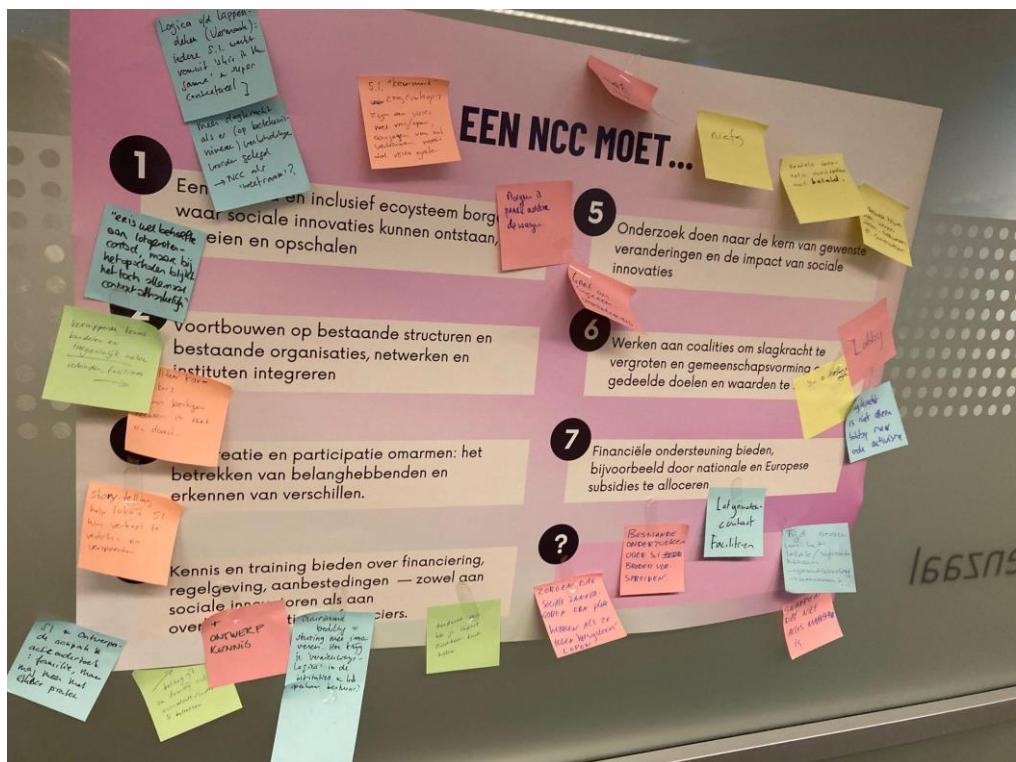

Figure 6: Poster Workshop 4 - An NCC must …
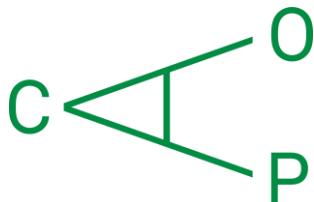
Workshop 5: Establishing a Dutch NCC

In this section, we suggest what a Dutch NCC could look like according to Dutch experts on social innovation and workshop during the expert session.

International Examples

Unlike in the Netherlands, different European countries already established NCC's on social innovation. However, the scope and organizational dynamics vary. For example:

- Belgium is home to the Social Innovation Factory, which provides support in the form of experimental spaces and information about scaling up and financing.
- Austria has the Centre for Social Innovation, a scientific institute that promotes social development.
- The NCC SI in the Czech Republic is part of a ministry and aims to improve public administration and public services in the Czech Republic.

The Dutch NCC

Because there is no blueprint for a National Competence Centre on social innovation in the Netherlands, the institution could take shape in either an informal or a formal way. Based on the case study research (D009.019), additional interviews with Dutch experts on social innovation, and the expert session (A009.020), we argue that an NCC on social innovation should begin by understanding what social innovators actually need and act as a bridge between grassroots creators and institutions. It should take on a clear and transparent role— whether focused on economics, knowledge, or networks—rather than trying to do everything at once. It should also carefully consider how digital tools can both support and complicate innovation, avoid becoming a rigid institution itself, and instead act as a mediator that reduces friction without taking control. To remain accessible across all regions, it may be better to establish several local spaces supported by one central online hub, rather than relying on a single physical centre.[4] Thus, the actual outcome of the NCC could be anything, such as a

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[4] According to sociologist Max Weber (see *the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, 1905)*, societies risk becoming trapped in systems of rationalization, bureaucracy, and rules that are designed to increase efficiency but
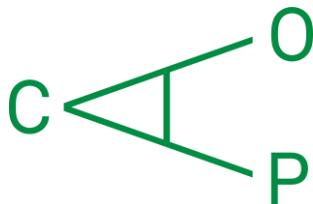
school, knowledge centre, museum, (digital) platform, network, coalition, think thank, fund, or many other possibilities. The Dutch consortium will answer this question during the upcoming activities of the European Social Innovation Alliance in 2026 and 2027.

Discussion

During the workshop we asked the question how an NCC on social innovation in the Netherlands should operate. According to the participants of the workshop, the following is needed:

- An NCC should form a bridge between creators working on social issues and professionals in the state, the market and other organisations.
- An NCC should not pursue to do everything but rather choose a role and be transparent about it. It is not possible to embody all forms of power. Rather it should decide whether it wants to take upon the role of an economic power, or knowledge or network.
- There needs to be more research into the role of the digital (or online) lense. Digital tools are both enabling, as they can be used for spreading awareness, they grant access to information and networks. However, the digital space also can form risks, and before deciding whether an NCC should be a physical or online space, these risks need to be brought into perspective.
- Experts warn us during the workshop for creating a new type of institution. As institutions tend to work linear, whereas social innovations do not. Instead of creating an institution that will cause friction, an NCC should be the oil between that friction. It can become an organisation to guide and mediate that friction into something productive. And while doing that, try not to take over the steering wheel from the social innovators.
- One central physical place risk excluding outer regions of the Netherlands. Therefore, it was suggested that there could be multiple spaces, such as one for every province. Which could still have a central (online) space where actors could come together, to create, brainstorm or ask for help.

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ultimately restrict human freedom, creativity, and values. He calls this the "iron cage," a condition in which human autonomy is constrained by an overly rationalized, bureaucratic order.
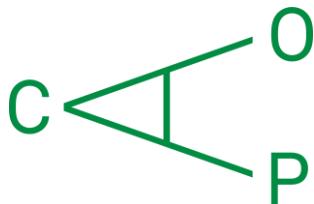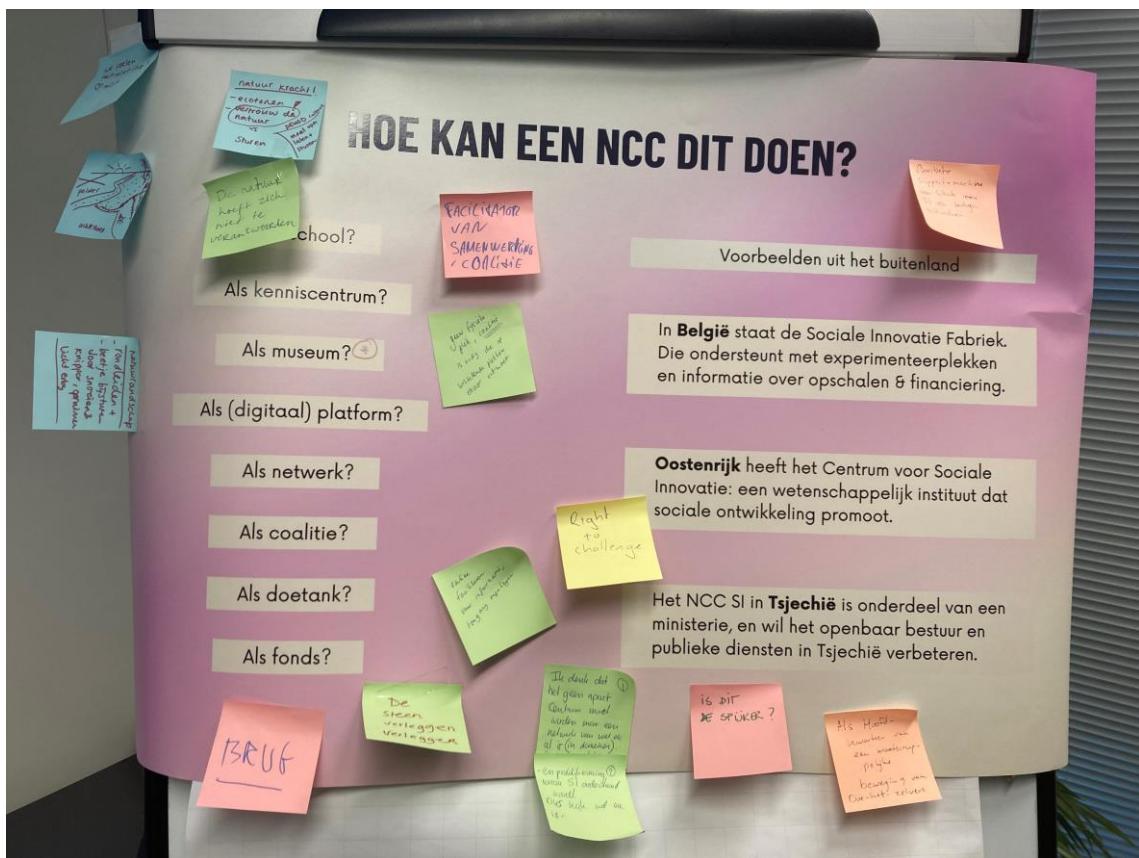
Figure 7: Poster Workshop 5 - How can an NCC operate?
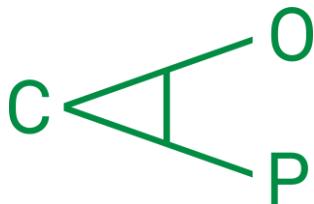
Conclusion

During the expert session on November 20, 2025, we explored the broader meaning and impact of social innovation for the Netherlands, as well as the potential structure, role, and working methods of an NCC for social innovation. Five main questions were addressed during the expert session (which consisted of several workshops) and additional semi-structured interviews (N=11). In addition, results of the case study report (A009.019/D009.019) were used to further guide the discussions and workshops.

Based on these activities, is clear that a National Competence Centre for social innovation (NCC SI) should start from the needs of social innovators and act as a bridge between grassroots initiatives and institutional actors. It should take on a clear and transparent role—whether economic, knowledge-based, or network-oriented—rather than attempting to do everything at once, and it must carefully balance support with allowing innovators to retain the lead.

The NCC should also embrace digital tools thoughtfully, using them to connect, share knowledge, and build networks, while being mindful of potential risks. To remain inclusive and accessible across regions, a distributed model with multiple local spaces supported by a central online hub may be preferable to a single physical centre, and its role should focus on mediating and reducing friction rather than imposing control or becoming a rigid institution.

1. Why should a National Competence Centre be established?
An NCC can address frictions between social innovations and institutions, acting as "oil in the gears" to make these frictions productive. An NCC could also increase awareness, since many local actors do not see themselves as social innovators. An NCC could be a central platform for connection, knowledge sharing, and agenda-setting, reducing fragmentation. The value of an ncc could furthermore help to face challenge like systemic barriers (rules, distrust, norms) and create trust and space for initiatives, rather than controlling them.

2. What is needed to strengthen, accelerate, or scale up social innovation?
Policy flexibility and room for experimentation; government should act as a facilitator, not a restrictor. What is needed is trust, shared responsibility and a safe environment for initiatives. Social innovation asks for structural embedding through funding, knowledge sharing, and
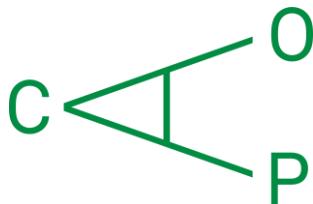
involvement of local communities. There should be attention to Digital tools for dissemination and networking, while addressing associated risks of digitalization. Finally, social innovation needs practical input from experienced practitioners and local initiatives, avoiding overly theoretical approaches.

3. What could a National Competence Centre be or do?
An NCC could act as a facilitator, connector, and agenda-setter, not as an "action group" or counter-power. An NCC should ensure transparency in collaboration and role distribution and develop a digital strategy for support and networking. An NCC could serve as a knowledge platform and support structure for local hubs. Important is that an NCC should intervene only when necessary, following the nature management metaphor: *support and create space rather than control.*

4. Which stakeholders should we involve?
An NCC can be a network or coalition of parties that are already engaged in enabling and supporting social innovations. Therefore, there are different stakeholders that could play an essential (lead) role in setting-up an NCC on social innovation, such as:

- Local actors and initiatives (neighbourhoods, networks, informal groups).
- Government and institutions (for systemic change and policy support).
- Businesses and social organizations.
- Experienced practitioners and volunteers.
- Digital partners for infrastructure and tools.

5. How can we make a National Competence Centre sustainable?
An NCC should be inclusive, represent diverse regions and initiatives, and clearly communicate its guiding values in practical, accessible language. It should also develop a thoughtful digital strategy and focus on facilitating and connecting social innovators rather than trying to control or dominate the innovators. The following guidelines were suggested by the participants of the workshops:

- Ensure inclusivity: represent all regions and types of initiatives.
- Clarify guiding values and priorities for innovation.
- Use practice-oriented language and avoid theoretical framing.
- Develop a clear digital strategy addressing both opportunities and risks.
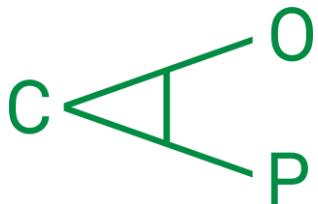
- Position NCC as a facilitator and connector, not as an executor of counter-power.

Thus, the approach of the NCC on social innovation in the Netherlands should embrace space for experimentation, collaboration and trust. This approach can help turn fragmented initiatives into sustainable, cross-domain solutions. The government at the national, provincial and municipal level in the Netherlands should act as facilitators rather than controllers to create the conditions for social innovation to thrive and produce lasting societal impact.
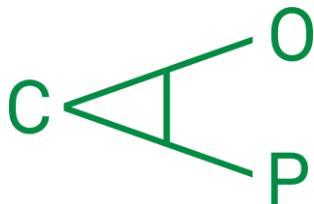
Appendix I: List of interviewees

The following experts on social innovation were interviewed between July and November 2025:

# Interview	Name	Organisation	Date
1	Tessa de Geus	Utrecht University	24-7-2025
2	Han van Nieuwaal	Thrive Rotterdam	2-10-2025
3	Tabo Goudswaard	Studio Goudswaard	9-10-2025
4	Marc Vermeulen	TIAS	22-10-2025
5	Mareve Biljohn	University of the Free State South Africa	22-10-2025
6	Martijn Arnoldus	Social Finance Matters	24-10-2025
7	Mandy Kokkelink	Lekker geven / Gemeentehuisje	27-10-2025
8	Arre Zuurmond	Former ombudsman	29-10-2025
9	Patrick Huntjens	Hogeschool InHolland	29-10-2025
10	Bart Ahsmann	ClickNL	12-11-2025
11	Anjani Pherai	College Rechten van de Mens	18-11-2025

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