

How do social initiatives manage to scale?

Finding balance between one-size-fits-all and couleur locale

Hoe lukt het sociale initiatieven op te schalen?

Balans vinden tussen one-size-fits-all en couleur locale

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Content

Chapter 1	5
1.1. Importance of scaling social initiatives	5
1.2. Context of the study	6
1.3. Research aim and research questions	9
1.4. Research strategy	16
1.5. Introduction of Dutch social sector and three domains	19
1.6. Societal relevance of the dissertation	22
1.7. Overview of the dissertation	23
Chapter 2 How and why do social and sustainable initiatives scale?	25
2.1. Introduction	25
2.2. Central concepts, search terms and definitions	26
2.3. Methodology	28
2.4. Overall findings	30
2.5. Impact: volume, graphical distribution, and system change	31
2.6. Strategy choices: pathway and structure	31
2.7. Actor characteristics: willingness and ability to scale	34
2.8. Institutional factors: rules and support	37
2.9. Framework for scaling social and sustainable initiatives	39
Chapter 3 How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives?	42
3.1. Introduction	42
3.2. Key concepts	44
3.3. Framework for studying the scaling of social initiatives	45
3.4. Methodology	49
3.5. Results	51
3.6. Overall conclusion and discussion	57
Chapter 4 Scaling of social initiatives: the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions	59
4.1. Introduction	60
4.2. Key concepts	61
4.3. Theoretical expectations	63
4.4. Methodology	67
4.5. Results	69

4.6.	Discussion	75
4.7.	Overall conclusion	76
Chapter 5	Accelerating social initiatives: an exploratory study on scaling in the social sector	78
5.1.	Introduction	78
5.2.	Towards an academic understanding of public sector accelerators	80
5.3.	Methodology	86
5.4.	Results.....	88
5.5.	Discussion	95
5.6.	Conclusion.....	97
Chapter 6	Synthesis	100
6.1.	Introduction	100
6.2.	Conclusions	101
6.3.	Contributions to academic literature	104
6.4.	Reflection on research strategy	113
6.5.	Recommendations for research.....	114
6.6.	Recommendations for practice.....	115
6.7.	Final note	116
	List of references	118
	Samenvatting.....	127
	Summary.....	128

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Importance of scaling social initiatives

Over the past few decades, a wide range of social initiatives have emerged in many domains of the public sector, from energy to homelessness to health. The contribution of social initiatives has become important in a public sector that relies on these initiatives for innovation (Karré, 2021). As local public organizations know better what residents need, they can provide more tailored services. Decentralized public sectors, like the Dutch social sector, create plenty of room for *couleur locale* (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008). However, a decentralized public sector runs a risk of generating a proliferation of similar initiatives (Hartmann and Hartmann, 2023), unnecessarily reinventing the wheel (and making the same mistakes) and wasting public money and capacity. This could be avoided by scaling initiatives that prove effective at the local level to other contexts, for example from one municipality to another. Scaling social initiatives could also allow more citizens to benefit from specific innovations.

However, the scaling of social initiatives that start at the local level has proven to be a major challenge (Torfing, 2016). In addition, scaling to other contexts is not the end in itself (Moore *et al.*, 2015) as what works in one context does not necessarily work in another (Williams, 2014). Literature argues that governments have an essential role in facilitating public innovation (Braams *et al.*, 2023). A top-down approach does not suit innovation because it does not allow for local experimentation and differences (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008). Allowing local experiments is one of the reasons for decentralization. So, a one-size-fits-all approach may defeat the purpose, but every time inventing the wheel too. The scaling of social initiatives calls for a balance between room for local differences and some coordination to ensure that more people can benefit, and public money is not spent unnecessarily. But how can good ideas be transferred to other contexts to achieve large-scale impact? This was the starting point for this dissertation, with the following central research question: ‘How do social initiatives manage to scale?’

Social initiative is a broad concept. Social initiatives occur in different environments and can start both in and outside public organizations (Mazzucato, 2013; Bason, 2010). Consequently, research on scaling social initiatives is fragmented across different disciplines, ranging from sustainability disciplines (Hossain, 2016) to private and public management (Crişan *et al.*, 2019; Osborne *et al.*, 2022; Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). They all have their own emphasis in the debate and researchers use different terms to describe small-scale experiments with a social purpose, ranging from 'grassroots' to 'social enterprises' or 'community initiatives' (Hossain, 2016; De Moor, 2023; Content *et al.*, 2020; Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). This diversity makes it difficult to compare academic studies on scaling social initiatives. This dissertation

includes an overview of the literature on scaling social initiatives in a broad sense and uses this as a basis for empirical research on scaling social initiatives in the Dutch social sector. This research contributes to the gaps in literature by combining studies on public innovation, institutional and social entrepreneurship, and private sector management. By doing so, this dissertation provides insights for policy advisors, public managers, initiators of social initiatives and other stakeholders in the social sector to help them improve the performance of the whole social sector.

1.2. Context of the study

In order to facilitate the understanding and readability of this dissertation, this section provides a brief overview of how social initiatives are understood in this dissertation and the challenges in their environment, the public sector.

1.2.1. Categorizing the wide variety in social initiatives

Social initiative is a broad concept that includes many labels, such as 'social enterprise' (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017), 'social entrepreneurship' (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Becker *et al.*, 2017), 'collective action' (De Moor, 2023) or 'grassroots' (Hossain, 2016). They all share however the focus on social purpose (Santos, 2012). This dissertation adopts a broad definition of social initiative as entrepreneurship with a social purpose (i.e. Austin *et al.*, 2006). The focus is on social initiatives with a general interest that start in or on the fringes of public organizations. Entrepreneurship then includes entrepreneurship in (public) organizations, usually referred to as institutional entrepreneurship (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017) or intrapreneurship (Bosma *et al.*, 2010). The social initiatives are very closely tied to the services provided by public organizations and often difficult to commercialize, for example because the target group is unwilling or unable to pay for them. This is true of many social sector initiatives, with a general interest, targeting vulnerable groups (Santos, 2012). Therefore, the social initiatives in this dissertation fully or strongly rely on public resources.

Although some social initiatives in this dissertation fall under the current wide definition of social enterprises (European Commission, 2023), which includes a wide variety of (new) hybrid organizational forms of social enterprises, such as public sector social enterprises (PSE) (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Serres and De Moor, 2022; Bauwens *et al.*, 2019), the term social enterprise does not apply to all social initiatives in this dissertation. For example, social initiatives started by employees of a municipality that

do not generate any income from the market. For the same reason, the term social entrepreneurship does not fit either. The debate on definitions of social entrepreneurship focuses on how it relates to social enterprises and social entrepreneurs (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). Social entrepreneurship is now understood as a cluster concept consisting of actor characteristics and social purpose (Phan *et al.*, 2020; Cardella *et al.*, 2021; Fauzi *et al.*, 2022), but definitions usually include some revenues generated (in part) through the market mechanism (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). In addition, the use of the term social entrepreneurship instead of social initiative is also confusing in relation to the actor characteristic of entrepreneurial skills, which is addressed in sub-study 3 of this dissertation. Therefore, despite the expanded definitions of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, the use of the term social initiative is most appropriate. Examples of social initiatives in this dissertation are explained in more detail in section 1.5.

1.2.2. Challenges in the scaling of social initiatives in the public sector

The environment is a key factor in the scaling of social initiatives (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). In the academic literature on (public) innovation, different terms are used to describe the environment in which social initiatives occur, such as context (Crişan *et al.*, 2019), social system (Luhmann, 2020) or ecosystem (Content *et al.*, 2020; Cobben *et al.*, 2022; De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; Osborne *et al.*, 2022). In the following chapters, this variety of terms will be used in line with the focus of the relevant academic debates. This dissertation focuses on the scaling of social initiatives in the public sector environment. This section highlights the challenges of scaling social initiatives in this environment.

The first major challenge in the scaling of social initiatives is the lack of commercial triggers for scaling in the public sector environment (Karré, 2022; Rønning *et al.*, 2022). In the market, diffusion is a dominant strategy for increasing profits (Rogers, 1962). Therefore, in general, the focus of entrepreneurs is to expand and increase volumes. The parties supporting them, such as investors or accelerators (Crişan *et al.*, 2019), usually also have a commercial interest in expanding, e.g. they get a percentage of profit. However, money is also important for public organizations, which are key actors in the environment of social initiatives. Public organizations are subject to political and administrative control and must use public funds efficiently and effectively (Karré, 2022; Rainey and Chun 2007). And, as noted above, a decentralized public sector runs the risk of generating a proliferation of similar initiatives (Hartmann and Hartmann, 2023) and unnecessary spending of public money. Therefore, not wasting public money could be an important incentive to scale social initiatives. In addition, scaling to other contexts allows more citizens to benefit from the innovation, another important goal of the public sector.

The second challenge in scaling social initiatives is related to the complexity of the public sector environment. The public sector environment is multi-level and includes different dimensions: individual, the organizational and institutional dimension and occurs at the local, regional and (inter) national level (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; Osborne *et al.*, 2022). The generation of innovative ideas often occurs in collaboration between public organizations (Bryson *et al.*, 2015; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009), in particular with those who share the general interest and are familiar with the norms and practices of a specific domain (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Brock, 2020). But also, in collaboration between public and private organizations (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; Jukic *et al.*, 2019) and in collective action (De Moor, 2023). In recent years, labs, referred to as innovation labs, policy labs, living labs, have received much attention in the public innovation literature (Cole, 2022; Lewis, 2021; Dekker *et al.*, 2020). These labs focus on the generation of innovative approaches for public service delivery in collaboration with target groups (Lewis, 2021). The public sector environment includes therefore a wide variety of stakeholders who have varying roles on various levels in the generation and scaling of social initiatives (Meijer, 2014). Particularly in decentralized sectors, collaboration on multiple levels makes scaling in the public sector a challenge of bridging different interests and cultures (Cinar *et al.*, 2019; Schot and Geels, 2010).

The third challenge in scaling social initiatives in the public sector environment are the complex scaling dynamics. Scaling in the public sector is a more complex process than simply spreading a social initiative to another context (Moore *et al.*, 2015), in the literature often indicated as scaling out (Westley *et al.*, 2014). In order to achieve their social purpose, social initiatives need to influence rules and routines, referred to as scaling up (Hermans *et al.*, 2016), as well as attitudes, referred to as scaling deep (Peeters and Mahout, 2020, Moore *et al.*, 2015). The different dimensions of scaling, scaling out, up and deep, are interrelated. For example, scaling out without embedding in the current routines (scaling up) will defeat the social purpose, but scaling out can increase pressure on the current rules and attitudes and therefore support the scaling up and deep as well. It must be said that scaling out to other contexts is not an end in itself and there are studies that show that social initiatives can also scale down, meaning they are doing the opposite of scaling out by focusing on a smaller group (Peeters and Mahout, 2020). This dissertation, however, focuses on scaling out, but the process of scaling out cannot be studied without considering the processes of scaling up and deep.

The above challenges show that there are many factors that complicate the process of scaling to other contexts. There are no commercial triggers for the wide variety of stakeholders who are involved in the scaling process which moreover exists of different interrelated scaling dimensions. Understanding these factors and their relationship is important because it helps to unravel the complex scaling process.

This dissertation analyses the influence on the scaling process of 1) factors associated with social initiative, the skills and position to mobilize others. This is important since scaling is a collaborative process (Meijer, 2014) and stakeholders cannot be motivated by commercial triggers (Karré, 2021). 2) factors related to the environment, such as the support for the scaling. This is important since the different scaling dimensions require the support of a wide variety of stakeholders, such as policy advisors, public managers, and interest groups. The multi-level environment and different dimensions in scaling imply that stakeholders can have various roles in the scaling process. In the context of this dissertation, the role of diffuser is particularly interesting. In the market, there are different platforms that support startups to grow their business, such as accelerators (Crişan *et al.*, 2019). Although, as mentioned, the market is fundamentally different from the public sector environment, the core function of ‘diffusors’ remains the same: to scale out initiatives. Therefore, 3) this dissertation will explore the role of accelerators in the public sector environment.

1.3. Research aim and research questions

The central research question of this dissertation is 'How do social initiatives manage to scale?' The focus is on the scaling of social initiatives that start in or on the fringes of public organizations to other contexts, i.e. scaling out, with an awareness of the interrelationship between scaling out, scaling up and scaling deep. To answer the central research question, this dissertation focuses on three factors presented in the literature as crucial to the scaling process of social initiatives: the institutional environment, actor characteristics, and the role of accelerators. These are reflected in the following sub-questions:

1. What do we know about the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q1)
2. How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q2)
3. How do actor characteristics influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q3)
4. How do accelerators influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q4)

To answer these sub-questions, four sub-studies were conducted. The four studies are discussed below to highlight the relevance of the sub-questions and how the sub-studies contribute to the gaps in the relevant literature. The addressed gaps in one sub-study are sometimes based on the findings of one of the other sub-studies. Some gaps are addressed in more than one sub-study, which is reflected in Table 1 at the end of this section.

1.3.1. Study 1: providing an overview of the current literature on scaling

The first study's aim was to provide a basis for empirical research into the scaling of social initiatives in the social sector. Studies on scaling are fragmented, and concepts are used in different ways. There is a lack of a systematic overview of current literature and a framework for research is missing. This was identified as **gap 1**, which relates to the first research sub-question: What do we know about the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q1). The results of the first study are discussed in chapter 2 and 6. Based on these findings, the following choices were made in the delineation of the empirical research, some of which have already been discussed in section 1.2:

1. In this dissertation the focus is on social initiatives with a general interest that rely entirely or largely on public resources and operate within or on the fringes of public organizations. These social initiatives are very closely tied to the services provided by public organizations. Examples of these social initiatives are explained in more detail in section 1.5.
2. This dissertation focuses on scaling out, meaning scaling to other contexts/geographical areas, recognizing that scaling out is strongly intertwined with scaling up and deep. Consequently, this dissertation focuses on the scaling *process*, rather than on the scaling outcomes, such as public value and focuses on the later stages, not on the idea generation.
3. This dissertation focuses on the social sector, since the first study shows that research on scaling is dominated by sustainability issues (Hossain, 2016) while the social sector is understudied. This was identified as **gap 2**.

The findings of the first study formed the basis for three sub-studies on the influence of the institutional environment, actor characteristics and that of accelerators on the scaling process of social initiatives. Deepening the relevant literature for these three sub-studies led to the identification of **gaps 3-9** in the literature. These gaps and their identification are discussed in more detail in the presentation of sub-studies 2, 3 and 4.

1.3.2. Study 2: exploring the influence of institutional environments on the scaling process

The first study shows that – next to actor characteristics - the institutional environment is a crucial component in the scaling process of social initiatives. The following sub-question – Q2 – was formulated to guide study 2: How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? Literature on public innovation and institutional entrepreneurship formed the basis for this sub-study on the environmental influence. Both academic disciplines emphasize the importance of a heterogeneous environment, meaning environments with a wide diversity of organizations with their own norms and practices (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017), for the generation of innovative ideas, but each with its own accent. The literature on public innovation shows an increasing attention of public organizations to collaborate with external parties, both public and private (Bryson *et al.*, 2015; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009; Bason, 2010) with the aim of creating more experimental space (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008). However, heterogeneity is often associated with the generation of innovative ideas, rather than with scaling out, the later stage of the scaling process.

The literature on institutional entrepreneurship highlights the negative influence of homogeneous environments, meaning environments with a low diversity in organizations, norms, and practices (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; DiMaggio and Powel, 1983), on the innovation process. A homogeneous environment where organizations look alike and have a long history of collaboration with each other is less conducive to the generation and scaling of ideas, because the persistent patterns of the public organizations could easily lead to compromise or failure of social initiatives (Schot and Geels, 2010; Torfing, 2009). In relation to the scaling process, the literature on institutional entrepreneurship therefore emphasizes the importance of multi-embeddedness (Grin, 2020). This means that stakeholders have strong networks in multiple environments. As a result, they would be able to implement the initiative in the homogeneous environment without being too influenced by it and having to make undesirable compromises that reduce the effectiveness of initiatives (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Schot and Geels, 2010). However, literature on institutional entrepreneurship does not distinguish between the various dimensions in scaling. Social initiatives may be able to impact local rules and routines (scaling up), but not scale out to other contexts. Thus, both the public innovation literature and the institutional entrepreneurship literature pay little attention to the influence of homogeneity and heterogeneity on the scaling out *process*. This gap in the literature on scaling - **gap 3** – is addressed in study 2.

The literature on public innovation shows that spreading social initiatives is a complex collaborative process (Meijer, 2014). In contrast to the private sector, making profit is not a drive for scaling social initiatives to other contexts (Karré, 2022). Initiators of social initiatives may be highly

motivated by their purpose (Smith *et al.*, 2016), but in decentralized sectors they may tie to a local public organization and not have the time or space to spread the social initiatives to other geographical areas as this goes beyond their formal sphere of influence. Or co-created initiatives rely on local networks that are difficult to scale. The question then is: who is driving and coordinating the scaling out of social initiatives? Coordination in scaling out is crucial, not only to increase the beneficiaries and avoid the waste of public money, but also to keep focus on the effectiveness while scaling (Schot and Geels, 2010; Williams, 2014). However, knowledge about coordination in the scaling process is limited, which is identified as **gap 4** in the academic literature on scaling. Gap 4 is addressed in sub-studies 2 and 4.

Furthermore, the few studies on roles in scaling (Hansen *et al.*, 2022) focus on individuals and single cases. There is limited knowledge about the roles of organizational actors, e.g. the role of a ministry or interest group, for example their role as accelerator. This is important because this would provide information about the structural networks for scaling for the benefit of all social initiatives, rather than individual cases. The limited knowledge on the role of organizational actors is identified as **gap 5** in the literature and addressed in sub-study 2, 3 and 4.

1.3.3. Study 3: exploring the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process

The first study shows that actor characteristics are - next to the institutional environment - a crucial component of the scaling process of social initiatives. Study 3 is related to Q3: How do actor characteristics influence the scaling process of social initiatives? The literature on social and institutional entrepreneurship formed the basis for the sub-study on the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives. The first study shows that entrepreneurial skills are an important actor characteristic for scaling social initiatives. Entrepreneurial skills are often used to describe the ability to formulate an ambitious vision, recognize opportunities and create a sustainable business (Mukhuty and Williams, 2015). In the context of public innovation, institutional entrepreneurship is more common and used to express the activities of creating a vision of divergent institutional change and convincing stakeholders to support the vision (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). These skills have much in common with entrepreneurial skills, so in this dissertation entrepreneurial skills are defined as skills to formulate an ambitious vision for (social) change and to focus on sustainability. By doing so, these skills apply to social entrepreneurship (Bacq and Janssen, 2011), intrapreneurship (Bosma *et al.*, 2010) and institutional entrepreneurship (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017).

Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills actively mobilize stakeholders to support their social

initiative (North, 1991; Bocken, 2015). They also tend to have a high need to control the scaling process (Smith *et al.*, 2016) and focus on both scaling up and out to increase their impact (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Santos, 2012). However, our knowledge on the influence of entrepreneurial skills on the scaling process is strongly based on the literature on social initiatives that scale in the market, which – as discussed in paragraph 1.2 - differs from scaling in the public sector environment because there are no commercial incentives and the scaling process is much more complex (Karré, 2022; Moore *et al.*, 2015). In addition, the focus on social enterprises ignores the entrepreneurial behavior of initiators of social initiatives that operate in public organizations, such as civil servants (Hartmann and Hartmann, 2023). Although the public sector is often seen as less known for their entrepreneurial behavior (Bason, 2010), this is also controversial (Mazzucato, 2013). There is limited knowledge on the differences between the entrepreneurial skills of initiators inside and outside public organizations. This is identified as **gap 6** in the literature on scaling and is addressed in sub-study 3.

In addition to entrepreneurial skills, the literature on institutional entrepreneurship shows that the initiator's position, meaning authority in the eyes of others (Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020), is also important for scaling. Initiators with a strong position in a particular context, such as the social sector, have an advantage because they have better access to relevant networks and can mobilize stakeholders (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). Thus, while the literature on social entrepreneurship highlights the importance of the actor characteristic 'entrepreneurial skills', the literature on institutional entrepreneurship focuses on the 'position' of initiators. To better understand the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives, it is important to know how these two actor characteristics are related to each other and to the scaling process of social initiatives. However, this knowledge is lacking. This is identified as **gap 7** in the literature.

The importance of and limited knowledge about the coordination of the scaling process was discussed in relation to sub-study 2 (identified as gap 4). Lack of coordination could also negatively affect the effectiveness of social initiatives in other contexts, because if there is no focus on the effectiveness while scaling, social initiatives may easily be implemented in a way that they are less effective (Schot and Geels, 2010; Williams, 2014). This aspect remains understudied in the literature on public innovation (Williams, 2014) and the literature on social and institutional entrepreneurship only indirectly provides evidence. Social entrepreneurs with high entrepreneurial skills would be more focused on the effect on the institutional environment than those with low skills (Smith *et al.*, 2016; Zahra *et al.*, 2009), while a position in a well-established network could be prohibitive because initiatives may end in compromises

(Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020; Schot and Geels, 2010). Knowledge about retaining effectiveness as part of the scaling process is therefore important. Social initiatives in other contexts may fail because they are poorly implemented. For example, providing housing for homeless drug addicts without supervision. Also, what works in one context may not work in another because of different local circumstances (Williams, 2014). Evidence-based policymaking is a critical issue globally (Meijer *et al.*, 2023). In the technological areas there is a growing interest in R & D collaboration on a voluntary basis (Meijer *et al.*, 2023; Amir *et al.*, 2019), for example by investing in joint labs, cartels, and development of standards. In the social sector however, such agreements are less common, although there is a growing interest in social R & D as well (Foray *et al.*, 2012; TACSI, 2021). This may be explained by the fact that financial investments and commercial interests are lower and performance of human behavior more difficult to measure than technical performance. Lack in focus on effectiveness as part of the scaling out process is identified as **gap 8** in the literature. Study 3 therefore addresses gaps 6, 7 and 8 in addition to gaps 2 and 5, which have already been discussed above.

1.3.4. Study 4: exploring the role of accelerators in the public sector

Study 4 addresses research gaps 2, 4 and 5. It also addresses the final gap identified in this dissertation, **gap 9**, by focusing on the role of accelerators in the public sector, indicated as public sector accelerators. Gap 9 was not the result of an in-depth literature review, but of empirical research conducted to answer research questions Q2 and Q3 (sub-studies 2 and 3). It was found that there are stakeholders, sometimes initiators themselves, who act more or less as accelerators for the scaling out of social initiatives. Despite the growing attention on roles and ecosystems for innovation, both in the private (Content *et al.*, 2020) and public sector (Osborne *et al.*, 2022), the role of accelerators has only been addressed in the literature on scaling in the private sector (Crişan *et al.*, 2019). There is no academic understanding of the role of accelerators in the public sector environment and their relation to the role of other stakeholders such as policy labs, living labs, which have received a lot of attention in the public innovation literature in recent years (Cole, 2022; Lewis, 2021; Dekker *et al.*, 2020). Knowledge on the role of accelerators in the public sector is important, as it contributes to a better understanding of the complex scaling process of social initiatives to other contexts and provides guidance for improvement. Gap 9 relates to Q4: How do accelerators influence the scaling process of social initiatives?

Table 1 Identified gaps and relation to research sub-questions and literature

Gap	Research question	Literature
1. Overview of the literature on scaling process of social initiatives is missing	Q1	<i>Scaling in general</i> (Hossain, 2016; Hermans <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Zahra <i>et al.</i> , 2009)
2. Limited knowledge on scaling in the social sector compared to sustainability issues	Q2, Q3, Q4	<i>Public innovation</i> (Hossain, 2016)
3. Limited knowledge on influence of institutional environment on scaling	Q2	<i>Public innovation</i> (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009) <i>Institutional entrepreneurship</i> (Micelotta <i>et al.</i> , 2017)
4. Academic understanding of coordination of the scaling process is lacking	Q2, Q4	<i>Public innovation</i> (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Karré, 2022)
5. Limited knowledge on the role of organizational actors in scaling	Q2, Q3, Q4	<i>Public innovation</i> (Hansen <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Ansell and Gash, 2012; Meijer, 2014)
6. Limited knowledge on relation between skills of initiators in and outside public organizations and the scaling process	Q3	<i>Social entrepreneurship</i> (Smith <i>et al.</i> , 2016; North, 1991; Zahra <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Mazzucato, 2013)
7. Limited knowledge on the relation between initiators' skills <i>and</i> position on the scaling process	Q3	<i>Institutional entrepreneurship</i> (Hoogstraaten <i>et al.</i> , 2020) <i>Social entrepreneurship</i> (Smith <i>et al.</i> , 2016)
8. Limited knowledge on focus on retention of effectiveness in another context	Q3	<i>Public innovation</i> (Williams, 2014) <i>Institutional entrepreneurship</i> (Hoogstraaten <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Schot and Geels, 2010) <i>Social entrepreneurship</i> (Zahra <i>et al.</i> , 2009)
9. No empirical understanding of the role of accelerators in the public sector context	Q4	<i>Public innovation</i> (Osborne <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Cole, 2022; Dekker <i>et al.</i> , 2020) <i>Private sector management</i> (Crişan <i>et al.</i> , 2019)

Table 1 summarizes the nine identified gaps in the literature on scaling, related to the four research sub-questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4) and broken down by public innovation, institutional entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and private sector management literature.

Overall, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the academic literature on scaling (gap 1), public innovation (gap 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9), institutional entrepreneurship (gap 3, 7 and 8), social entrepreneurship (gap 6, 7 and 8) and private sector management (gap 9) by filling the gaps identified in Table 1. In doing so, this dissertation is relevant to the academic literature because it 1) provides a cross-disciplinary framework for research on scaling, 2) provides a more precise and nuanced understanding of the influence and relations between concepts of environmental factors and actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives and 3) explores the potential role of accelerators in the context of the public sector.

1.4. Research strategy

In order to answer the central research question ‘*How do social initiatives manage to scale?*’ and the four sub-questions, this dissertation is structured in two parts. The first study consists of a literature review on scaling. This literature study forms the basis for the second part: the empirical research which consists of three sub-studies (2, 3 and 4).

1.4.1. Research design

To answer Q1, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted. SLR has its roots in medicine (Cook *et al.*, 1997) and has been used in management and entrepreneurship (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) and environmental studies (Hossain, 2016). The literature review was conducted by searching Web of Science for articles on scaling social and sustainable initiatives in May 2017, resulting in 133 articles processed and analysed. The search strategy and method of analysis are described in more detail in chapter 2.

The empirical study to answer Q2, Q3 and Q4 consisted of a comparative multiple case study conducted between 2019 and 2022. A multiple case study method is used to conduct an in-depth analysis of cases and to explore causal relationships (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). The focus of this dissertation is on social initiatives in the Dutch social sector. The social sector was chosen because social issues are underrepresented in the literature on scaling (gap 2). The *Dutch* social sector was chosen because in the Netherlands the social sector is highly decentralized. A decentralized public sector provides room for innovative solutions at the local level, but also poses challenges for scaling to other contexts as discussed in section 1.2.2.

To answer Q2, related to sub-study 2, the influence of the institutional environment on the scaling

process, three domains within the social sector were selected: mental health, labour participation and debt. Mental healthcare was selected because it was representative for the homogeneous institutional environment, stimulating labour participation as representation of a heterogeneous institutional environment and debt assistance as representation of an institutional environment in which homogeneity and heterogeneity is balanced. This delineation within the Dutch social sector was also useful for answering Q3, the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process, as these domains provided enough diversity to select a variety of skills and positions of initiators without creating too much diversity in social initiatives. The three domains are described in more detail in 1.5.

1.4.2. Collecting and analysing data

The empirical study consisted of 48 in-depth interviews. Respondents were identified through social media and snowball sampling. Respondents were considered as 'organizational units' which means they represented for example a department, a project or small foundation. For sub-study 2, on the influence of the institutional environment, stakeholders in the three domains mental health, debts, and labour participation, were selected, such as ministries, interest groups and commercial organizations with strong roots in the domain. Parallel, initiators of social initiatives were interviewed. Initiators vary in their positions from directors of a foundation, project leaders or employees. They were the faces of the social initiatives, but more importantly, those who did the actual work in the scaling, at least at the local level. Social initiatives were selected by snowball method and media. To be included in the research, social initiatives must 1) occur in one of the three domains 2) focus on the general interest, and strongly rely on public resources 3) operate in or on the fringes of public organizations and very closely tied to the services provided by public organizations 4) have started at least three years. So, community initiatives and (social) enterprises that strongly relied on the market mechanism were excluded. However, social initiatives by entrepreneurs or commercial organizations could meet the criteria if the social initiative was not their core business and did not generate income from the market mechanism. For this dissertation, 20 social initiatives were identified.

In practice, it was impossible to unequivocally link all social initiatives to interviewees, because programs could contain many social initiatives and initiatives could be collaborative partners of other initiatives and sometimes similar initiatives started at the same time by different initiators. Table 2 shows how respondents and initiatives were distributed.

Table 2 Distribution of initiatives and respondents across the three domains

Mental health 8 initiatives	Labour participation 6 initiatives	Debt 6 initiatives
18 Ministry (2) Interest group (4) Healthcare (1) Platform (1) Municipality (1) Mental health organization (4) Housing cooperation (1) Foundation (3) Social work (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Commercial enterprise (1) Knowledge centre (1) Foundation (2) Commercial enterprise (3) Governmental commission (1) Regional network (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Health care (2) Knowledge centre (1) Municipality (2) Foundation (3) Social enterprise (1)

The interviews were semi-structured. The interview protocol was based on the key concepts in the sub-studies as presented in Table 3 and agreed with the supervisors beforehand. The interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed. Nvivo was used for analysis. The rich data from the interviews were used for the sub-studies Q2, the influence of the environment, Q3, the influence of actor characteristics and Q4, the influence of accelerators. The 'case' was defined as 'institutional environment', 'initiator' and 'accelerator' respectively. The dataset was analysed for case characteristics and components of the scaling process to which they are (expected to be) related. The coding variables are discussed in more detail in the relevant chapters 2-5.

For sub-studies 2 and 3, expectations were formulated based on the in-depth literature. Both sub-studies were deductive and inductive, as the analysis of the findings also led to additional insights. Sub-study 4, on the role of accelerators in the public sector context, was more exploratory, so there were no expectations to test. Table 3 summarizes the perspectives for the analysis of the dataset for the three sub-studies. The coding of the different key concepts belonging to the sub-questions is explained in more detail in the accompanying chapters 2-5.

Table 3 Overview of the three perspectives for analysing the dataset

Sub-question	Perspective (definition of 'case')	Case characteristics	Components in scaling process
Q2 (sub-study 2)	Institutional environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health (homogeneous) • Labour Participation (heterogeneous) • Debts (mixed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support • Coordination (common frame and goals)
Q3 (sub-study 3)	Initiator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial skills • Position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing stakeholders • Focus on retaining effectiveness
Q4 (sub-study 4)	Accelerator	<i>Characteristics for identification:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational form • Intensity and time limitation of support 	<i>characteristics for support:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection method • Support packages • Scaling pathway

In addition to the interviews, data were validated by consulting websites, annual reports and attending conferences and events organized by initiators of social initiatives or interest groups. This secondary data was used to broaden the picture of the institutional environment as well as validating the data on the support for the scaling process of social initiatives in the research, which increased the external validity of the data. The researcher, who was self-employed during the study, had no personal or business relationship with any of the respondents prior to the study.

1.5. Introduction of Dutch social sector and three domains

In the Dutch social sector, municipalities and social organizations work together on issues such as health, welfare, labour participation and (financial) self-reliance. Since 2015, the Dutch social sector has been decentralized, which means that local public organizations have been given much more responsibility and space to make their own decisions. The idea behind decentralization is that municipalities know better what their residents need and can therefore provide more tailored services. Decentralization has also been accompanied by budget cuts, forcing local public organizations to look for smart solutions (Karré, 2021). Within the Dutch social sector there are various domains such as social care or labour participation and a wide variety of target groups, such as the elderly or benefit recipients. The three domains in this

dissertation, mental health, labour participation and debts, also have common ground and overlap. For example, debt is often associated with mental health problems, and being out of work increases the likelihood of debt. And debt and mental health problems can also be at the root of job loss. However, each of these areas has its own specific problems, which are briefly described below. To give an idea of the social initiatives in this dissertation, two social initiatives in each domain are explained in more detail.

1.5.1. Mental health domain

The mental health domain is dominated by the Dutch Mental Health Care Institution (GGZ) in which most mental health care providers are affiliated. Anyone suffering from a mental illness must first see a general practitioner before being allowed to seek specialized help (Zorgwijzer.nl). The costs are covered by health insurance. The financial system is complex and strongly linked to diagnoses made by professionals. After the decentralization in 2015, mental health institutions were forced to collaborate more with municipalities and other local care providers. In addition, waiting lists for mental health care are getting longer. For example, in 2021, almost 16% of the Dutch employees suffered from burn-out problems (TNO, 2021) and mental health problems among youth increased to 18% (CBS, 2023). The costs for mental support exceed the budgets (De Nederlandse GGZ, 2023), meanwhile, the focus must shift to prevention.

Many social initiatives in the mental health domain focus on fighting stigma because mental illness is still taboo (Van Weeghel *et al.*, 2016). One example of an initiative included in this dissertation is an evidence based First Response method for recognizing signs of mental illness and starting the conversation. The concept was developed in Australia and brought to the Netherlands by the director of one of a Dutch mental health organization. It was set up as a limited liability company with a franchise, with the aim of rolling out the method in the Netherlands, like the First Response for Medical Help. By making the method available to citizens or employees of various organizations, mental health problems would be recognized and discussed earlier. Another example is a recovery college, run by experts, that offers free training to all residents who need it, for example on how to deal with stigma. ‘College’ emphasizes learning rather than therapy, making mental problems accessible. In the Netherlands, recovery colleges in this form are relatively new. The initiative was taken by a mental health organization, but it was left to the peer experts themselves. The recovery college has now been established in the area.

1.5.2. Labour participation domain

After the decentralization, the decrease in the number of social workplaces was accompanied by cut budgets (SER, 2016). Since then, municipalities have focused more on reintegrating people in welfare (SCP, 2021). The idea was that people with a distance to the labour market should work in regular jobs. In the labour market, organizations have a growing interest in hiring people who are far from the labour market for social (Defourny *et al.*, 2021) or corporate responsibility reasons (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Partly because of Black Lives Matter, diversity and inclusion is on the agenda of employers (Verloo, 2023). And there are all sorts of schemes to attract employers with a distance to labour market. So, in addition to the diversity of municipalities and other public organizations, in the labour participation domain there is a wide variety of commercial organizations. An example of an initiative in this dissertation is a service from a public organization, where, together with network partners in the region, jobs in healthcare are created for people who are at a distance from the labour market. This is done through job carving. Another example is an accessible selection method that is based on the applicant's trust. When an applicant thinks they meet the requirements, they are basically hired. For individuals who are apprehensive about rejection, this could be perceived as a lowering of the threshold. This method comes from the United States and was brought to the Netherlands by a foundation - a former government organization. The aim is to roll out this method within municipalities and the regional labour market.

1.5.3. Debt domain

'Livelihood security' is high on the political agenda and was a hot topic in many election manifestos, including those of the liberal parties in the last Dutch general election in 2023 (Wiarda Beckman Stichting, 2023). The previous cabinet even had a minister for poverty. It illustrates the vulnerable position of a group of citizens who cannot pay their bills. Debt is a serious social problem for municipalities (CBS, 2020), as it is often associated with other problems such as the threat of eviction for homes, health problems and child poverty. Debt therefore results in additional costs for municipalities, housing cooperatives and health insurance companies. Apart from these costs, the social impact of debt in 2022 was estimated at around 17 billion euros (NVVK, 2022). Compared to mental health and labour participation, the stakeholders in the debt domain are well known. However, the way people in debt are viewed has changed. First because of the economic crisis in the early years of the 21st century, and later because of Corona (Commissie Sociaal Minimum, 2023). Debt is now seen as something that can happen to anyone, and the focus is on prevention rather than fines for overdue payments. Talking about debt however is still

a taboo (Rijksoverheid, 2019) and therefore debt relief often only starts when people are in desperate need.

One example of a social initiative in the debt domain is a project started by employees of a local authority. They saw that people in debt often came to the attention of the authorities at a late stage, and together with the 'fixed cost' organizations, they committed themselves to setting up a system for early warning and discussion of arrears. Together with colleagues from other municipalities, the project was taken up more widely and early detection eventually became national policy. Another illustration of a social initiative is that of a large cleaning company that feels a sense of social responsibility. It has set up a foundation specifically for this purpose. The director visited local councillors to find out what their main concerns were. It turned out to be debt. Together with the parties, the director launched a digital buddy initiative, where people get a digital buddy to help them get their finances in order. This initiative was intended to be a flywheel for a national map, in collaboration with other stakeholders, for helping people at various stages of debt.

1.6. Societal relevance of the dissertation

The need to scale social initiatives in the public sector is great because there are many challenges that require smart solutions that meet the needs of residents (Bason, 2010; Torfing, 2016; Crosby *et al.*, 2017). This is also true for the decentralized Dutch social sector, which faces difficult problems that cannot be solved by local governments alone. In practice, however, many social initiatives that are implemented in one context fail to scale out or get bogged down in bureaucracy (Schot and Geels, 2010). Research on the scaling process of social initiatives is therefore urgently needed and relevant from a societal perspective. After all, it is citizens who ultimately benefit from innovation, so the better the scaling process, the greater the societal impact. Moreover, if scaling is efficient as well as effective, it also saves taxpayers' money. This dissertation provides an analysis of the scaling process from two perspectives: that of the institutional environment, including the role of accelerators and that of the characteristics of the initiator of social initiatives. These findings provide guidance for different stakeholders in the social sector to improve the performance of the scaling out process of social initiatives.

First, at the sector and domain level, insights into how the institutional environment supports social initiatives in scaling can help public managers, policy advisors, interest groups and other stakeholders, who are part of the environment, in their efforts to organize and support the collaborative

scaling process in a way that do justice to local diversity, so no standard approach, but that is also effective and efficient. This study exposes the need and possibly their blind spots, which helps them to take responsibility and find the right balance between local diversity and a one size-fits-all approach.

Second, at the local level, insights into the entrepreneurial behaviour of initiators inside and outside public organizations make public managers aware of their role in not only the generation and embedding of social initiatives at the local level, but in the scaling to other contexts as well. Their role does not end with their formal authority, because they are part of the multi-level environment in which they collaborate with other stakeholders. This study provides insights and tool to encourage and support social initiatives to scale to other contexts, thereby also increasing their contribution to the social sector as a whole.

Thirdly, on the individual level, the findings of this dissertation contribute to practice of initiators of social initiatives as the findings expose the differences in interaction between initiators and their institutional environment and the effect on the scaling process. Initiators of social initiatives, both in and outside public organizations, can benefit from these findings in their efforts to scale their innovation to other contexts.

1.7. Overview of the dissertation

Table 4 presents an overview of this dissertation. The four sub-questions are addressed and answered in the subsequent chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5. These chapters take the form of scientific publications, the status of which is shown in the last column of Table 4. Table 4 also shows in which chapters the nine identified gaps in the literature are discussed.

Table 4 Overview dissertation

Chapter	Research sub-question	Literature gaps (Table 1)	Status
Chapter 2 How and why do social and sustainable initiatives scale?	Q1 What do we know about the scaling process of social initiatives?	1	Published as co-authored paper Van Lunenburg, M., K. Geuijen and A. Meijer. 2020. "How and Why Do Social and Sustainable Initiatives Scale? A Systematic Review of the Literature on Social Entrepreneurship and Grassroots Innovation." <i>Voluntas</i> .31 (5), 1013-1024.
Chapter 3 How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives?	Q2 How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives?	2, 3, 4, 5, 9	Published as single authored paper Van Lunenburg, M. (2024), "How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? An empirical exploration in the Dutch public sector", <i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i> , Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 77-90. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-12-2022-0291
Chapter 4 Scaling of social initiatives: the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions?	Q3 How do actor characteristics influence the scaling process of social initiatives?	2, 5, 6, 7, 8	Published as single author paper Van Lunenburg, M. (2024), "Scaling of social initiatives: the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions", <i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i> , Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-12-2023-0374
Chapter 5 Scaling social initiatives: An exploratory study on public sector accelerators?	Q4 How do accelerators influence the scaling process of social initiatives?	2, 4, 5, 9	Published as single author paper Van Lunenburg, M. (2024), "Accelerating social initiatives: an exploratory study in the social sector", <i>Public Management Review</i> , https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2024.2395497
Chapter 6 Synthesis	Central research question: How do social initiatives manage to scale?		

Chapter 2 How and why do social and sustainable initiatives scale?¹

Abstract

Social and sustainable initiatives generally start small and need to scale to create substantial impact. Our systematic review of 133 articles develops a better understanding of this scaling process. From the literature, we conceptualize impact as the result of two different pathways: ‘scaling out’ (extending geographical space or volume) and ‘scaling up’ (influence on public discourses, political agendas, and legislation). The review identified strategy, actor characteristics and institutional environment as key factors for scaling. The literature indicates that for *strategy* a focus on open structures generates speed and higher impact, but we also found critical views on this. The literature shows that the *actor characteristics* such as the ambition to scale, equal focus on the economic and the social logic, entrepreneurial skills and leadership are positively related to the level of impact. The *institutional environment* influences actor characteristics and strategy choices and also has a direct effect on the level of social and sustainable impact.

2.1. Introduction

Social and sustainable initiatives generally start small but some of them manage to create an enormous impact when they scale. Research has shown that local initiatives can form the starting point for processes of transformation by bringing in new ideas and generating public support (Doberstein, 2016; Bason, 2010; Fung, 2015; Geuijen 2014; Cloutier *et al.*, 2015). These initiatives may also have an impact on policies and even transform national and international systems (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). At the moment, however, our academic knowledge of scaling these initiatives is limited.

There are well known examples of successful scaling such as the Alzheimer Café and the Instock Restaurant. At the Alzheimer Café, families meet peers, professionals and students in an informal setting. It started in The Dutch city of Leiden in 1997 and at the moment there are 230 Alzheimer Cafés in the

¹ This chapter has been published as co-authored paper Van Lunenburg, M., K. Geuijen and A. Meijer. 2020. “How and Why Do Social and Sustainable Initiatives Scale? A Systematic Review of the Literature on Social Entrepreneurship and Grassroots Innovation.” *Voluntas*.31 (5), 1013-1024.

Netherlands. The idea has been picked up in other countries as well. The Instock restaurant prepares high quality meals from wasted ingredients. In 2015, four ambitious employees of a big supermarket in the Netherlands started it and meanwhile, they have not only increased the number of restaurants, but also put food waste on the political and public agenda. These examples are highly interesting but an academic understanding of these successful forms of scaling is lacking.

Scaling local initiatives turns out to be rather difficult (Hermans *et al.*, 2016). How, why and under what conditions initiatives scale are important questions, but academic knowledge is limited and fragmented. In addition, this subject is researched in different academic domains with their own terms and jargon. A systematic review on the literature of the scaling process of social and sustainable initiatives is needed to develop a better and more precise understanding of this process in different areas.

Systematic reviews are based on systematic methods (Tranfiels *et al.*, 2003) and aim to gather, evaluate and synthesize all studies on a topic (Popay, 2005). They also identify the gaps in the literature to help further scientific knowledge (Kitchenham, 2004). Despite their complex and time-consuming nature (Mills *et al.*, 2005), systematic reviews are of key importance since they contribute to the academic literature and also be a methodological advance for the field.

The present literature review aims to answer the research question: *How and why do social and sustainable initiatives scale?* This paper aims to build a framework that synthesizes the state of the art of the fragmented literature in an accessible manner. It provides the basis for research into the scaling mechanisms of initiatives that start bottom up by presenting the state-of-the-art knowledge on this topic (what do we know and where are the gaps) and by providing the conceptual understanding that is needed to study this topic.

2.2. Central concepts, search terms and definitions

2.2.1. Central concepts

A literature review of scaling processes of local initiatives is complicated in view of the variety of terms and concepts that are being used to refer to the same or similar processes, in different areas. To get more focus, we distinguished four central concepts – (1) actor characteristics (2) strategic choices (3) institutional factors and (4) impact – based on the literature on strategic management (Trau, 2017; Eshima and Anderson, 2017; Kraus and Rigtering, 2017) and environmental issues (Hossain, 2016; Martiskainen, 2017; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013). The four concepts refer to choices to be made by actors or

organizations acting in a certain context, with the aim to increase their impact.

2.2.2. Search terms

The systematic review was an iterative process that we used to specify the central concepts in more detail. At the start of our research, we thoroughly considered what search terms cover our main interest the best. Selecting search terms turned out to be more complicated in view of the variety of terms that are being used to express 'local initiatives'. An initial exploration of these terms helped to select our search terms for the literature review.

The term 'bottom-up initiatives' is often used as an umbrella term to express initiatives that start locally. This umbrella term, however, is not used as much as the underlying, more specific terms. A systematic review of grassroots innovation literature showed that almost all articles were published in journals that focus on the environmental research areas (Hossain 2016). Grassroots innovation would therefore only cover the sustainable initiatives in our review and provide limited information about scaling of social initiatives.

We considered 'social enterprise' as search term. However, following the definition of social enterprise in Roy *et al.*, (2014) as 'business with social objectives whose surplus revenue is reinvested for these purposes' we would have excluded other forms of social entrepreneurial behaviour, for example by employees or individual citizens. We follow Becker *et al.*, (2017) who have combined the literature on community energy (grassroots innovation) with that of social entrepreneurship and found this fertile ground for mutual advancement. By including the concept social entrepreneurship, we not only covered the social initiatives, but also enrich the literature on grassroots innovation. In order to check whether we did not omit relevant literature on specific geographical areas or research domains by selecting 'social entrepreneurship' as our search term, we compared this term with 'social enterprise'. In the period which our research covers we did not find a difference between these two terms, neither geographically nor in research area.

In brief, besides 'bottom-up' we include two search terms that represent social and environmental initiatives more specifically: grassroots innovation and social entrepreneurship. We searched on these terms AND 'scaling'.

2.2.3. Definitions

Grassroots innovation is seen as a bottom-up process that focuses on the creation of public value. Seyfang and Smiths' (2007) definition of grassroots innovation is widely used in the literature:

"(...) networks of activists and organizations generating novel, bottom-up solutions for sustainable development, solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved." (Seyfang and Smith 2007, page 585).

Although a clear definition of social entrepreneurship is still missing, they share the dual focus on economic goals and their social challenges (Becker *et al.*, 2017; Zahra *et al.* 2009; Santos, 2012; Smit and Stevens, 2010). Some authors also refer to environmental challenges (Becker *et al.*, 2017).

Scaling is defined as 'increasing the impact a social (or sustainable)-purpose organization produces' (Dees 2008, p. 18 in Smith *et al.*, 2016). However, the literature provides many different perspectives on scaling and it is not clear how social and sustainable impact can be understood. For this reason, we decided to use the literature to develop a conceptual understanding of scaling and impact that could form the basis for further research.

2.3. Methodology

2.3.1. Search strategy for identification and selection of studies

We adopted the systematic literature review (SLR) as our method. SLR was grounded in Medical Science (Cook *et al.*, 1997) and adopted in the field of management and entrepreneurship (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) and in environmental studies (Hossain, 2016). This method was used to provide a framework for identifying the gaps in literature relevant to scaling social and sustainable initiatives and for synthesizing the existing findings. Systematic reviews improve the quality of the review process and outcome by employing a transparent, reproducible procedure (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). Following SLR guidelines, the review process consists of three stages: data collection, assessment and clustering for analysis and reporting.

2.3.2. Data collection

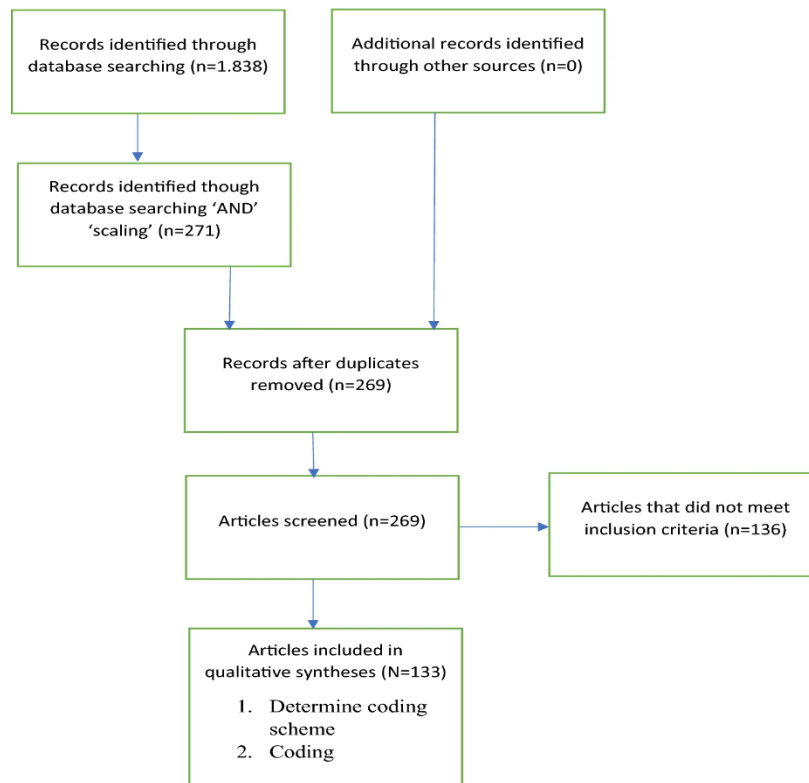
On May 5th, 2017, we identified 1.838 studies by searching the Web of Science (SSCI, SCI en A&HCI) database on the topics 'bottom-up initiatives' (494), 'grassroots innovation' (172) and 'social

entrepreneurship' (1.172). Only articles were included. Articles not written in English were excluded. To keep our focus on the scaling process and reduce the number of articles, we infused our search with 'scaling'. This resulted in 271 articles (bottom-up 76; grassroots innovation 26; social entrepreneurship 167).

2.3.3. Inclusion criteria for studies to review

After duplicated were removed, 169 abstracts and (sometimes) content were screened on two inclusion criteria: (1) studies that regarded the broader public sector and (2) studies concerning scaling in the context of growth, distribution or transformation.

Figure 1 Flow diagram of the literature screening process



2.3.4. Assessment process and coding

The assessment was done by the first author, a PhD-student. Every step was taken in close consultation with the supervisors of the team, being the second and third author. We started our analysis with a rough

division of variables taken from the central concepts: ‘strategic scaling choices’, ‘actor characteristics’, ‘institutional factors’ and ‘impact’. We also looked at the year of publication, the research area, whether a study was evidence based or not and the perspective. In order to cluster our data, we had to develop a more detailed code scheme, so we read and re-read the articles in an iterative process. In this way we double checked if all articles matched the criteria. Every step in this process was discussed in the team.

2.4. Overall findings

Our analysis of the selected set of publications showed that the first publications on bottom-up initiatives and scaling date from 1997, those on social entrepreneurship from 2003. Based on a systematic review of grassroots innovation done by Hossain (2016) we expected a dominant focus of the environmental areas in grassroots literature, but we were surprised that the environmental areas also dominate the literature on bottom-up initiatives. Although environmental areas were found in 28% of the literature on social entrepreneurship as well, business and economics was dominant (67%).

Table 5 shows that 60% of the articles was based on empirical research. In 20 studies quantitative methods were used. Although the quantitative data did not refer to the variables in the scaling process in which we were interested, it did bring us useful information on the how and why in the scaling process.

Table 5 Type of research

Empirical	Not empirical	Total
80 (60%) - 60 qualitative - 20 quantitative	53 (40%) - 44 literature review - 7(database) analyses - 2 expert interviews*	133 (100%)

**experts were interviewed for their opinions and normative visions. We therefore classified this study as not empirical.*

Most empirical studies were based on qualitative research methods (62). 52 out of 62 qualitative studies were case studies. 40% of the studies was based on secondary data, but these data may also represent empirical evidence. Sometimes experts were interviewed about their opinions on how to encourage local initiatives. We classified these interviews as secondary data, but the empirical classification would be defensible as well. All in all, most studies were based on empirical data.

The dominant theme in the literature on bottom-up initiatives was ‘how to involve the public’. Most studies were done from the perspective of the institutional environment (65%). The literature on social entrepreneurship frequently discussed the characteristics and position of the social entrepreneur compared with the traditional entrepreneur. As a result, more studies on social entrepreneurship were done from the perspective of the entrepreneur (49%).

2.5. Impact: volume, graphical distribution, and system change

Scaling is not an objective in itself but is seen as a strategy to realize more impact. All 133 articles are on scaling purposes that improve social, welfare, health or physical environmental issues. Impact as success indicator was mentioned in 20 studies. In 17 studies (15 more general studies on bottom-up initiatives and 2 specifically on grassroots initiatives) impact was considered as some form of prevention (14) or compliance (3) in the environmental or healthcare context (for example protected cost management, smoking). In the remaining 19 articles (of 56) impact was implicitly defined in terms of ‘better education’, ‘access to energy’, ‘empowerment of women’ and so on, mostly in the context of individual cases.

The types of impact are very diverse and highlight dependent on the specific issue at hand. They may also be focused on narrow or broader issues. In more general terms, our analysis highlights that impact refers to social and sustainable impact which can be expressed in (1) volume, (2) geographical distribution and (3) system change. The three dimensions can be used to assess whether scaling has resulted in impact.

2.6. Strategy choices: pathway and structure

In the diverse set of academic publications, we found two main strategy choices for scaling which we label as ‘pathway’ and ‘structure’.

2.6.1. Pathway: ‘scaling up’ or ‘scaling out’

The different perspectives in scaling processes were recognised by Westley *et al.* (2014) and Hermans *et al.* (2016). They labelled all organization’s efforts to affect more people and cover a larger geographic area as ‘scaling out’ and reserved the term ‘scaling up’ for identifying opportunities and barriers within institutional structures to properly embed an innovation and the actions that niche actors employ to

achieve that. Among these are creating and fine-tuning technologies, linkage building through intermediation activities, advocacy and lobbying, mobilizing powerful 'patrons', and creating alternative visions, framings and discourses. Vertical or political scaling was mentioned as an equivalent of 'scaling up' (Kempers *et al.*, 2015; Radywyl and Biggs, 2013; Andre and Pache, 2016). The literature highlights that the results (impact) of scaling up and scaling out are measured on different levels (Westley *et al.*, 2014). Scaling out focuses on increasing numbers, from local to international or from small to big networks. Scaling up focuses on influence on local to international political agendas, public discourses or legislation.

These two perspectives on scaling – scaling up and scaling out – show that we need to study local initiatives' scaling as two separate but possibly also interrelated processes of making more impact: either by reaching more people and a larger geographical area or by changing institutional structures. The literature suggests that local initiatives may choose one or both forms to strengthen their impact. We explored the strategic choices of local initiatives to enhance our understanding of these two possible routes to more impact.

Pathway is not explicitly discussed in many articles. As initiatives can simultaneously scale up and out, a certain article could cover both. So, 54% covered scaling up and 60% scaling out. The bottom-up literature mainly refers to scaling up in the sense of influencing policy making (64% of 55 articles). Key strategic issues are creating awareness, positive entrepreneurial environment, institutional context and inclusive policy making. In this context, Westley *et al.* (2014); Quinn, Tompkins-Stange *et al.* (2014) introduced institutional entrepreneurship as a concept and condition for scaling up successfully. The literature on social entrepreneurship relatively covered scaling out the most (64% of 56 articles). We found replication, distribution of services, (financial) growth, differentiation, diversification and market development as strategic issues in scaling out. Replication was a dominant way to scale out in bottom up and grassroots literature.

Little is known about the effects of pathway choices on social and sustainable impact. One study on the scaling process of grassroots innovations in the agricultural area showed that although they had the same challenges, grassroots initiatives all had their own pathways that strongly differ from each other and it is impossible to draw any conclusions on successful strategies (Hermans *et al.*, 2016).

2.6.2. Structure: open or closed

One important reason for the variance in scaling outcomes is the use of different strategies, or organizational modes, of scaling (Wei-Skillern *et al.*, 2007). Structure is defined as the way in which initiatives organise their activities: choosing a more open or a more closed structure. This strategy choice is linked to the concept of organizational scaling (Bocken *et al.*, 2016) and was implicitly covered by 75% of the articles. Structure is mostly discussed in the literature on social entrepreneurship. Warnecke and Houndonougbo (2016) distinguished four ways for organizational scaling: expanding the organization, establish strategic networks, affiliation/branching or informal/loose networks just to spread an idea. Smith and Stevens (2010) suggested three structure strategies for scaling: dissemination, affiliation and branching. Dissemination would be the most open structure; branching expresses the most control. Franchising sits between branching and affiliation. In the more general literature on bottom-up initiatives as well as in the more specific literature on grassroots initiatives, the collaborative structure dominated. It was also seen as the most successful strategy for scaling environmental issues (Hermans *et al.*, 2016; Becker *et al.*, 2017; Elbakitze *et al.*, 2010; Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Vergragt and Brown, 2012; Hatz *et al.*, 2016). However, we also found studies that took a critical view on the success of a collaborative strategy. These argue that collaboration could frustrate the scaling process due to internal conflicts and slow learning (Vergragt and Brown, 2012; Mair *et al.*, 2016).

The literature on social entrepreneurship was sometimes fully devoted to the relation between strategic choices on structure and impact. In general, social enterprises opt for organizational structures that resemble franchise or network models, implying that multiple bodies co-exist, all with some degree of autonomy (Voltan and Fuentes, 2016). We found evidence that open structures like franchising, generate more impact in comparison to formal structures (Auvignet and Lloret, 2015; Smith and Stevens, 2010; Beckmann and Zeyen, 2014; Krzeminska and Zeyen, 2017). Open structures also speed up the scaling process (Smith *et al.*, 2016). The relationship between structure and impact is not clear. While some studies find that an open structure implies more and faster impact, other studies contradict this. It seems that actor characteristics interfere. An entrepreneur who desires control, would choose a less open structure more often (Smith *et al.*, 2016). This would imply that preferring control would lead to a slower pace of creating impact. However, studies also show that commercial entrepreneurs – who generally desire for control - scale out faster as they are professionally organised and have better access to resources (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016). So, the relation between structure and impact seems to be mediated by actor characteristics. We will discuss this more in-depth in the next section.

In sum, strategic choices consist of the choice for a pathway and the choice for a structure. The literature provides a fragmented and inconclusive overview of the relation between pathway and social and sustainable impact. An open structure seems to speed up scaling the most, but this might also depend on actor characteristics. For this reason, we explored the literature further to understand how strategic choices and impact are influenced by actor characteristics.

2.7. Actor characteristics: willingness and ability to scale

The characteristics of actors can be organized in many ways. Scheuerle and Schmitz (2016) introduced two specific actor characteristics as conditions for scaling: willingness and ability¹. We will apply these concepts below when reporting our findings on actor characteristics.

2.7.1. Willingness to scale

The first actor characteristic we will discuss is the actor's willingness to scale. The literature distinguishes three subcategories of the actor's willingness to scale an initiative: first his or her ambition to scale, second their desire to control, and third which logic would be dominant. 52% of the articles covered one or more aspects of this concept willingness.

Scale ambition. Ambition to scale was covered by 44% of the articles. They indicate that scale ambition differs among initiatives (Becker *et al.*, 2017; Scheuerle and Schmitz, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2016; Westley *et al.*, 2014; Hufen and Koppenjan, 2015; De Bruin 2016; Gutberlet *et al.*, Campos, 2016). Different types of social entrepreneurs would have different scale ambitions. Zahra *et al.* (2009) distinguish three types of social entrepreneurs. The social bricoleur focuses on the local needs and will hardly touch the existing institutional context. The social constructionist aims to replicate an innovation to different geographical areas and the social engineer wants to break the (international) social system radically and focusses on the political agenda.

The literature indicates that scale ambition is related to the level of impact. A focus on local needs was seen as a barrier for scaling (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016; Kirwan *et al.*, 2013; Nel *et al.*, 1997; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013; Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2014; Gasperi *et al.*, 2016). Whereas social bricoleurs do not want to scale in the first place, the constructionist will scale up and/or out to the regional and national level and the engineer even to the global system. So, scale ambition is related to impact, but

literature does not allow to draw conclusions on a relation between scale ambition and pathway of structure choices.

Desire for control. The second subdivision of the concept concerning the actor's 'willingness to scale' is the actor's 'desire for control'. Smith *et al.* (2016) found that a scaling process will be delayed if the social entrepreneur has great ambitions, but also feels a strong desire for control. This result was explained by the actor's preference for an open or formal structure. Smith *et al.* (2016) presumed a relationship between the actor's wish to control, his or her strategic choice for a certain type of structure and the impact created by the initiative. A formal structure would be chosen by entrepreneurs who want to control, while open structures speed up scaling more than formal structures. Smith and Stevens (2010) explored this further by correlating structure choice and the threefold categories of Zahra *et al.* (2009). They assumed that the strength of the ties in the network is related to the desire for control: the stronger the network, the less the actor desires for control. As a result, the local bricoleur will opt for an open structure, whereas the social engineer will opt for branching. Building upon Smith *et al.*'s (2016) reasoning, it would paradoxically be expected that the social engineer would be less successful in scaling due to their choice for a less open structure. As we have indicated above, Hatzl *et al.*, (2016) found the same paradox for commercial entrepreneurs. So, the desire for control turns out to be directly related to the choice for a certain structure. It is indirectly related to the impact created.

Logic: economic and social. The third subcategory which is implicated in the actor's willingness to scale is whether the economic logic or the social logic prevails in his or her plans and actions. Logic was covered by 20% of all articles, of which 75% was literature on social entrepreneurship. Initiators who could simultaneously act in accordance with both economic and social logics turned out to be more successful in scaling (Morris *et al.*, 2011; Fosfuri *et al.*, 2016). They can sustain in their social focus, whereas social entrepreneurs who do not focus on economic goals at all, would lose their social focus over time due to external pressure (Andre and Pache, 2016). As a result, (social) impact decreases. It turns out that the prevalence of either the economic or the social logic is related to the impact which is created. However, no final conclusions on the relation between logic and pathway and structure can be drawn from the literature.

In sum, we found that scale ambition, desire for control and logic are related to impact. We do not know whether these characteristics are related to pathway: strategic choices for scaling out and/or scaling up. Desire for control seems to be related to structure choice. These findings, however, are mostly based on the literature on social entrepreneurship. We found less studies on the actor's willingness to

scale in grassroots innovation or bottom-up initiatives. We know grassroots innovation focusses on the local community, so we might consider grassroots innovators as social bricoleurs who have low ambition to scale and might have strong ties and therefore choice for an open structure. This might also explain the dominant position of collaborative structures, but we cannot draw hard conclusions on that.

2.7.2. Ability to scale

Above we indicated that the actor's characteristics consist of two relevant aspects. We have discussed 'willingness' to scale above. The second factor in actor characteristics we discuss is 'ability'. This aspect was covered by 47% of the articles. Ability to scale represents the way in which initiatives can act upon the institutional context. We distinguished three subcategories of the actor's ability to scale, being first entrepreneurial skills², second leadership, and third dependency on money, knowledge and network (resources).

Entrepreneurial skills. Entrepreneurial skills are crucial for scaling. These are needed to get political or financial support (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Calvo-Urgarteburu *et al.*, 2017; Kempers *et al.*, 2015; Warnecke and Houndonougbo 2016; Radywyl and Biggs 2013; Loosemore 2015), to build networks, to hire professional staff, to communicate with stakeholders (Smith and McBride 2015; Sofo 2008, Hatzl *et al.*, 2016; Osterblom *et al.*, 2010; Spiegel *et al.*, 2011) to work efficiently, and to build a proper business case and develop marketing strategies (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Vergragt and Brown, 2012; Bocken, 2015; Reeves *et al.*, 2014; Pless and Appel, 2012; Perrini *et al.*, 2012; Fosfuri *et al.*, 2016). In the literature most case studies were presented as successful, meant to learn from. In this context, actors having enough entrepreneurial skills was crucial for success. We therefore may conclude that the more entrepreneurial skills actors have, the more likely the initiative creates impact (on the condition that the actor's willingness to scale is high). However, we did not find information on how entrepreneurial skills and the two strategic choices, pathway and structure are related.

Leadership. Next to having entrepreneurial skills, leadership is the second subcategory of the actor's ability to scale. Leadership refers to both managing the internal organization and (proactively) dealing with the external circumstances (Nel *et al.*, 1997; Osterblom *et al.*, 2010; Sofo, 2008; Biggs *et al.*, 2010; Warnecke and Houndonougbo 2016). We classified leadership apart from entrepreneurial skills as an actor who has high leadership skills and low entrepreneurial skills could still create high impact. This

leader might proactively search for the help of others, for example by collaboration in a network or by participating in a franchise structure.

Dependency on resources. The third and final subcategory indicating the actor's ability to scale is dependency on money, knowledge, or network. This concept was often mentioned when discussing collaboration of grassroots and bottom-up initiatives, especially in environmental issues like coast protection. These issues either require high levels of knowledge and investments or they can only be solved by including a great diversity in stakeholders. In this way, a high dependency on resources requires high entrepreneurial skills and/or it would more often lead to the choice for open structures. Dependency on resources obviously is relevant for structure choice.

To conclude, the literature shows that actor characteristics influence the scaling process towards impact. In the previous section we discussed the actor's willingness to scale, and in this section, we discussed the actor's ability to scale. Two subcategories of the actor's ability are positively and directly related to impact, being entrepreneurial skills and leadership. However, dependency on resources seems to be only indirectly related to impact, being through structure choice. We did not find evidence for a relation between ability and pathway.

2.8. Institutional factors: rules and support

The setting of initiatives consists of the institutions that influence the process of scaling. The general literature on bottom-up initiatives contributed the most to the concept of institutional factors, but it was also substantially covered in more specific articles on grassroots initiatives (59% of 22) and in the literature on social entrepreneurship (41% of 56). The analysis showed that the process of scaling was influenced by the formal and informal rules (mentioned in 49% of all articles), and by support, which is being done through supplying funds, through knowledge and training, or through network relations (covered in 79% of all articles).

2.8.1. Rules

As for rules, governments obviously play a key role in designing and implementing these. However other actors – e.g. sector organizations – can also influence these rules. Space for experimentation, flexible rules, a favourable business environment and political will are crucial for scaling local initiatives (f.i.

Vergragt and Brown, 2012; Radywyl and Biggs, 2013; Biggs *et al.*, 2010; Jenson, 2017; Bailey *et al.*, 2010; Awoonor-Williams *et al.*, 2013; Biehl, 2007). Even a lack of rules can be favourable to social entrepreneurs (Gutberlet *et al.*, 2016; Gluckler and Lenz, 2016). Studies done in developing countries showed that fragile regimes might decrease the social and environmental impact (Ault, 2016). However, stable regimes with strict rules could also frustrate initiatives with their red tape resulting from the bureaucratic system (Kempers *et al.*, 2015).

2.8.2. Support

Apart from rules, there seemed to be consensus about the facilitating and encouraging role that government could have in supporting local initiatives. Based on case studies, some researchers also came up with ideas *how* government could fill in this role. For example, by organising train-the-trainer (Spiegel *et al.*, 2011), by connecting local initiatives with standards on higher levels (Riisgaard, 2011) and EU policy (Osterblom *et al.*, 2010) or by co-management (Marin and Berkes, 2010) or workshops (Bremer *et al.*, 2016). Although government is often mentioned as a major actor in the institutional environment, there are other players in the field. Ngo's are mentioned, and large companies and philanthropy may also stimulate the development of small initiatives by providing knowledge, money and access to networks (f.i. Quinn *et al.*, 2014; Harvey *et al.*, 2011). Ashoka might be an example of institutional support. This worldwide network stimulates and support the most innovative entrepreneurial solutions to social and environmental challenges, for instance by training the right skills.

So, what do we know about how institutional factors influence actor characteristics, strategic choices and impact? A favourable business environment will stimulate the start-up activities of grassroots initiatives and social enterprises and the space to experiment will help to scale. For social constructionists and engineers, rules might even be target for system change (Radywyl and Biggs, 2013). In this way, rules influence the ambition of the actor. Institutional factors also influence the focus on either the economic or the social logic. For example: some studies done in developing countries show that fragile regimes increase pressure on social entrepreneurs to shift their focus to wealthier clients as they lack the support from government which would allow them to maintain a focus on poorer clients. If they do not shift, they go out of business (Ault 2016). As logic is positively related to impact, regime indirectly influences the level of impact too.

Supporting by funds, network and knowledge influence both the actor's ability to scale and the structure choices that are made. Institutional factors can also influence impact directly by way of adjusting rules, stimulating public debate, or by changing of behaviour inspired by the success of a social entrepreneur. However, a precondition would be the actor's willing to change (Mahara, 2012; Awoonor-Williams *et al.*, 2013 Biehl, 2007).

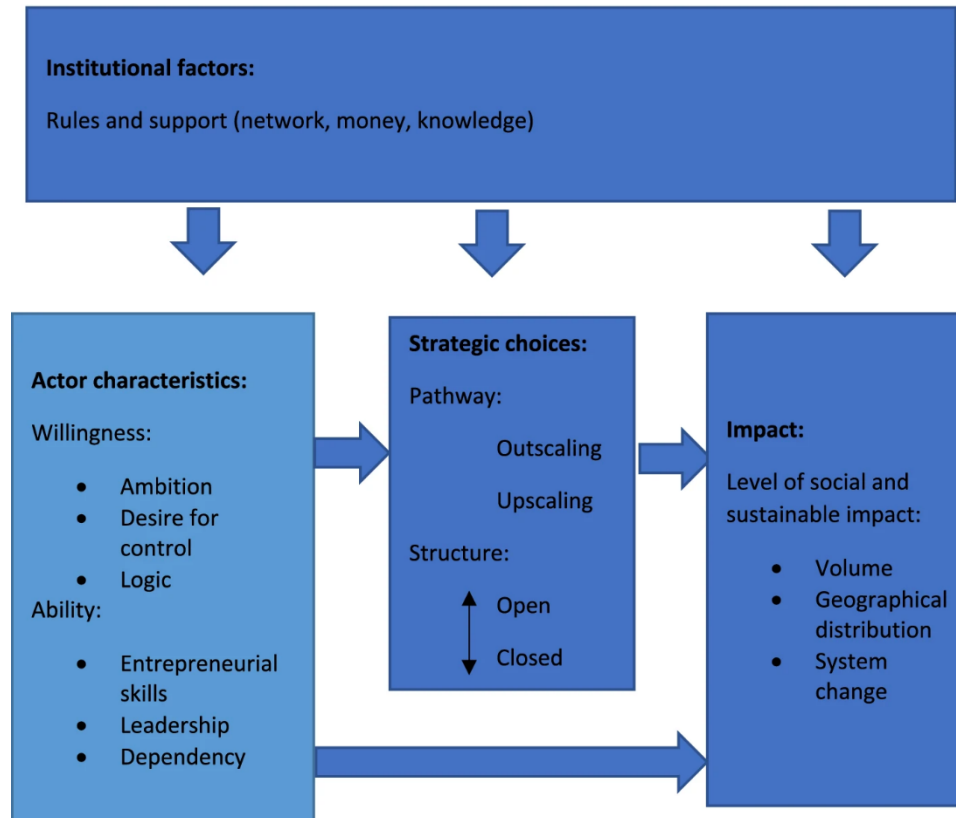
In sum, the institutional factors can be categorized in rules and support. The institutional environment is important since it influences actor characteristics, strategic choices as well as impact. The institutional setting influences both the actor's willingness and ability to scale. The institutional environment also affects the strategic choices for a certain type of structure, but we can only assume a relation to pathway. It could also have influence on how much social and environmental impact is created but the literature in our corpus does not provide clear evidence for this relation.

2.9. Framework for scaling social and sustainable initiatives

The purpose of our review was to combine literature on social entrepreneurship with that of grassroots innovation and bottom-up initiatives to find out why and how social and sustainable initiatives scale. The current academic knowledge about scaling is highly fragmented and anecdotal. In addition, there was much confusion about terms and relevant factors. For that reason, we focused our research on reducing conceptual confusion and building a framework of the different factors and relations in the process of scaling bottom-up initiatives.

The review of 133 academic articles resulted in a framework (Figure 2) that reflects the current state of the field. It presents a concise overview of key theoretical concepts in the literature. Based on literature, we first distinguish two choices in the scaling process: pathway (up scaling and out scaling) and structure (organizational form). Successful scaling implies more social or environmental impact. We chose the perspective of the initiative and categorized the influential factors for scaling in 'actor characteristics' (willingness and ability) and 'institutional factors' (rules and support).

Figure 2 Framework ‘Scaling social and sustainable initiatives’



The literature review provides important insights into the process of scaling. Our analysis of the literature highlight that:

1. Actor’s scale ambition, hybrid logic and entrepreneurial and leadership skills are positively related to level of impact realized through scaling;
2. Open structures may generate speed and more social and environmental impact (but we also found some critical views on this relation);
3. A collaborative structure dominates in grassroots literature, and this may be caused by the actors’ dependency on resources;
4. An institutional environment in which there is room to experiment with different approaches and strategies helps the initiative to scale.

This systematic literature review contributes to the literature on the scaling of local initiatives by combining separate bodies of literature – the literature on grassroots innovation, bottom-up initiatives and on social entrepreneurship – and analysing the similarities and differences between these literatures.

The review resulted in a compact framework that provides an overview of the key institutional factors, actor characteristics, strategic choices and impact. The framework can form a basis for further research.

The framework highlights that scaling social and sustainable initiatives is complex as there are many variables and the complex interactions between all these variables are not yet well understood. We need a better understanding of the interaction of variables and dynamics in the framework and further explore whether the relations between actor characteristics, strategic choices and impact are linear. Time must be taken into consideration as well, as speed seems to be related to structure choice and we do not know to what extent strategic choices could change over time.

We suggest further exploration of the framework in a specific branch or specific topic, like social initiatives in healthcare or sustainable initiatives in the food industry. This will help to explore the different relations and dynamics in the framework more in detail. Also comparing results across different branches and topics could be potentially fruitful as our literature review showed that combining bodies of literature reduces fragmentation of the academic literature and is of benefit to more than one discipline.

To conclude, this paper highlights that actors need a facilitating context, the willingness and the ability to scale and a strategy that works for them to realize either a better (commercial) dissemination or a stronger impact on policies. There is no evidence for a 'miracle cure' as the complex interactions between actors, environments, strategies and impact are dynamic and interactive. Scaling requires 'contextual work' and an in-depth empirical analysis of this type of work is needed to further enhance our understanding of these patterns of scaling.

Chapter 3 How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives?²

Abstract

The scaling of social initiatives is of immense importance for public innovation. A key factor in the scaling process is the institutional environment, which plays a key role in supporting and coordinating the scaling process. This environment can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous, i.e. dominated by a few or variety of public organizations, norms and practices. Both environments have advantages and challenges. However, our academic understanding of the influence of the institutional environment is limited and a systematic empirical assessment of the relationship between the type of environment and scaling is lacking. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of homogeneous and heterogeneous environments on the scaling process of social initiatives. A comparative qualitative study in the Dutch social sector, in three different domains - a homogeneous, heterogeneous, or mixed environment – showed that homogeneous environments are less supportive of scaling social initiatives than heterogeneous environments, as sharing best practices and collaborating with less familiar organizations is not common. Heterogeneous environments, however, do not provide coordination of the scaling process, with the risk that public funds are used less efficiently and effectively. Institutional environments with a balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity are best suited for scaling social initiatives.

3.1. Introduction

Scaling social initiatives – entrepreneurship with a social purpose (Austin *et al.*, 2006) - is important to realize a broad societal impact based on successful small-scale experiments (Doberstein, 2016; Geuijen,

² This chapter has been published under Van Lunenburg, M. (2024), "How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? An empirical exploration in the Dutch public sector", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 77-90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-12-2022-0291>

2017). A key factor in scaling social initiatives is their institutional environment (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020; Diaz Gonzalez and Dentchev, 2021), which can be homogeneous or heterogeneous. Homogeneous environments are dominated by a few public organizations with similar practices and norms, whereas heterogeneous environments consist of a wide variety of organizations, practices, and norms. Within the public sector, heterogeneity and homogeneity in the environment differ. The diversity of practices and norms in highly protocolized environments, such as health and safety, is much less than in the market. This paper aims to provide a theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between the institutional environment and the scaling of social initiatives. The diversity or lack of diversity in the institutional environment influences two key factors in the scaling process: support and coordination. To better understand the scaling process, we need to have a good understanding of how homogeneity and heterogeneity in the institutional environment influence the support and coordination of the scaling of social initiatives. Our current academic understanding of scaling in homogeneous and heterogeneous environments is limited, as few studies have specifically analysed the process (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the variety of definitions of social initiatives and the elastic concepts of 'environment' and 'heterogeneity' make it difficult to compare studies. This study strengthens our academic understanding of these relationships by addressing the following central research question: How do homogeneous and heterogeneous institutional environments influence the scaling process of social initiatives?

A first key function in the scaling process of social initiatives is support from the institutional environment (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020), for example through the exchange of best practices or the promotion of social initiatives in networks (Osterblom *et al.*, 2010; Torfing *et al.*, 2020). Support of the institutional environment is important because many social initiatives start at the local level and need the support of different organizations at the regional and national levels to scale. Support in scaling, that is, support for the diffusion of social initiatives (Meijer, 2014), is therefore a collaborative process between different organizations in the environment (Meijer, 2014). Homogeneous environments are said to be less open to change and new practices (Yee and Van Thiel, 2020; Torfing, 2016; Bason, 2010) and therefore less supportive of the diffusion of social initiatives. In contrast, heterogeneous environments are expected to be more open to change (Bason, 2010) and therefore more supportive of the scaling of social initiatives.

A second key function in the scaling process of social initiatives is coordination. Unlike the market, public organizations have a shared interest in the common good and a shared responsibility to use public funds effectively and efficiently (Karré, 2021; Rainey and Chun, 2007). This means avoiding reinventing the wheel and carefully monitoring the effectiveness of interventions. This requires some form of

coordination. In homogeneous environments with a few dominant organizations, there are well-established networks of trusted organizations. It is therefore likely that scaling is easier to coordinate in homogeneous environments (Torfing *et al.*, 2020; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In heterogeneous environments there is a wide diversity of organizations, both public and commercial, with their own norms and practices (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). It is likely that a high degree of diversity hinders coordination (Cinar *et al.*, 2019).

In sum, according to a theoretical line of argument, in homogeneous environments the scaling process is coordinated but social initiatives are not supported in their scaling, whereas in heterogeneous environments the scaling process is supported but not coordinated. In a comparative qualitative study in the Dutch social sector, we will test these expectations (deductive analysis). In addition, we will generate new insights and extend our academic understanding of this relationship based on an inductive analysis of the findings.

3.2. Key concepts

3.2.1. Social initiative

A social initiative has been defined in many ways, ranging from activities and processes to improve social welfare (Zahra *et al.*, 2009) to entrepreneurship with a social purpose (Austin *et al.*, 2006). A common element in all these definitions is the focus on value creation rather than value capture (Santos, 2012). Social initiatives are often mentioned in the context of social enterprises. The term social enterprise was previously reserved for initiatives with a social purpose that have commercial value (Schoneveld, 2020), but the academic debate on what a social enterprise is has shifted to how to categorize the wide variety of (new) organizational forms (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017). According to the European Commission, a social enterprise 'provides goods and services to the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives' (European Commission, 2023). This would exclude innovative initiatives started by employees of public institutions. In our study, we therefore follow the broader definition of Austin *et al.* (2006) and define social initiatives as entrepreneurship with a social purpose. Our study focuses on initiatives with a social purpose that rely entirely or largely on public resources and operate within or on the fringes of public organizations.

3.2.2. Homogeneous and heterogeneous environments

The academic literature on (public) innovation uses different terms to refer to the environment in which initiatives scale, such as context (Crişan *et al.*, 2019), social system (Luhmann, 2020) or ecosystem (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; Cobben *et al.*, 2022). Building on the public innovation literature, we focus on the institutional level as this is consistent with the public innovation literature, which typically expresses the environment as the 'institutional environment' (Moore, 2013). The institutional environment is defined as a stable set of institutional practices and norms for organizations and individuals (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). These stable sets of practices and norms apply to, for example, public sectors, industries, but also occupational fields. Homogeneous environments are characterized by a few dominant organizations with similar norms and practices, for example highly protocolized environments such as health or safety. Heterogeneous environments represent a wide variety of organizations with their own practices and norms. Since there is no clear dividing line, we need to consider homogeneity and heterogeneity in the institutional environment as a continuum, i.e. there are environments where homogeneity and heterogeneity are in balance.

3.2.3. Scaling

Scaling a social initiative means increasing its impact (Dees 2008 p.18 in Smith, Kistruck, and Cannatelli 2016; Moore, 2013; André and Pache, 2016). One way to increase impact is to scale from one geographical area to another, often referred to as 'diffusion' (Meijer, 2014) or 'scaling out' (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Hermans *et al.*, 2016). This is how scaling is understood in our study, which means that our study focuses on the scaling process rather than the outcomes.

3.3. Framework for studying the scaling of social initiatives

In this section, we will discuss the relevant literature on the environment and the scaling process of social initiatives. Based on the existing literature, we will present a framework for research and formulate expectations about the relationships.

3.3.1. How to assess the influence of the institutional environment on scaling in the public sector?

In the literature, we have found two specific functions that are crucial in the relationship between the institutional environment and the scaling of social initiatives: support and coordination. Support includes the provision of networks, funding, and rules (Osterblom *et al.*, 2010; Torfing *et al.*, 2020; Riisgaard, 2011; Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020; Diaz Gonzalez and Dentchev, 2021). Support of the scaling process is important because many social initiatives start at the local level. Unlike in countries with centralised public sectors, such as China, scaling social initiatives in countries with decentralized public sectors is a collaborative process (Meijer, 2014). The obvious support for scaling the public sector comes from public organizations, such as ministries that may provide rules and funding for scaling, or interest groups that provide networks for sharing best practices and promoting social initiatives. Support can also come from commercial organizations that have strong roots in the public sector, for example because they have been privatized. These organizations are multi-embedded (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017) because they are known to both the public sector and the market. Support may also come from commercial organizations that have an interest in social initiatives, for example to recruit people with distance to the labour market.

Coordination refers to a common focus and clarity of roles in the scaling process of social initiatives (Ansell and Gash, 2012). Coordination in the scaling process is important for efficient and effective scaling of social initiatives, which is a shared responsibility of public organizations (Karré, 2022). In decentralized public sectors, where local public organizations have many responsibilities, coordination is voluntary. This aspect remains underexposed in the literature on the scaling of social initiatives. The literature on sustainability and technology already recognizes collective responsibility on a voluntary basis as part of Responsible Innovation, for example in the development of common technical standards (Meijer *et al.*, 2023).

The institutional practices and norms of an institutional environment (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Diaz Gonzalez and Dentchev, 2021) provide support and coordination of the scaling process of social initiatives. For example, the habit of sharing best practices is more supportive, and well-established collaborative networks facilitate coordination. To assess the extent to which homogeneous and heterogeneous institutional environments influence the scaling process of the social initiative, we assess whether they provide support and coordination.

3.3.2. Expected patterns for the influence of homogeneous environments on scaling

In terms of the first function, support, homogeneous environments are theoretically expected to be less supportive of innovation processes, as they tend to be less open to change due to the limited diversity of stakeholder orientations (Bason, 2010; Torfing *et al.*, 2020). It is likely that the few dominant organizations in the environment of social initiatives are not supportive of scaling, as they do not actively promote social initiatives in their network and share best practices. They may even be less supportive of social initiatives coming from outside, i.e. not initiated by local public institutions in the network, as they are less familiar with them. This would be undesirable, as studies show that fresh ideas are often generated in environments outside public organizations (Bason, 2010; Grin, 2020). In terms of coordination, organizations in homogeneous environments are strongly protocolized and networks are well established (Meijer, 2019; Christensen *et al.*, 2006). They are likely to have a shared focus and clear roles. This means that homogeneous environments are expected to provide the second function for scaling, coordination.

3.3.3. Expected patterns for the influence of heterogeneous environments on scaling

Expectations for heterogeneous environments contrast with those for homogeneous environments. Previous research highlights that social initiatives are often generated in environments that are more heterogeneous (Bason, 2010; Grin, 2020) and that the heterogeneous environments are supportive of social initiatives. It is therefore likely that organizations in heterogeneous environments take an active role in sharing best practices and using their networks to promote social initiatives. However, with the diversity of organizations comes a diversity of interests, norms, and practices. This makes it difficult to coordinate the scaling process (Cinar *et al.*, 2019). Although collaboration between public and commercial organizations is becoming more common (Bryson *et al.*, 2015; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009; De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; Jukic *et al.*, 2019), collaboration is still difficult (Rajala *et al.*, 2021; Schot and Geels, 2010) as there are still many differences that hinder collaboration. Commercial organizations will have little interest in social initiatives that are difficult to turn into profitable concepts. Even if they recognize the benefits of a shared interest model, for example for reasons of social responsibility (Porter and Kramer, 2011), there is a lack of trust as they are less familiar (Brock, 2020; Cinar *et al.*, 2019; Crosby *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, commercial organizations do not share the responsibility to spend public funds in an efficient way as they rely on other resources (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Santos, 2012). All this leads to fragmented collaboration, which is likely to lead to coordination problems in scaling of social initiatives.

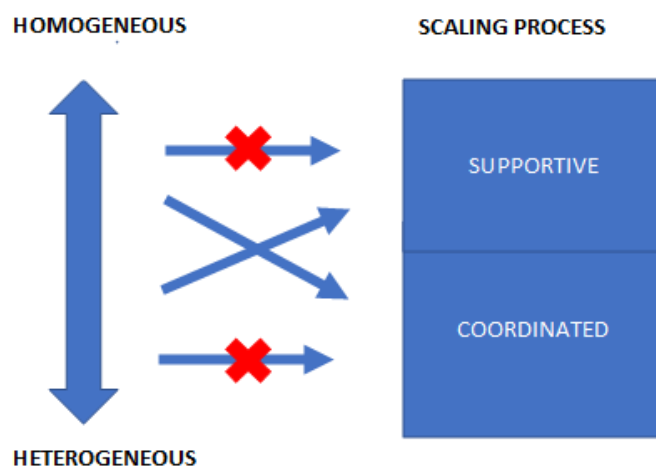
Thus, both homogeneous and heterogeneous environments have advantages and disadvantages in terms of support and coordination. Homogeneous environments are less supportive (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) but the scaling process is coordinated, whereas heterogeneous environments are supportive (Bason, 2010) but coordination is a problem (Cinar *et al.*, 2019; Ansell and Gash, 2012). A final consideration relates to the dichotomy we have discussed so far. In practice, homogeneity and heterogeneity in the institutional environment is a continuum rather than a clear dichotomy. This means that there are environments in which homogeneity and heterogeneity are in balance. In this environment there is enough heterogeneity to be supportive, but not too much diversity and conflicting interests for coordination.

We now have three expectations:

1. Heterogeneous environments are more supportive of the scaling of social initiatives than homogeneous environments.
2. The scaling process in homogeneous environments is more coordinated than in heterogeneous environments.
3. The scaling process in environments where homogeneity and heterogeneity are balanced is both supportive and coordinated.

Figure 3 visualizes the expectations discussed above about homogeneous and heterogeneous institutional environments and the scaling process of social initiatives.

Figure 3 Framework for research



3.4. Methodology

The aim of our research was both to test our expectations, as presented in Figure 3 (deductive analysis), and also to use the research to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms and contextual factors that play a role in the relationship between the institutional environment and the scaling of social initiatives (inductive analysis).

3.4.1. Research method

A qualitative multiple case study method allowed us to conduct an in-depth analysis of the cases, in our research the environment, and to delve deeper into the relationships as shown in Figure 1. We used the diverse case selection method because this technique is suitable for comparing environments (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). We focused on one country to reduce the diversity of national policies. We chose the social sector as social initiatives often deal with health, social or welfare problems (Santos, 2012) and most studies on scaling are conducted on sustainability issues (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). We chose the Netherlands because in this country the social sector is decentralized, which makes our study relevant to scaling issues in other countries with decentralized regimes. Within the social sector, we searched for a variety of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the institutional environment and selected mental health (homogeneous), labour participation (heterogeneous) and debt (mixed institutional environment). Within these three domains, we selected a mix of social initiatives (20) that had started in (8) and those that had started outside (12) public organizations. We did this to test whether homogeneous environments differ in their support. The social initiatives had to have started at least 3-5 years ago, so that they had survived the initial phase.

3.4.2. Data collection and analysis

The fieldwork consisted of 48¹ in-depth interviews with respondents, distributed across the three domains as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Distribution of initiatives and respondents

Mental health	Labour participation	Debts
8 initiatives	6 initiatives	6 initiatives
18 Ministry (2) Interest group (4) Healthcare (1) Platform (1) Municipality (1) Mental health organization (4) Housing cooperation (1) Foundation (3) Social work (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Commercial enterprise (1) Knowledge centre (1) Foundation (2) Commercial enterprise (3) Governmental commission (1) Regional network (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Health care (2) Knowledge centre (1) Municipality (2) Foundation (3) Social enterprise (1)

Interviewees, ranging from initiators and advisors to decision-makers and project leaders, were identified through social media, personal networks and snowball sampling. We started by interviewing the obvious stakeholders in the three domains, such as ministries, interest groups and commercial organizations with strong roots in the domain. In parallel, we interviewed initiators and asked them what support they received (or did not receive) in scaling, and from whom. In this way we also identified (other) organizations in the environment of social initiatives. In practice, all interviewees provided additional information on the support and coordination of social initiatives and organizations that were not part of our research. This information was used to validate our findings on the support and coordination of the scaling of social initiatives in our research.

In the coding, 'support' was operationalized as 'active or passive support'. Only the provision of networks was coded as passive support, whereas organizations acting as ambassadors for social initiatives were coded as active support. Respondents were asked to provide examples to illustrate their support in the scaling. Support from the institutional environment in scaling social initiatives was coded as low (actively supported by 0-1 organizations), moderate (actively supported by 2 organizations) or high (actively supported by 3 or more organizations). The coding for 'coordination' was operationalized as 'common focus' and 'clarity of roles in scaling'. A common focus could be a common frame or a common programme. We asked respondents about their goals in scaling and their vision of how these goals will be achieved. For clarity on roles, we asked respondents to describe their role and the role of other organizations in scaling. This allowed us to draw conclusions about coordination in the three domains.

The interviews lasted on average 1-1.5 hours and were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in NVivo. To obtain background information, we checked websites and attended several relevant conferences.

3.5. Results

We start the presentation of our findings with a brief description of the Dutch social sector, particularly in relation to our cases, the domains of mental health, labour participation and debts. We then present our findings in relation to our cases, followed by a comparative reflection on the results.

3.5.1. Description of the three domains: mental health, labour participation and debts

In the Dutch social sector, municipalities and social organizations work together on issues such as health, welfare, labour participation and (financial) self-reliance. The Dutch social sector is decentralized, which means that the national government only provides a framework for municipalities and other public institutions, and there is a lot of autonomy at the local level.

The *mental health* domain represents the homogeneous environment, as mental health organizations dominate, are internally focused and strongly protocolized. In addition to the Ministry of Health, the most important organizations are insurance companies, mental health organizations and interest groups. Anyone suffering from a mental illness must see a general practitioner (Zorgwijzer.nl). The costs are covered by health insurance. Decentralization and long waiting lists force mental health organizations to focus on prevention, outreach work and cooperation with local organizations and municipalities. This is a clear focus for innovative social initiatives. As mental illness is still taboo (Van Weeghel *et al.*, 2016), many social initiatives in our study focus on fighting stigma. Examples include a first aid course for mental illness, an academy run by experience experts, a stigma café, and an annual run for inclusivity.

The institutional environment of social initiatives with a focus on the participation of people who are at a distance from the *labour market* can be characterised as heterogeneous. A wide variety of organizations are involved. A tight labour market encourages companies to recruit staff from this target group, and municipalities focus more on the reintegration of people on social security, as sheltered workshops have come under scrutiny after decentralization. In addition to the diversity in municipalities, there are executive organizations, knowledge centres, interest groups and ministries, as well as a wide

variety of commercial organizations. The social initiatives in our study range from inclusive recruitment methods and cultural programmes to job carving and on-the-job learning for people with severe mental illness.

The domain of *debts* represents the environment with a balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Debts are a serious social problem for municipalities (CBS, 2020), as they are often associated with other problems such as the threat of eviction, health problems and child poverty. Debts therefore results in high additional costs for municipalities, housing cooperatives and health insurance companies. These commercial partners are multi-embedded, as they are known in the social sector, more than, for example, supermarkets. Talking about debts is taboo (Rijksoverheid, 2019) and therefore debt relief often only starts when people are in desperate need. Initiatives in our study vary from early prevention by acting on overdue payments, conversation techniques based on neuroscience research or volunteer financial buddies.

3.5.2. Social initiatives in mental health

Our findings confirm that the institutional environment in mental health is not supportive of social initiatives ('Sometimes directors treat us like children', Rm10; 'If you stand out, people will let you down', Rm13). Collaboration with commercial organizations is rare and even when known, negative perceptions hinder collaboration ('Government is not to be trusted', Rm17). There is a lack of established channels for sharing best practices ('People were surprised that I was willing to share all the documents', Rm9). The interest group of mental health organizations has only just started to set up learning networks for its members. Although at the local level most social initiatives were supported, otherwise they would not have survived the initial stages, ministries, interest groups, platforms do not actively support the scaling of social initiatives. There is no evidence that the environment is more supportive for social initiatives that start in public organizations than for those that start outside. One example is the Stigma Café, which was initiated by an employee of a mental health organization. The local management said they welcomed the initiative, but after the initiator became ill, no one took up the initiative to continue it. Another social initiative, part of a local mental health organization, aims to expand into the commercial sector, but interest groups or ministries do not actively provide relevant networks to gain access.

Our findings show that there is no evidence that the process of scaling in the mental health domain is coordinated. There is widespread support for fighting stigma, but there are different views on

the 'how'. For example, whether the focus should be on the narrow target group or on all minority groups, using the frame of inclusiveness. Being associated with the negative image of mental health organizations is mentioned as a barrier to scaling in other environments. For some initiators this was a reason to stay away from these organizations. Roles in the scaling process are unclear. Organizations struggle with their role in scaling ('I hesitate to support initiatives as municipalities are responsible', Rm1) and even when they share the same goal, coordination between organizations was not always obvious.

So, as expected, the mental health domain does not support the scaling of social initiatives, but also, other than expected, the scaling process is not coordinated.

3.5.3. Social initiatives in labour participation

Our empirical findings highlight that the institutional environment in the labour participation domain is encouraging for social initiatives. There are many platforms for the exchange of best practices, mostly organized by sectoral organizations representing the profit and non-profit sectors. Public and commercial organizations cooperate in national programmes. Support includes the provision of networks and, in two cases, funding. We found mixed results in terms of active support ('If member x has a good idea, we share the plan, but we are not primarily focused on scaling', Ri5; 'we took the lead', Ri3). These results show that, in general, social initiatives are moderately supported in their scaling by the institutional environment.

Our findings show that the coordination of the scaling process is fragmented. The urgency of labour market participation for minority groups is widely recognized, but a common frame is lacking. Some social initiatives focus on one minority group, while others focus on inclusion for all. We found that negative perceptions between the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors hinder coordination ('In general, civil servants are lazy', Ri4). Respondents often refer to persistent bureaucratic patterns, particularly in the non-profit sector. Although public and commercial organizations work together in national programmes to improve inclusivity, they do not join forces to scale initiatives. An example of this is a new way of recruiting staff that has scaled in both public and commercial organizations. In the absence of horizontal coordination between interest groups or at ministerial level, in practice commercial companies visited other companies for inspiration, while municipalities visited other municipalities to learn. Our findings show that the roles in scaling are not clear. Interviewees seem to struggle with their role ('We asked ourselves 'should this be the way to go?' But you also need support at the local level', Ri10), which hinders the coordination of the scaling process.

So, heterogeneous environments are moderately supportive for social initiatives, but – as expected – coordination of the scaling process is fragmented.

3.5.4. Social initiatives in debts

The research showed that the institutional environment in the debt domain is supportive of social initiatives. There are well-established platforms for learning and sharing best practices, and the added value of lesser-known organizations is recognized ('they do better than our own networks', Rd8). Ministries, interest groups and commercial enterprises actively support social initiatives by promoting them in their networks, but also by training staff and sharing manuals, tools, and documents. Ministries even mention social initiatives in their parliamentary letters, and in one case the social initiative led to a change in legislation. It is notable that companies, such as insurance companies, share best practice with competitors ('We shared our business case', Rd13),

Our findings show that there is some form of coordination in the scaling process in the debt domain. There are also negative perceptions of each other ('They are afraid of their own role, I can feel it in every conversation', Rd11) and organizations struggle with their role ('Much of the work should be done by other public organizations, but at the same time you want to help', Rd7). However, there is a widely supported frame that has changed from 'your own fault' to 'it can happen to anyone'. A national multidisciplinary debt relief programme encourages municipalities to join forces and focus on prevention. Municipalities and multi-embedded organizations such as housing cooperatives share a focus on early warning. The widely supported frame also prompts private organizations to take responsibility and start social initiatives that focus on even earlier signalling of debts and, for example, the provision of voluntary financial buddies. These outside initiatives complement those in public organizations, which encourages cooperation between public and commercial organizations. Our findings also show that initiators of social initiatives also join forces, especially those who started outside public organizations. They combine their networks, resulting in a link between the local and national levels and between public and private partners. Organizations moved in the same direction ('It became a movement', Rd4, Rd5) and respondents often mentioned the same initiatives, organizations and names. As one respondent said: 'It's a small world' (Rd14).

Thus, our findings confirm that the debt domain supports the scaling process and that there is some form of coordination.

3.5.5. Comparative analysis: testing expectations

The results of the analysis of the three domains are presented in Table 7 below and form the basis for an assessment of our expectations.

Table 7 Institutional environment and scaling: results for the three domains

Domain Function	Mental health (8 initiatives)	Labour participation (6 initiatives)	Debts (6 initiatives)
Support	Low 6 low 2 middle	Moderately 2 low 1 middle 3 high	High 1 middle 5 high
Coordination	No common frame No clarity on roles No coordination	No common frame No role clarity Fragmented coordination	National program Common frame Mixed role clarity Joining forces in scaling

Table 7 illustrates that our first expectation, that heterogeneous institutional environments are more supportive of scaling social initiatives than homogeneous environments, is supported. The social initiatives in the mental health domain were hardly actively supported by the organizations in their environment. In contrast, most social initiatives in the domain of debts were actively supported by three or more organizations in their environment (high). Social initiatives in the labour participation domain were moderately supported, as we found mixed results in terms of the support from organizations.

We found no evidence for our expectation 2 that the scaling process is more coordinated in homogeneous environments than in heterogeneous environments. In both mental health and labour market participation, there is a lack of a common frame and a lack of clarity about roles in scaling. In both domains, more than once respondents had never heard of social initiatives that were known in other networks. In the mental health domain, there is a lack of coordination. In the domain of labour participation, coordination is, as expected, fragmented.

Table 7 confirms our third expectation that an institutional environment with a mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity is best suited for scaling social initiatives. In the debt domain, social initiatives were highly supported and there was some form of coordination. Organizations shared best practices and actively promoted social initiatives. There was a national programme and a common frame.

Organizations joined forces in scaling social initiatives and compared to mental health and labour participation, the scaling process in the debt domain was the most coordinated.

Our findings in Table 7 were confirmed by the information on support of social initiatives that were not part of our research.

3.5.6. Comparative analysis: additional insights in relation between environment and scaling

In addition to testing our three expectations, the aim of this research was to generate new insights based on an inductive analysis of the findings. A first pattern in our findings is that in all three domains, organizations struggle with their role in scaling. Ministries say that they are not responsible and that municipalities should join forces, and interest groups are reluctant to actively promote social initiatives because they do not want to interfere with the autonomy of their members, or they are waiting for guidelines from the ministry. Most of the interviewees admit that this is starting to be a nuisance, as it makes it difficult to scale social initiatives in an efficient and effective way, but no one is picking up the gauntlet yet. However, we are noticing the first steps towards a more coherent approach. This is most visible in the domain of debts, where we see a change in dynamics. Organizations in the institutional environment are joining forces which creates a movement and space for new actors, such as a social initiative that has become a respected platform for scaling and monitoring evidence-based initiatives on debts. In the domain of mental health, learning networks are being set up and professionals are becoming more involved in outreach work. In the domain of labour participation, regional networks between public and commercial organizations develop common visions and goals for labour participation and promote the exchange of best practices.

Secondly, our findings show that a common frame is crucial for overcoming mutual negative perceptions, especially between public and commercial organizations, which we found in all three domains. A common frame is important for coordinating scaling. In the debt domain, the economic crisis and the Corona had changed the frame from 'your own fault' to 'it can happen to anyone', which was the driver for joining forces. In the domains of mental health and labour participation, there is no common frame. It is quite possible that the domain of debt is ahead since the social pressure on the debt issue already started with the economic crisis. In particular, since the Corona, mental illness has been recognized as a serious societal problem and Black Lives Matters and #MeToo have increased the pressure

on non-inclusive environments. It is likely that these events are encouraging the development of a common frame and focus on these domains as well.

Our research reveals a third notable pattern. Although there were many organizations operating in all three domains, such as health insurance companies, ministries, and municipalities, we did not observe an exchange of knowledge and practices between these domains. The institutional environment dominates the way in which departments operate in a particular domain. An example of this is the process of scaling a new method of labour participation for people with severe mental illness. This was a close collaboration between the interest group of mental health organizations, the knowledge centre, the ministry, the benefits agency, and commercial organizations known in the public sector. This collaborative network is also known in the mental health domain, but the network is not used for scaling (other) social initiatives in the mental health domain. From the perspective of increasing impact, this is a missed opportunity.

3.6. Overall conclusion and discussion

We started our research with the central question: How do homogeneous and heterogeneous environments influence the scaling process of social initiatives? Based on the literature, we expected that homogeneous environments would be less supportive of scaling than heterogeneous environments, but that scaling in homogeneous environments would be more coordinated. We found that heterogeneous environments were indeed more supportive of the scaling of social initiatives, but there was no evidence that the scaling process was more coordinated in homogeneous environments. Environments in which homogeneity and heterogeneity are balanced are best for scaling social initiatives, as they are both supportive and coordinated.

The aim of this paper was to contribute to the academic literature on scaling and to provide insights for public managers. Regarding these goals, our first contribution to the institutional entrepreneurship literature is an empirical test of the expected relationships between institutional environments and the scaling of social initiatives. Our research confirmed that homogeneous environments are not supportive of the scaling of social initiatives (Garud *et al.*, 2007; Meijer, 2019). However, we found no evidence that the scaling process is more coordinated in homogeneous environments.

Secondly, our findings also provide a more precise understanding of the influence of the

institutional environment. We found that social initiatives that were supported at the local level lacked the support of organizations at the national level in their scaling. In addition, we found that organizations that are familiar with multiple institutional environments act differently depending on the environment. This finding confirms academic literature on institutional pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). It also raises questions about how multi-embeddedness, often defined as 'position in multiple environments' (Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020), should be understood. Our findings show that organizations can be multi-embedded in an institutional environment, such as housing cooperatives that are familiar with both the public sector and the market. At the same time, these organizations are also embedded in multiple institutional environments, which is also considered to be multi-embedded. To be more precise, the distinction between functional institutional environments, such as health or defense, and organizational institutional environments, such as government or business, may be helpful (Crişan *et al.*, 2019).

Third, our research highlights the importance of a dynamic perspective on institutional environments (Roy and Hazenberg, 2019; De Bruin *et al.*, 2023). Changing societal frames, such as those derived from the Corona, encourage public and commercial organizations to join forces and overcome their negative perceptions of each other. This creates space for new actors in the institutional environment, who also influence existing collaborations and may even take on the role of coordinator of the scaling process. We suggest further research on the creation and influence of a common frame of organizations in the institutional environment to increase our knowledge of the complex relationships in the scaling of social initiatives.

Our findings on relationships and patterns within the institutional environment are generally applicable, as homogeneous, and heterogeneous environments exist worldwide. We suggest further research in countries with a highly privatized government or, on the contrary, a highly centralized one, to increase our knowledge of the influence of the institutional environment on the scaling of social initiatives.

An important lesson for public managers is the importance of addressing the shared responsibility for the scaling process. We believe this is important for both public managers and researchers but underexposed. Public managers can take up the gauntlet by putting collective responsibility on the agenda and sharing experiences of the scaling process, starting with their own colleagues in other domains.

Chapter 4 Scaling of social initiatives: the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions³

Abstract

Purpose – The scaling of social initiatives is important to achieve broad social impact based on successful small-scale experiments. This paper focuses on the influence of the characteristics of the initiators of social initiatives on scaling processes. The limited literature on this topic highlights two critical actor characteristics: high entrepreneurial skills and a central position in the area. Both characteristics influence two critical components of the scaling process: mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to explore these complex relationships in a deductive analysis and to use these findings for an inductive analysis to generate new insights and extend our academic understanding.

Design/methodology/approach – A comparative qualitative study of 20 social initiatives in the Dutch social sector was conducted, including 48 in-depth interviews with initiators and stakeholders in three different areas – mental health, debt and labour participation.

Findings – High entrepreneurial skills are more important for mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retention of effectiveness than the position of the initiators, but these are a condition rather than a guarantee. Creating space for scaling and investing in measuring effectiveness in other contexts are also important.

Originality/value – By combining the literature on social entrepreneurship and public innovation and conducting an empirical study, our study provides a broad and nuanced picture and brings precision to our understanding of the relationships between initiators' entrepreneurial skills and position and the scaling process.

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4.1. Introduction

Scaling social initiatives – entrepreneurship with a social purpose (Austin *et al.*, 2006) – is important to achieve broad social impact based on successful small-scale experiments (Torfing, 2016; Doberstein, 2016; Geuijen *et al.*, 2017). However, our academic understanding of why some initiatives scale successfully and others do not is limited. This paper focuses on the influence of the characteristics of the initiators of social initiatives on scaling processes. The limited literature on this topic highlights two critical actor characteristics of initiators for scaling social initiatives: high entrepreneurial skills and a central position in the area (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020; Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). Both characteristics influence two critical components of the scaling process: mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on the retention of effectiveness. The literature suggests positive relationships, but our empirical knowledge of these relationships is limited and ambiguous. This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature through a theoretical and empirical analysis and strengthen our academic understanding of these complex relationships by addressing the following central research question: “How do initiators’ entrepreneurial skills and positions influence the mobilization of stakeholders and focus on retaining the effectiveness of social initiatives?”

A first crucial component in the scaling process that may be influenced by initiators’ characteristics is mobilizing stakeholders (Battilana *et al.*, 2009; Westley *et al.*, 2014; Meijer, 2014). In the academic literature on social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial skills are widely accepted as crucial for mobilizing stakeholders (North, 1991; Bocken, 2015; Reeves *et al.*, 2014; Hatzl *et al.*, 2016). Although most of these studies focus on (social) enterprises that operate in the market, it is likely that these findings also apply to social initiatives in the context of the public sector. Most initiators of social initiatives start at the local level, which means that initiators need to mobilize stakeholders to scale to other contexts as well (Meijer, 2014; Westley *et al.*, 2014). Initiators in a central position, defined as being part of well-established public organizations such as municipalities, have an advantage. It is likely that they have better access to stakeholders, such as ministries, than a peripheral position, meaning a position outside the established public organizations (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). Thus, both high entrepreneurial skills and a central position are expected to be helpful in mobilizing stakeholders.

A second critical component in the scaling process of social initiatives, which may be influenced by initiators’ characteristics, is retention of effectiveness. This is important because social initiatives that are effective in a specific context may lose their effectiveness due to, for example, poor implementation elsewhere (Crosby *et al.*, 2017; Williams, 2014). Unlike the market, public organizations have a

responsibility to scale social initiatives effectively and efficiently because they are funded by public money (Karré, 2022; Rainey and Chun, 2007). From that point of view, it makes sense that initiators in central positions are more focused on retaining effectiveness than initiators in peripheral positions. However, in terms of entrepreneurial skills, initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are highly driven by their social purpose (Zahra *et al.*, 2009). It is only logical, therefore, that they will do everything in their power to retain the effectiveness of their social initiative, more than initiators with low entrepreneurial skills.

Thus, in line with the academic literature on social and institutional entrepreneurship, both high entrepreneurial skills and a central position are helpful for two important components of scaling social initiatives: mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness. However, the literature is fragmented: while the literature on social entrepreneurship focuses on entrepreneurial skills (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020), the literature on institutional entrepreneurship emphasizes the position of the initiator (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). There is a lack of studies that focus on both entrepreneurial skills and position on the one hand and both components of the scaling process, mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retention of effectiveness on the other. Furthermore, the concept of scaling has been used in many ways, and only a few studies have specifically conducted a comparative analysis of the processes of scaling (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). In a comparative qualitative study of 20 social initiatives in the Dutch social sector, we will test our expectations about these complex relationships through a deductive analysis. These findings are used for an additional inductive analysis to extend our academic understanding of actor characteristics on the scaling process. By doing so, our study brings in new insights for further research and practice.

4.2. Key concepts

In the following paragraphs, we explain how we understand the key concepts of our central research question: social initiative, scaling, entrepreneurial skills, position, mobilizing stakeholders and retention of effectiveness.

4.2.1. Social initiative

Social initiatives are often mentioned in the context of social entrepreneurship. The original academic debate on how social entrepreneurship differs from commercial entrepreneurship (Santos, 2012) has evolved to how to categorize the wide variety of (new) hybrid organizational forms of social enterprises

(Defourny and Nyssens, 2017). Social entrepreneurship is now understood as a cluster concept that consists of actor characteristics and intention (Phan *et al.*, 2020; Cardella *et al.*, 2021; Fauzi *et al.*, 2022). In line with this, in our study, we will define social initiatives as entrepreneurship with a social purpose (Austin *et al.*, 2006), which has the advantage of including initiatives that are started by employees of public organizations. However, it offers too much variation for research because it also includes social initiatives in the market. Our study therefore focuses on initiatives with a social purpose that largely rely on public resources and operate within or on the fringes of public organizations.

4.2.2. Scaling

Scaling social initiatives means increasing their impact (Smith *et al.*, 2016; Moore, 2013; André and Pache, 2016). One way to increase impact is to develop activities to scale from one geographical area to another, often referred to as scaling out (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Hermans *et al.*, 2016). This is how scaling is understood in our study, which means that our study focuses on the scaling process rather than the outcomes.

4.2.3. Entrepreneurial skills

Entrepreneurial skills are often used to describe the ability to formulate an ambitious vision, recognize opportunities and create a sustainable business (Mukhuty and Williams, 2015). In the context of public innovation, the terms social and institutional entrepreneurship are more common. Studies on the characteristics of social entrepreneurs (Smith *et al.*, 2016) focus on explaining why some entrepreneurs decide to become social entrepreneurs and others do not (Phan *et al.*, 2020; Cardella *et al.*, 2021), rather than differences in entrepreneurial skills. Institutional entrepreneurship is used to express the activities of creating a vision of divergent institutional change and convincing stakeholders to support the vision (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). These skills have much in common with entrepreneurial skills, so there is no need to assume that these skills differ from those of commercial entrepreneurs. In our study, we combine both definitions and define entrepreneurial skills as skills to formulate an ambitious vision for (social) change and to focus on sustainability.

4.2.4. Position

In the institutional entrepreneurship literature, position is defined as “authority in the eyes of others” (Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020). It means a strong position in an established network, enabling you to achieve more (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Giddens, 1991). We are aware that a strong position can also be achieved through personality or reputation, regardless of someone’s formal position. However, this would create confusion in our study because an informal position can also be the result of entrepreneurial skills. Then, this would interfere with the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and scaling. Therefore, we define a position as a formal one. Initiators in a central position have formal positions in well- established public organizations, for example, municipalities. Initiators in peripheral positions do not (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Giddens, 1991).

4.2.5. Mobilizing stakeholders

Stakeholder mobilization includes all activities that motivate others to actively support the scaling process (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). For example, convincing interest groups to promote the social initiative among their members or making phone calls to policy advisors or potential adopters.

4.2.6. Retention of effectiveness

Evidence-based policymaking is a critical issue globally (Meijer *et al.*, 2023), but attention to the effectiveness of evidence-based social initiatives in other contexts is underexposed (Williams, 2014). Retaining effectiveness is twofold. In similar contexts, social initiatives can not only lose their effectiveness, for example, through half-hearted implementation but also evidence-based methods may not fit in because local circumstances differ. Retention of effectiveness is understood as all activities to retain effectiveness while scaling social initiatives to another context, for example, other geographical areas.

4.3. Theoretical expectations

This section discusses the relevant literature on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and position on the one hand and mobilizing stakeholders and retention of effectiveness on the other. Based on the current literature, we will formulate six expectations for these relationships, which are further explored in our empirical research.

4.3.1. Expectations on the influence of entrepreneurial skills on the scaling process

Entrepreneurial skills are important for the generation of social initiatives (Bason, 2010). The rich body of studies on (social) entrepreneurship (Cardella *et al.*, 2021; Fauzi *et al.*, 2022) shows that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills can mobilize stakeholders (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016; Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Bocken, 2015; Battilana *et al.*, 2009), for example, by developing convincing frames and actively building and using networks. A systematic review of scaling social initiatives shows that our knowledge of the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and scaling is heavily based on social entrepreneurship in the market context (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). In the public sector, there has been an increasing focus on hybrid forms of social enterprises (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Cardella *et al.*, 2021; Fauzi *et al.*, 2022; Phan *et al.*, 2020) and co-creation with the private sector (Perikangas *et al.*, 2023; Patetta and Enciso-Santocildes, 2024), blurring the dividing line between the market and the public sector. Therefore, scaling in the public sector is not a result of one hero but of a collaborative process in which various actors play various roles (Meijer, 2014; Ansell and Gash, 2012). Thus, initiators of social initiatives also need to mobilize stakeholders, and in the public sector too, those with high entrepreneurial skills are expected to be more successful in mobilizing stakeholders than those with low entrepreneurial skills.

Retaining effectiveness while scaling to other contexts is underexposed in the academic literature on scaling social initiatives (Williams, 2014). We may find leads, however, in the management literature and in that on (social) entrepreneurship. In a competitive market, entrepreneurs are likely to protect their unique selling points and therefore aim to control the scaling process (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016). Studies on social entrepreneurship also show that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more likely to control the scaling process than those with low entrepreneurial skills (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2016). Initiators of social initiatives are driven by their social purpose (Santos, 2012). Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills formulate ambitious goals and are therefore likely to be eager to protect their initiatives from unwanted influences on their effectiveness. Otherwise, their social initiative will end up having less impact. We therefore expect initiators with high entrepreneurial skills to focus more on retaining effectiveness than those with low skills.

Based on the literature, we formulate the following expectations for the influence of entrepreneurial skills:

1. Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills mobilize stakeholders more than initiators with low entrepreneurial skills.
2. Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills focus more on retention of effectiveness than initiators with low entrepreneurial skills.

4.3.2. Expectations on the influence of position on the scaling process

The literature on institutional entrepreneurship highlights the importance of a central position in the area. Initiators in central positions have formal positions in well-established public organizations, such as a municipality, and this provides opportunities to mobilize relevant stakeholders, such as ministries or interest groups (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, a peripheral position leads to difficulties in mobilizing stakeholders, as there is less access to established networks and stakeholders are less known (Cinar *et al.*, 2019) and less trusted (Rinne-Koski and Lähdesmäki 2023). This means that initiators in central positions are expected to mobilize stakeholders more than those in peripheral positions.

As for the relation between a central position and focus on retaining effectiveness, the literature is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is said that initiators in a central position are more likely to compromise (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020). This could lead to unwanted adjustments that negatively affect their effectiveness. However, this is also true for the social initiatives of initiators in peripheral positions that need to be scaled in public organizations. In that respect, there would be no difference between initiators in central or peripheral positions. However, public organizations, both local and national, are subject to political and administrative control and government oversight and must use public funds efficiently and effectively (Karré, 2022; Rainey and Chun 2007). From this perspective, we expect that initiators in central positions are more focused on retaining effectiveness than initiators in peripheral positions.

Based on the limited literature available on this relation, we formulate the following expectations for the influence of position:

3. Initiators in central positions mobilize stakeholders more than initiators in peripheral positions.
4. Initiators in central positions focus on retention of effectiveness more than initiators in peripheral positions.

4.3.3. Expectations on the relation between entrepreneurial skills and position

The previously discussed expectations show that both a central position and high entrepreneurial skills are positively related to mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness. This raises questions about their mutual relationship and how this may affect the relationship with the two components of the scaling process: mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness. The literature on public innovation is ambiguous. Studies on public innovation argue that social initiatives often start outside public organizations, and thus in peripheral positions (Bason 2010; Grin, 2020; Gabher, 2018), which explains the growing interest in co-creation and social impact bonds with social enterprises (Patetta and Ensico-Santocildes 2024; Perikangas et al. 2023). There are also many examples of studies showing that social initiatives emerge in public organizations (Mazzucato 2013; R. Hartmann and K. Hartmann 2023). The question is whether this is due to their position or to their entrepreneurial skills. Regarding the latter, we assume that entrepreneurial skills are more important than position in mobilizing stakeholders, because initiators may have good access to networks, but these networks still need to be activated.

As for focus on retentions of effectiveness, the generation of fresh ideas is often associated with high entrepreneurial skills (Bason 2010). It is obvious that initiators of social initiatives in peripheral positions can have high entrepreneurial skills. As previously discussed, initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are driven by their ambition to impact the status quo, and they are likely to protect their social initiatives from unwanted influences on the effectiveness. However, due to their peripheral position, they may have less control over the scaling process than initiators in central positions, which makes effective implementation in other contexts more difficult. We therefore expect that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in central positions are more focused on retaining effectiveness than initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in peripheral positions.

Based on our reading and interpretation of the literature, we formulate the following expectations for the influence of entrepreneurial skills and position:

5. Entrepreneurial skills are more important for mobilizing stakeholders than position.
6. Position is more important for focus on retaining effectiveness than high entrepreneurial skills.

The literature reviewed so far shows that our understanding of the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and position on the one hand, and stakeholder mobilization and focus on retaining effectiveness on the other, is far from straightforward. The aim of our research is to present a first test of our expectations based on the in-depth analysis of 20 cases. The expectations are based on a limited number of publications and therefore we will also use the research for our inductive analysis on these relations.

4.4. Methodology

4.4.1. Research methodology and selection of cases

Research methodology and selection of cases. The aim of our research was to present a test of our expectations based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of 20 cases and to generate new insights. A qualitative multiple case study method, in our study the 'initiator', allowed us to delve deeper into the relationships and expectations discussed in the previous section (Seawright and Gerring 2008). We chose the social sector to strengthen our contribution to the literature on scaling, as most studies have been conducted in the sustainability disciplines (Van Lunenburg et al. 2020). We focused on one country, the Netherlands, to reduce the diversity of institutional contexts. The Dutch public sector is decentralized, especially since the Social Care Act (WMO) and the Participation Act came into force in 2015. This means that the national government only provides a framework for municipalities and other local public institutions, so there is a lot of autonomy at the local level. It also means that, according to our definition of position, initiators who have central positions at the local level, for example because they work in a municipality, do not have central positions at the national level, and vice versa. To test our expectations, we looked for a mix of initiators with high and low entrepreneurial skills in both central and peripheral positions. We included initiatives that had started at least 3 years earlier, as we focused on the stage of scaling to the regional or national level. To reduce the diversity of social initiatives, we focused on three related areas: mental health, debt, and labour participation.

The *mental health area* is very protocolized in terms of processes and connections and was traditionally rather internally focused. However, due to both the decentralization of tasks and the problem of long waiting lists, the mental health area has been changing, with the need for mental health institutions to work together at a local level and a gradual shift towards prevention and outreach work. As mental illness is still a 'taboo subject' (Van Weeghel et al. 2016), many social initiatives focus on fighting this stigma. Examples of mental health initiatives include a first aid course for mental illness, an academy

run by experts with experience on this topic, a stigma café and an annual run for inclusivity. A variety of organizations works in this area: in addition to governmental organizations, health insurance companies and interest groups are important stakeholders.

Decentralization of tasks has also had an impact on *labour participation*, as sheltered workshops have come under scrutiny and municipalities have decided to focus more on the reintegration of people on social benefits. In a tight labour market, companies are increasingly interested in recruiting and retaining staff from people who are distant from the labour market, including migrants. Examples of social initiatives on labour participation are inclusive recruitment methods, cultural programmes, job carving and on-the-job learning for people with severe mental illness. In addition to government organizations, a wide range of private organizations are stakeholders because they also have an interest in this area.

Debt is a severe problem and difficult to tackle for municipalities (CBS 2020) because it is often combined with other problems such as the threat of eviction, mental health problems and child poverty. Debt relief often only starts when people are in desperate need, resulting in high additional costs for councils, housing associations and other creditors who do not receive the full amount. Initiatives to tackle debt range from early prevention through overdue notices, to neuroscience-based counselling techniques, to volunteer financial buddies. In addition to governmental organizations, important stakeholders are providers of services that result in recurrent expenditure such as energy and housing.

4.4.2. Data collection and analysis

The fieldwork consisted of 20 detailed in-depth interviews with initiators. To validate our data on entrepreneurial skills and the role of initiators in the two components of scaling, mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness, we also interviewed 28 stakeholders spread across the three related areas. These were advocacy organizations (10), public health organization (2), commercial organizations (5), ministries (6), municipalities (2), executive organizations (2) and platforms (1). These respondents ranged from advisors to decision-makers or project leaders and are indicated with an 'S'. In the coding, entrepreneurial skills were operationalised as 'formulating an ambitious vision for change' and 'focusing on sustainability'. Ambitious visions were coded as 'yes' for missions that go beyond the activities of the initiator, for example 'a world without stigma'. For focusing on sustainability, we asked about business cases and funding, but also about their strategies for reaching new audiences or how back-up is organized in case the initiator stops. Table 8 shows our coding scheme.

Table 8 Coding scheme

Variable	Operationalization	Code	Source
Central position	Part of well-established public organizations	Yes/No	Interview, websites
Entrepreneurial skills	Formulating ambitious vision for change (yes/no) Focus on sustainability (= < 2 examples = no > 2 examples = yes)	Low = none criterium Moderate = one criterium High = two criteria	Interview, websites
Mobilizing stakeholders	Motivate stakeholders successfully to an active role in scaling	= < 2 examples = no > 2 examples = yes	Interviews, data on results
Focus on retaining effectiveness	Activities to protect social initiatives from negative influences on effectiveness	Protocol, certificate, licence, or local support => 2 examples of intervention (yes) no	Interviews, websites

Initiators were asked to give examples of their behaviour. For example, in the case of mobilization stakeholders, we asked what they did to mobilize interest groups to promote the social initiative among their members and with what result. To validate our data, we asked stakeholders for example ‘who took the initiative and what was the effect?’ Initiators were coded as 'yes' if they provided two or more examples of successful mobilization. Regarding coding focus on retaining effectiveness, we asked initiators what they did to keep their social initiative effective in another context. For example, they made sure that a method was protected by licence, they trained staff or kept close supervision to the implementation in another context.

Initiators were indicated with an ‘I’ and classified as I-ch, I-cl, I-cm, I-ph, I-pl or I-pm, where c and p refer to central and peripheral position and h, l, m, refer to high, low, and moderate entrepreneurial skills, respectively.

4.5. Results

In this section we present our findings on the expectations for the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and position on one hand and mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness on the other. In our comparative analysis, we conclude on our expectations and discuss additional insights on

these relations.

4.5.1. Influence of entrepreneurial skills on mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness

Table 9 Results on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and scaling process

Entrepreneurial skills	Total number of cases	Mobilizing stakeholders	Focus on retaining effectiveness
High	11	9	9
Moderate	7	2	4
Low	2	0	0
Total	20	11	13

The findings in Table 9 provide support for expectation 1: initiators with high entrepreneurial skills mobilize stakeholders more than initiators with low entrepreneurial skills. Both initiators with low entrepreneurial skills struggled to fit into the picture, to demand attention ('I just never manage to get access', I-pl1), as they struggled to adapt to what they called the political game and smooth talk. In contrast, most initiators with high entrepreneurial skills knew how to play the acquisition game ('I'm not afraid to pick up the phone and talk to anyone I meet', I-ch3; 'I started by talking to the gurus in the field', I-ph5; 'I read something in the media and then I contacted him', I-ch2), for example, because they had a commercial background ('I come from a family of entrepreneurs', I-ch1) and took a long-term view. They were also flexible and adapted ('In the beginning I still wore a tie,' I-ph5). Moderately skilled initiators were also less likely to mobilize stakeholders than initiators with high entrepreneurial skills. ('I am not the person to kick in the doors,' I-cm3; I should do acquisition, I-pm2). It was noteworthy that one social initiative, a program for inclusiveness, scaled geographically, while the initiator with moderate entrepreneurial skills did not actively mobilize stakeholders. This social initiative was initially supported by interest groups who promoted the social initiative among their members.

Table 9 also shows that two initiators with high and five with moderate entrepreneurial skills did not mobilize stakeholders. These two with high entrepreneurial skills were part of organizations, of which one of a large private organization. Although they were highly driven by their social purpose, they did not have enough energy, time, or focus to mobilize stakeholders to scaling the social initiative to other contexts ('but the handicap of learning is, how shall I put it, that they all want to reinvent the wheel', I-ch1). Those with moderate entrepreneurial skills were more concerned with day-to-day matters at a local

level and therefore less focused on mobilizing stakeholders for the scaling across geographical areas ('I do not have enough time', I-pm2). Most of these initiators were practical and focused purely on the initiative itself, rather than the impact on the bigger picture.

Table 9 also provides support for expectation 2 since initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more focussed on retaining effectiveness than those with moderate or low entrepreneurial skills ('We only give access after accreditation by I-ph4', I-ph7; 'We stick to our principles in every intervention, that's part of our success', I-ph6; 'courses are evaluated for effectiveness', I-ch2). . It was remarkable that four initiators with moderate entrepreneurial skills were focussed on retention of effectiveness, whereas only two focused on mobilizing stakeholders. This was because three of them had protected their names in some way ('Our name is registered,' I-pm3; 'They have to sign a contract, otherwise they can't use the name', I-pm4). Without permission, others could not use them, thus they maintain control over the conditions for effectiveness. The fourth had developed a monitor to measure effectiveness in another context.

4.5.2. Influence of position on mobilizing stakeholders and retaining effectiveness

Table 10 Results on the relationship between position and scaling process

Position	Total number of cases	Mobilizing stakeholders	Focus on retaining effectiveness
Central	8	4	5
Peripheral	12	7	8
Total	20	11	13

Table 10 shows that expectation 3 is not supported, because initiators in central and peripheral positions mobilize stakeholders to the same extent. For example, we found initiators in both peripheral and central positions who successfully mobilized policy advisors at ministries. Our findings highlight that initiators in central positions did not benefit from their networks more than initiators in peripheral positions ('I do not have close contacts with the ministry of Health', I-ch2). Both initiators in peripheral and central positions had to deal with resistance ('They don't take over, they want to reinvent it all themselves', I-ch1; 'You need to have a lot of bureaucratic skills', I-ph7), not only in public organizations, but in private as well ('Top down is not going to work. There are so many egos there', I-ph1).

The findings presented in Table 10 do not support expectation 4 either. Table 10 shows that initiators in peripheral positions were no less focused on retaining effectiveness than those in central positions.

Interviews with initiators and stakeholders painted a picture of a government unaccustomed to measuring effectiveness ('..... we did not know the effect of our policy', S1), half-hearted implementation of evidence-based social initiatives ('They only took the interview training and went beyond the whole concept', I-cm1). Measurement is also difficult because it requires consistent implementation in the same way, and in the social sector this has not always been the case ('..so we cannot measure results', I-ch3). It was remarkable that initiators in central positions did not get support in their efforts to keep social initiatives effective ('there is an intention to work with it, but no one said so loud', I-ch1).

4.5.3. Comparative analyses: testing expectation 5 and 6

So far, we have described individual relationships between entrepreneurial skills and position and the scaling process. In this section we bring them together. In doing so, we give a picture of the interrelationship between entrepreneurial skills and position and their impact on mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness. Table 11 summarizes our findings on these relationships.

Table 11 Comparative findings

Position/Entrepreneurial skills	Total number of cases	Mobilizing stakeholders	Focus on retaining effectiveness
Central/High (ch)	4	3	3
Central/Moderate (cm)	3	1	2
Central/Low (cl)	1	0	0
Peripheral/High (ph)	7	6	6
Peripheral/Moderate (pm)	4	1	2
Peripheral/Low (pl)	1	0	0
Total	20	11	13

Table 11 supports our expectation 5 that high entrepreneurial skills are more important for mobilizing stakeholders than position. Most initiators with high entrepreneurial skills mobilize stakeholders for their scaling, regardless of their position (see rows 'Central/High' and 'Peripheral/High' in Table 11). It was remarkable that four out of six initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in peripheral positions (ph) mobilized stakeholders focused on social initiatives in the debt area. Although their social initiatives were different, they shared the social purpose and joint forces in their efforts to increase impact ('we work closely with I-ph3, I-ph5 and I-ph7', I-ph4). By doing so, they increased their networks and created access to relevant public and public organizations ('He was our former director.' S4; 'He (I-ph5) did some great

marketing', S3, 'It is a small world', S5;) and were successful in mobilizing stakeholders ('We mentioned I-ph4 in a letter from Parliament', S2). Two other initiators (ph) were strongly driven by changing attitudes. One focused on society, while the other, a supermarket manager, worked hard to persuade other colleagues and stakeholders to look at people differently, for example by introducing a new recruitment method.

Although initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in both peripheral and central positions mobilized stakeholders, many stakeholders confirmed that, in general, it is difficult for initiators in a peripheral position to gain access to the public sector. Interest groups, ministries or executive organizations acknowledged the barriers for initiators in peripheral positions ('You have to have a specific network to get access to our organization', S3; 'The Secretary General talks to his colleague from another ministry. They are in the same building', S2). However, these barriers can be broken down by high entrepreneurial skills, as our research shows.

Our findings do not support expectation 6. Table 11 highlights that this position is not more important than entrepreneurial skills in focusing on retaining effectiveness. Most initiators, both in central and peripheral positions, who focused on retaining effectiveness had high entrepreneurial skills. We found that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills were strongly driven by their social purpose and felt some need to control the scaling process. Although we cannot draw any conclusions from the numbers, the picture that emerged was that initiators with moderate entrepreneurial skills had their hands full with their own ambitions and were less concerned with the long term. They did not mobilize stakeholders to scale, but it seems that they were more focused on the retention of effectiveness of their social initiatives, for example by registering the name. Thus, based on our research, we conclude that for both components of scaling, mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness, the entrepreneurial skills of the initiators are more important than the position.

4.5.4. Comparative analysis: additional insights

In addition to testing our six expectations, the aim of this research was to generate new insights based on an inductive analysis of the qualitative findings to enrich our understanding of the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions in the scaling of social initiatives.

The first pattern we identified was that in all areas there is hardly any perceived responsibility for scaling social initiatives in such a way that they retain their effectiveness ('It's not our role to protect the

concept', S6; 'They can't do much. They can present initiatives to the municipalities, but they cannot enforce them', S7). In general, little attention has been paid to measuring the effectiveness of social initiatives in other contexts. There is little inclination to invest in this, in part because it takes a lot of time and money. Our findings show that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more focused on scaling the initiative while retaining its effectiveness, but this does not guarantee that their social initiatives will retain their effectiveness in other contexts because they cannot fully control the scaling process. And local public organizations have other priorities and there is no trigger to invest in initiatives started elsewhere. This leaves room for another - less effective - solution, which is illustrated by the proliferation of social initiatives at the local level.

A second additional insight was that in addition to entrepreneurial skills and position, initiators, especially those who are part of large organizations, need 'space' to scale. We found that some initiators were given space to develop and implement their social initiatives at the local level, but that others were organizationally constrained. This was illustrated by the difference between an initiator with high entrepreneurial skills and one with moderate skills, both in central positions at the local level. While the one initiator with moderate skills was given space to (successfully) scale the social initiative to other contexts, the other had no time and - more importantly - an extensive experience of stakeholder resistance and therefore little confidence that the social initiative would be successfully taken up elsewhere. To make the most of social initiatives, stakeholders need to have - or create - space for entrepreneurial behaviour in the scaling process.

A third additional insight we found was that, unlike in the market, initiators in peripheral positions with high entrepreneurial skills are more likely to join forces with initiators of similar or related initiatives than to start competition. This was illustrated by four initiators in peripheral positions who initially did not know each other and then decided to join forces. One of them, with a strong commercial background, explained that he too had to change gears, but felt that this was the best strategy to cut through the bureaucracy. Although we do not know whether they would have succeeded on their own, we do know that they became serious players in the scaling process of social initiatives in the debt area and respected partners for public organizations such as ministries and interest groups to work with. In addition to testing our six expectations, the aim of this research was to generate new insights based on an inductive analysis of the qualitative findings to enrich our understanding of the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions in the scaling of social initiatives.

4.6. Discussion

Our findings show that entrepreneurial skills are more important than a formal position for both mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retention of effectiveness. In public organizations initiators can have high entrepreneurial skills, but for them also, scaling is as much difficult as for those in peripheral positions. Our findings show that space to scale and joining forces help scaling to other contexts, but coordination of the scaling process is often missing and there is little attention to measuring results and retention of effectiveness in other contexts. In addition, the picture that emerged from the interviews is that there are no triggers to scale local initiatives to other contexts and evidence-based research requires scale and capacity, which can be challenging at the local level.

The findings of our study touch the academic debate on ecosystems for co-creation and social entrepreneurship (e.g. Perikangas *et al.*, 2023). The development of such an ecosystem raises puzzling questions such as 'who should be involved? Based on our findings, a supportive ecosystem should also include a platform for scaling, for example a scaling lab. A scaling platform could invest in measuring effectiveness in different contexts and build on emerging research, such as the work of Matos *et al.* (2023) and Rønning *et al.* (2022), which suggests that public value should be much more about evaluation than measurement. Stakeholders in a supportive ecosystem create space and are willing to collaborate based on a shared vision (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Perikangas *et al.*, 2023). Other than social enterprises who (partly) rely on profit, for public organizations there are no triggers for scaling local social initiatives, so an ecosystem should not only include incentives for social enterprises, but for public organizations as well.

Our findings should be considered within the context of a decentralized public sector, particularly in the social sector. First, in centralized public sectors, a formal central position at the national level may come with increased control and coordination over the scaling process. This may decrease the relevance of initiators' entrepreneurial skills for mobilizing stakeholders and focus on effectiveness compared to initiators' position. In addition, in centralized sectors, initiators with high entrepreneurial skills at the local level may be less hindered by organizational boundaries, so then, entrepreneurial skills are a condition and guarantee. Comparative studies between centralized and decentralized public sectors would increase our knowledge on the complex relations between position and entrepreneurial skills and their influence on the scaling process.

Second, our findings on the little attention paid to measuring outcomes may be linked to the specific nature of the social sector. The social sector involves human behaviour, which is less objectively measurable than, for example, technological performance. In the literature in other disciplines, such as

technology, there is more focus on responsible innovation through the development of voluntary, objectively measurable standards (Meijer *et al.*, 2023) and this may affect the focus on effectiveness as well as measuring outcomes. However, there are studies that address difficulties in the implementation of national and sectoral IT programs (Alidousti and Sahli, 2023), so recommend further research on the scaling of social initiatives in other sectors, including the focus on retaining effectiveness.

4.7. Overall conclusion

We started our research with the central question: 'How do initiators' entrepreneurial skills and position influence the mobilization of stakeholders and focus on retaining the effectiveness of social initiatives?' We found support for the expectations that high entrepreneurial skills and a central position would be positively related to mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retention of effectiveness. Our findings also support our expectation that entrepreneurial skills would be more important than position for mobilizing stakeholders. However, contrary to our expectation, we found that entrepreneurial skills were more important than position for the focus on effectiveness as well. Our research revealed three additional insights: 1) there is little responsibility for retaining effectiveness in other contexts, 2) initiators need space to scale to other contexts, and 3) initiators in peripheral positions tend to join forces rather than compete.

The aim of our research was to contribute to the academic literature and practice. Our study confirms researchers on public innovation who challenge the perception that public organizations lack entrepreneurial behaviour (Mazzucato, 2013). We found that entrepreneurial behaviour in scaling is influenced by space for scaling, related to the change readiness in the environment, which confirms studies on the institutional pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Experimental space is commonly associated with idea generation (e.g. Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008), and focus on the opportunities and challenges of co-creation, rather than on the space for scaling to other contexts. We recommend further research on the influence of experimental space on the entrepreneurial behaviour of initiators in the scaling process.

Our findings on initiators' position support the literature on institutional entrepreneurship (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020) that having a strong network is important for scaling and defining position as 'authority in the eyes of others' (Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020) is more useful than reference to someone's formal position. For scaling however, Hoogstraaten *et al.*'s definition (2020) is still too imprecise, because holding a central (informal or formal) position at the local level does not necessarily guarantee access to networks in other contexts, such as other regions. Conversely, a central

position at the national level may provide better access to other geographical areas. So, for scaling to other contexts, a distinction in level is relevant.

Our study also provides insights for policy advisors and public managers. Local public managers should be aware of the great potential within public organizations and welcome the collaboration with initiators in central and peripheral positions by creating space for scaling. To encourage collaboration in scaling social initiatives, the national government could consider financial triggers. For example, a bonus for adopting initiatives developed elsewhere (and proven effective), compensation for capacity, or funds for implementation. They can also actively promote successful examples among policymakers, which we found can lead to national guidelines. In addition, policy advisors and managers can invest in scaling platforms, labs, as part of the ecosystem, that stimulate and coordinate the scaling process of social initiatives that start at the local level. They can do so for example by providing structural funds for those who bear the costs, while the social initiative is saving on other public functions or to facilitate in tools and training for measuring results. A good initial step is the development of a clear and shared vision for scaling social initiatives and focusing on sustainability. And these are precisely two characteristics of entrepreneurial skills.

Chapter 5 Accelerating social initiatives: an exploratory study on scaling in the social sector⁴

Abstract

The current literature on the public sector pays limited attention to the role of accelerators in the scaling process of social initiatives. This exploratory research aims to provide an initial understanding of the role of accelerators as part of the ecosystem of social initiatives and to address possible gaps in the literature. Based on the literature on private sector accelerators, we have selected criteria which allowed us to make an initial identification of potential accelerators in the Dutch public sector, within several parts of the social domain. Closer study shows that accelerators in the public sector are very different from those in the private sector. In contrast to the private sector, accelerators in the public sector also take temporary organizational forms that focus on a specific initiative. Moreover, they rarely select social initiatives through open calls, and they sometimes focus on professionals or policy advisors rather than on the initiators. We conclude that the role of accelerators has potential value as they contribute to the coordination of the scaling process across contexts while maintaining a focus on the effectiveness of social initiatives in these different contexts. However, the accelerator role in the ecosystem of social initiatives needs further development including assessing and measuring their contribution to scaling. We also conclude that scaling beyond should be considered as a separate dimension of scaling, alongside scaling out, up and deep.

5.1. Introduction

Many authors argue that social initiatives are important for public sector innovation (Doberstein, 2016; Bason, 2010; Geuijen *et al.*, 2017; Torfing 2016) and that experimental space is crucial for the generation of new ideas (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008; Grin, 2020; Bason, 2010). The last decades have seen a proliferation of social initiatives at the local level, from housing to debt. Creating space for innovation at the local level was one of the reasons for decentralizing the Dutch social sector in 2015. It was expected that in this way

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municipalities could provide tailored services for their residents. From a societal impact perspective, it can be argued that it would be good if local social initiatives scale to other contexts, because a larger group of residents can benefit from the innovation and public money would be spent more efficiently (Karré, 2022). Scaling in the public sector, however, is more complex than in the market (Moore *et al.*, 2015) and turns out to be a huge challenge (Schot and Geels, 2010; Crosby *et al.*, 2017), as roles in scaling are distributed among various actors (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Meijer, 2014).

In the private management literature, accelerators are considered to play a crucial role in the scaling process of start-ups (Hallen *et al.*, 2020) and, more recently, social enterprises (Assenova, 2023). In contrast, the current literature on public sector innovation pays limited attention to the role of accelerators as distributors of social initiatives that start at the local level. Our explorative research aims to bring in a new perspective by providing an initial understanding of the role of accelerators in the scaling of social initiatives. The central research question of our theoretical and empirical exploration is: What are accelerators in the public sector, who do they support and how do they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives?

Accelerators who support initiatives that scale in the market, hereinafter referred to as private sector accelerators, are defined as organizational forms that provide planned, dedicated and time limited support to start-ups (Crişan *et al.*, 2019; Miller and Bound, 2011). Although a recurring subject of discussion in academic literature is how they distinguish from other roles in the ecosystem of start-ups, for example angel investors or incubators (Hallen *et al.*, 2020), accelerators are perceived to play a distinct role in the ecosystem of start-ups (Crişan *et al.* 2019). Most start-ups supported by accelerators show better outcomes, meaning increased income and volumes, than similar start-ups that were not supported (Guttentag *et al.*, 2021).

In this paper, we will explore the role of accelerators in the public sector context, hereafter public sector accelerators, in the scaling of social initiatives from one context to another. Clearly, social initiative is a broad concept (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Austin *et al.*, 2006). In this study we focus on social initiatives for the public good that are not scaled in the market. We will discuss the management literature in the public sector context and develop a theoretical understanding of the role of accelerators in the public sector ecosystem. In an empirical study we will further explore what public sector accelerators are, who they support and how they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives. The findings of the theoretical and empirical exploration are used to discuss the (potential) value of the role of public sector accelerators in the scaling process of social initiatives. This study aims to contribute to the

debates in the public innovation literature (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Cole, 2022; Osborne *et al.*, 2022; Tönurist *et al.*, 2017; Torfing 2016; Rønning *et al.*, 2022) and to provide tools for public managers in their efforts to improve the scaling process of social initiatives. In addition, this research contributes to the general literature on accelerators and heeds the call from Crişan *et al.* (2019) to study accelerators in different contexts.

5.2. Towards an academic understanding of public sector accelerators

Before we develop a theoretical understanding of public sector accelerators, we will explain our delineation of the wide variety of social initiatives and the context in which they scale.

5.2.1. Social initiatives in our study

Social initiative is a broad concept which is closely related to the concepts social entrepreneurship and social enterprise. Definitions of social entrepreneurship vary (Bacq and Janssen, 2011) but the common element is the primary focus on creating public value rather than on making profit (Santos, 2012). Social initiatives and social enterprises are not the same. Although the academic debate has been shifted from what a social enterprise is (Santos, 2012; Schoneveld, 2020) to how to categorize the wide variety of (new) organizational forms and hybrid resources (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017), innovative initiatives that fully depend on public funds are excluded from definitions of social enterprises (European Commission, 2023). This would exclude, for example, initiatives started by employees in public organizations (Hartmann and Hartmann, 2023). It is evident that there are a considerable number of social initiatives that fall within the definition of social enterprise. Nevertheless, there are also social initiatives that do not align with the definition. This is exemplified by the provision of services that are not commercially viable, such as services for vulnerable groups that are unable to pay for the service themselves (Santos, 2012). In our study we focus on social initiatives that are not scaled through the market mechanism. These social initiatives rely entirely or largely on public resources and operate within or on the fringes of public organizations and usually start at the local level.

5.2.2. Public sector context for scaling social initiatives

The public sector context in which social initiatives scale fundamentally differs from that of start-ups that scale in the market. Scaling a social initiative means increasing its impact (Smith *et al.*, 2016; Moore 2013; André and Pache, 2016). Whereas scaling in the market primarily focusses on growth, such as increased sales (Rogers, 1962), scaling in the public sector is a more complex process than simply diffusing a social initiative to another context (Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano, 2015; Rønning *et al.*, 2022). A new selection method for hiring people who are far from the labour market, for example, may be successfully introduced on a large scale, but unless the culture in workplaces changes, a similar category of people will be excluded again in the foreseeable future. Or in cases where the financial benefits of initiatives are distributed to different parties than the financial burdens, a different method of allocating public funds will be required to facilitate the widespread implementation of such initiatives. So, to achieve social goals, social initiatives not only need to increase volumes, but to impact rules, daily routines, and attitudes as well. In this respect, the public management literature distinguishes between scaling out, being activities to expand and increase volumes, scaling up, being activities to impact rules and routines (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Hermans *et al.*, 2016), and scaling deep (Peeters and Mohout, 2020; Moore *et al.*, 2015) to indicate activities to influence meanings and attitudes. As illustrated, these three dimensions are closely related. The lobby for changes in regulation (scaling up) or in attitudes (scaling deep) may encourage the scaling to other contexts (scaling out), but increased volumes (scaling out) may also increase pressure on adjustments in regulation and routines (scaling up) and contribute to changes in attitudes (scaling deep). In addition, these three dimensions occur at the local, regional or (inter) national level and impact the individual, organizational and institutional level (Osborne *et al.*, 2022; De Bruin 2023; Crişan *et al.*, 2019). The scaling process of social initiatives is therefore a collaborative process in which various actors take various roles (Meijer, 2014). Accelerator is one of these roles.

Our theoretical understanding of public sector accelerators is based on three sub questions 1) what are accelerators and 2) who do they support and 3) how do they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives? We use the theoretical answers to these questions as a basis for empirical research.

Public sector accelerators: what are they?

This study focuses on public sector accelerators that support the scaling of social initiatives that do not scale through the market mechanism, to distinguish them from private sector accelerators that support start-ups that operate in the market. But how can we define these accelerators? The management

literature on private sector accelerators is partially helpful, as private sector accelerators are seen as a distinctive actor in the ecosystem of start-ups and social enterprises (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023). Although a clear definition is still missing (Crişan *et al.*, 2019), there are commonly accepted characteristics of private sector accelerators that help to distinguish them from other roles (Cohen 2013; Hallen *et al.*, 2020; Pauwels *et al.*, 2016). Accelerators are organizational forms that support start-ups in their scaling. They are characterized by intensive, planned but time-limited relations with start-up entrepreneurs (Crişan *et al.*, 2019). They are distinct from incubators, another organizational form that seeks to support new ventures, as their support is time-limited, typically three months, and they usually do not provide a physical infrastructure, like office space and printers (Cohen, 2013). They also differ from angel investors, wealthy individuals who invest in new ventures, as angel investors lack the formal structure and planned activities (Hallen *et al.*, 2020).

The broad definition of 'an organizational form that provides intensive, planned, but time-limited (not physical) support to start-ups in their scaling' is also partially useful for the identification of public sector accelerators. It makes clear that accelerators are not always individuals. They move existing initiatives forward but do not necessarily play a key role in their design. It also shows that support for social initiatives is planned, intensive, and time limited. However, to apply the definition to public sector accelerators, we need to be aware of the specific context in which social initiatives scale. As said, scaling is a collaborative process, and many social initiatives are the result of co-creation and other open collective arrangements (Dekker *et al.*, 2020; Bason, 2010). The organizational form of public sector accelerators is part of our explorative empirical research.

Like in the literature on private sector accelerators, we need to distinguish the role of public sector accelerators from that of other actors in the ecosystem of social initiatives. Firstly, it should be said that the scarce studies on roles in scaling use various terms to express the role of accelerators, like 'diffusor' (Meijer, 2014) or 'catalyst' (Ansell and Gash, 2012). However, these studies are mostly case studies that focus on the roles of individuals rather than on organizational actors (Hansen *et al.*, 2022). Our study is about the sustainable role that accelerators can play in the ecosystem. Therefore, we look at accelerators that are organizational actors. The obvious actors that support the scaling out of social initiatives are, for example, ministries, interest groups or knowledge centers that provide funding, expertise, and networks (Van Lunenburg *et al.*, 2020). In theory, these actors can be identified as accelerators if their support is intensive, dedicated and planned, although it may be temporary. Incidental support, such as providing funds without intensive and dedicated support, does not meet our definition of public sector accelerators.

In the public sector context, it is important to highlight the similarities and differences between accelerators and labs. Labs, referred to as innovation labs, policy labs, and living labs, have received a lot of attention in the public innovation literature in recent years (Cole, 2022; Lewis, 2021; Dekker *et al.*, 2020). Here also, there is a debate about how the role of labs relates to, for example, think tanks, consultancies (McGann *et al.*, 2021) or departments in public organizations (Tönurist *et al.*, 2017). Labs too are seen as distinct actors in the ecosystem of social initiatives. Moreover, labs show similarities with accelerators as they also focus on supporting innovation and their support is limited in time (Tönurist *et al.*, 2017). However, the main difference between labs and accelerators is that labs focus on producing innovative solutions, including their framing (Cole and Hagen, 2023;), and then especially together with the target groups for whom the service is intended (Dekker *et al.*, 2020; McGann *et al.*, 2021), whereas the focus of accelerators of social initiatives is on the next step, scaling to other contexts. Thus, accelerators include social initiatives that already exist and that may even be embedded in organizations' systems on a smaller scale and/or that have proven to be effective at the local level. Accelerators can support social initiatives that are created by local labs, or other forms of co-creation, in their process of scaling to other contexts.

In sum, based on the previously discussed applicability of the definition of private sector accelerators, we define public sector accelerators as 'organizational actors that provide intensive, planned, but temporary support to social initiatives when scaling to other contexts.' We will use this definition to identify public sector accelerators.

Public sector accelerators: who do they support?

Private sector accelerators typically select start-ups by open calls for applications (Hallen *et al.*, 2020). As the public sector is open to all social initiatives, accelerators would be open to supporting all social initiatives, but how does one select from the multitude of social initiatives? Studies on collaboration show that public sector organizations are more likely to collaborate with stakeholders who are familiar with their culture and language than with those who are not (Brock, 2020; Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Grin, 2020). For actors who are not part of public sector networks, collaboration is difficult and frustrating (Cinar *et al.*, 2019). Building on these studies, it is expected that public sector accelerators are more likely to select social initiatives from their own networks rather than through open calls. The selection of social initiatives is part of our exploratory research.

Public sector accelerators: how do they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives?

The support of private sector accelerators focuses on growth, scaling out, such as increased sales (Rogers, 1962). For this reason, private sector accelerators offer either narrow or extended support packages (Crişan *et al.*, 2019), varying from workshops and training (Hallen *et al.*, 2020) to additional services like providing networks, validation of concepts and after-program assistance or legal support (Crişan *et al.*, 2019).

As said, scaling in the public sector is more complex than in the private sector. Obviously, scaling is not an end in itself. The main reasons for scaling to other contexts are on the one hand increasing the impact of social initiatives, and on the other hand avoiding the risk of wasting energy and money by reinventing the wheel through the initiation of many similar initiatives. So, particularly in a decentralized public sector a balance needs to be struck between the idea of letting a thousand flowers bloom (Hartmann and Hartmann, 2023) and not wasting public money by facilitating inefficiency. It is therefore important to focus on two factors considered in the literature as crucial for the scaling process in the public sector: 1) the mobilization of stakeholders and 2) the focus on effectiveness in other contexts.

The first factor, mobilization of stakeholders is important, particularly since scaling in the public sector is a collaborative process (Meijer, 2014). Stakeholder mobilization requires institutional skills, meaning skills to convince and motivate others to actively support the scaling process (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). For example, convincing interest groups to promote a particular social initiative among their members or lobbying with policy advisors or decision makers. This is important since the public sector is said to be less adaptive for changes (Bason, 2010; Torfing, 2016). Literature on scaling social initiatives shows that skills to mobilize stakeholders are important for the implementation, at the local level, but also for successful spreading of social initiatives from one context to another (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016; Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Vergragt and Brown, 2012; Bocken, 2015; Battilana *et al.*, 2009). Accelerators can support initiators in their mobilization of stakeholders and potential adopters, for example by offering training programs to improve these skills for mobilization or by providing access to their networks.

The second factor in the support for the scaling of social initiatives concerns the focus on their effectiveness in new contexts. Although evidence-based policymaking is a critical issue globally (Meijer *et al.*, 2023), attention to the effectiveness of social initiatives when spreading to new contexts is understudied (Williams, 2014). As what works in one context may not fit in another, social initiatives may need some adjustments when adapting to new contexts. However, compromises or half-hearted

implementation while scaling may also lead social initiatives to end up in red tape or lose their effectiveness due to (Schot and Geels, 2010). This raises questions on the need for a greater degree of coordination in scaling social initiatives to new contexts. While in technological domains there is a growing interest in R & D collaboration on a voluntary basis (Meijer *et al.*, 2023; Amir *et al.*, 2019), for example by investing in joint labs, cartels, and development of standards, in social domains in contrast such agreements are less common, although there is a growing interest in social R & D as well (Foray *et al.*, 2012; TACSI, 2021). The larger focus on R&D collaboration in technological domains may be explained by the fact that financial investments and commercial interests are higher than in the social sector, and technical performance is easier to measure than social performance. In our empirical study we will explore how public sector accelerators support the focus on effectiveness, for example by providing standards or tools for measuring.

So far, we have explored the support that accelerators provide for the scaling process. Although our focus is on the scaling process, we also aim to paint a picture of the effect of their support. Private sector accelerators contribute demonstrably to scaling (Guttentag *et al.*, 2021). The Global Accelerator Learning Initiative (GALI) which collected data from accelerators around the world showed that there are widely accepted systems for measuring the performance of private sector accelerators supporting social enterprises (scaling in the market) (Assenova, 2023). Economic parameters such as whether the business was still in operation, revenue, and number of employees (Hallen *et al.*, 2020), showed that start-ups supported by accelerators had better results than those who were not supported (Guttentag *et al.*, 2021). Although their conclusions were heavily based on data from accelerators in developing countries, it turned out that comparable results were found in studies from Western countries (Hallen *et al.*, 2020; Assenova 2023). These studies also show that not all participants benefit equally, and that results depend strongly on the intensity and quality of support (Guttentag *et al.*, 2021).

In contrast, measuring the contribution of public sector accelerators to the results of the scaling process of social initiatives is much more complex. because to date, there is no agreement in the public innovation literature on how public value should be understood (Moore 2013; Bozeman, 2007; Osborne *et al.*, 2022; O'Flynn, 2021, Rønning *et al.*, 2022). While scaling out can be measured in terms of volume and scaling up by looking at changes in routines or legislation, these do not indicate an improvement for citizens, which would imply public value. In addition, as scaling in the public sector is a collaborative process, the distinction between support from accelerators and support from other actors is difficult to

measure. In our exploratory study, we can only provide a picture of the contribution of public sector accelerators by looking at increased volumes and their support activities for scaling up and deep.

5.3. Methodology

5.3.1. Research method and case selection

The aim of the empirical research was to develop an exploratory empirical understanding of what public sector accelerators are, who they support and how they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives. We focused on one country to reduce the diversity of institutional contexts. We chose the Netherlands because in this small country the social sector is decentralized, meaning that the national government only provides a general framework for local public organizations all of which are looking for smart solutions. This makes the role of accelerators even more important as they can make specific social initiatives available to a larger group of citizens and while simultaneously avoiding wasting public money and energy caused by initiating similar social initiatives in various places.

In the Dutch social sector, municipalities and social organizations work together on issues such as health, welfare, labour participation and (financial) self-sufficiency. We aimed to provide an exploratory empirical understanding of accelerators by examining what they are and how they contribute to scaling out and up. We looked for a diversity of accelerators and therefore focused on three domains within the social sector. We chose mental health care, debt assistance, and interventions to improve labour participation. Examples of social initiatives in mental health care include a first aid course for mental illness, an academy run by experts by experience, a stigma café, and an annual run for inclusivity. Debt assistance initiatives range from early prevention by addressing overdue payments, to conversation techniques based on neuroscience research, to volunteer financial buddies. Examples of social initiatives on interventions to improve labour participation include inclusive recruitment methods, cultural programmes, job carving and on-the-job learning for people with severe mental illness. Our study was highly exploratory. We focused primarily on identifying accelerators, our cases, and used a qualitative case study method (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

5.3.2. Data collection and analysis

The fieldwork consisted of 48 in-depth interviews with initiators (representatives of social initiatives, for example project leaders or directors) and stakeholders in their ecosystem, such as policy advisors, consultants or employees of companies and interest groups. As we could not identify accelerators in advance, this was a highly iterative process. We started by interviewing initiators of 20 initiatives to find out what support they had received to scale and from whom. This allowed us to explore the distinction between accelerators and other actors in the social initiative's ecosystem that support the social initiative in scaling. We identified seven accelerators that met the criteria for public sector accelerators as 'organizational actors that provide intensive, planned, but time limited support to social initiatives in their scaling to other contexts.' We looked for covenants, contracts or other statements that underpinned 'dedicated and planned' where the criteria could not be identified from the organizations' websites or annual reports. Table 12 shows the distribution of our respondents.

Table 12 Distribution of initiatives and respondents

Domain	Mental Health	Labour Participation	Debts	Total
Initiatives	8	6	6	20
Respondents (Initiators and stakeholders)	18 Ministry (2) Interest group (4) Healthcare (1) Platform (1) Municipality (1) Mental health organization (4) Housing cooperation (1) Foundation (3) Social work (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Commercial enterprise (1) Knowledge centre (1) Foundation (2) Commercial enterprise (3) Governmental commission (1) Regional network (1)	15 Ministry (2) Interest group (3) Executive organization (1) Health care (2) Knowledge centre (1) Municipality (2) Foundation (3) Social enterprise (1)	48
Identified as public sector accelerator	2	3	2	7

The aim of our study was to explore how accelerators contribute to the scaling process in terms of their support for mobilizing stakeholders and focus on effectiveness and the effect of their support on

the scaling, particularly on scaling out. Scaling out was measured in terms of volume. For scaling up and deep, we looked at indirect parameters. Scaling up was measured in terms of effective implementation (i.e., changed legislation or data on effectiveness) and scaling deep in terms of reported results of these activities. By comparing the support with the indicators for scaling up and deep, we were also able to paint a picture of the contribution of accelerators to the scaling up and deep.

We coded the contribution as low if we found no evidence of increased volumes and high if we found evidence of positive results for scaling out and contribution to scaling up/deep. Mixed results were coded as moderate, for example if only some of the supported social initiatives scaled out. In this way, we were able to show the contribution of public sector accelerators to the scaling process of social initiatives.

5.4. Results

In this section we present the results of our research on public sector accelerators and provide explorative empirical answers to the three guiding questions of this paper: 1) what are public sector accelerators, 2) who do they support and 3) how do they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives? At the end of this section, we develop an empirical understanding of the specific nature of public sector accelerators.

5.4.1. Public sector accelerators: what are they?

We identified seven public sector accelerators distributed among the three domains. Table 13 presents a description of the identified accelerators and their organizational forms.

Table 13 Description and organizational form of identified public sector accelerators

Public sector accelerator	Organizational form	Comments
R1 (Mental Health) Platform against stigma	Foundation	Strongly based on funds from ministry and interest groups. Ten years. Next to the support for social initiatives, they developed social initiatives themselves.
R2 (Mental Health) Fundraising by yearly run for inclusiveness. Full amount available for the support of social initiatives	Foundation	Main sponsor: commercial organization Platform for inclusiveness. Supporting initiators of small social initiatives is part of their strategy against stigma.
R3 (Labour Participation) Innovation Award Yearly award for innovative approach	Interest group	The accelerator is part of an interest group
R4 (Labour Participation) National program for labour participation 'nonwestern background' Goal to measure effectiveness and scale promising initiatives	Government	The accelerator is part of a government ministry
R5 (Labour Participation) Scaling labor reintegration method for people with serious mental illness	Collaborative network	Network of ministry, executive organization, mental health federation and knowledge center Temporary
R6 (Debts) Scaling early alert	Collaborative network	Network started by employees of municipalities. Board of advisory Temporary
R7 (Debts) Scalinglab. Aims to tackle debt problems by scaling evidence-based methods in an efficient way.	Foundation	Foundation funded by public and private

Table 13 shows the diversity of accelerators. Two (R1 and R2) public sector accelerators were anti-stigma platforms. In addition to their role as accelerators, they developed their own activities ('It's part of our strategy', R2). One accelerator was unique in that scaling social initiatives in an efficient and effective way was its core business (R7). Diversity was also reflected in the variety of organizational forms. Two public sector accelerators were part of public organizations: a program that belonged to a ministry

('Actually it was the former target group for refugees', R4) or an interest group (R3). Two accelerators were temporary collaborative networks (R5, R6) in which several public organizations worked together. One was a spontaneous network of employees from different municipalities (R6) who joined forces. The other network (R5) consisted of known partners. Three accelerators were foundations (R1, R2, R7), one of which relied heavily on national funding from a ministry (R1) but did not survive a new round of bidding after our study. Two foundations received funding from both public and private partners (R2, R7).

5.4.2. Public sector accelerators: who do they support?

The next issue is how public sector accelerators select the social initiatives they want to support. In Table 14, the findings on this are presented in the second column.

Table 14 Findings on who is supported

Public sector accelerator	Selection of social initiatives	Target audience
R1 (Mental Health)	By network	Initiators
R2 (Mental Health)	Open call	Initiators
R3 (Labour Participation)	Open call Evidence-based Two social initiatives	Initiators
R4 (Labour Participation)	Network Evidence-based	Initiators Professionals
R5 (Labour Participation)	Own initiative Evidence-based One social initiative	Professionals Policy advisors
R6 (Debts)	Own initiative Evidence-based One social initiative	Professionals Policy advisors
R7 (Debts)	Network Evidence-based	Professionals Policy advisors/politician

Table 14 shows that most accelerators were open to social initiatives originating both inside and outside public organizations (preferably public-private partnerships, R3, R7). Five accelerators (R3, R4, R5, R6, R7) supported only evidence-based social initiatives. Two accelerators only supported one social initiative (R5, R6). Only two accelerators invited social initiatives through an open call (R2, R3). For example, the national programme listed social initiatives from its own network ('There was no open call where we say 'go ahead and submit your project', R4). In addition, there was a requirement to participate in scientific research,

and many potential participants, both public and private, did not have the time or need for this, for example because they were only interested in what they saw working in their context or they were worried that the results would not fit with local political leaders. Surprisingly, we found that most accelerators did not focus on the initiator, but on the target audience, which is expressed in the last column of Table 14. Three accelerators focused on the initiator (R1, R2, R3). Two of them (R1, R2) supported individuals ('so they can do it themselves', R1), which are more similar to citizens' initiatives. The public sector accelerators with a different target audience focused mainly on professionals or policy advisors (R5, R6, R7). Their scope went beyond the interests of the individual entrepreneur, as they are driven by the creation of public value for the general public. The focus on the target audience instead of the initiator was also reflected in their contribution to the scaling of social initiatives, which will be discussed below.

5.4.3. Public sector accelerators: how do they contribute to the scaling process?

As highlighted in Table 15, second column, the exploratory research identified a wide variety in support by public sector accelerators to help social initiatives scale. All accelerators provided expertise and networks ('We follow the initiatives and learn from the experience, R3' 'We introduce them to each other', R2) and some of them also provided or organized funding for social initiatives (R2, R3, R5). None of the accelerators, including those who focus on initiators, provide training programs to improve skills for mobilization of stakeholders. They supported the mobilization of stakeholders by providing their own networks. Accelerators who focus on professionals more than on initiators (see Table 14) sometimes act as entrepreneurs themselves by doing acquisition and building and using networks actively. The explorative study did not show that accelerators provided support in framing the issue. It should be noted that the initiators of social initiatives were active in spreading the frame, for example by using experts by experience or training professionals on how stress about debt affects people's choices. However, these actions were not directly linked to the accelerator interventions. Nevertheless, the accelerators reinforced the message by actively spreading the frame when mobilizing their network.

Table 15 Public sector accelerators' contribution to the scaling process

Public sector accelerator	Support	Measuring results	Main scaling dimension	Contribution to scaling
R1 (Mental Health)	Expertise/network	Not measured	Deep	Low
R2 (Mental Health)	Expertise/network/ Clinic Small funds from foundation	Not measured	Deep	Low
R3 (Labour Participation)	Expertise/network Substantial funds from foundation Practical support: Business case	Not measured	Out One supported social initiative showed increased volume Up On the local level	Moderately Indirectly impact routines and attitudes professionals
R4 (Labour Participation)	Expertise/network Practical support: effectiveness measuring tool	Measuring effectiveness. First results showed positive results.	Out Strategy to scale out by reaching HR professionals Up	Moderately Directly impact routines and attitudes professionals
R5 (Labour Participation)	Expertise/network Governmental funding Practical support: protocol, training for professionals	Measuring effectiveness and volume	Out Increased volumes Up Changed professional standard (protocol) Deep Part of scaling up	High
R6 (Debts)	Expertise/network Practical support: manuals, website Capacity: helpdesk for professionals	Monitor for volume and effectiveness	Out Increased volumes Up Changed regulation, working routines Deep Part of scaling up	High
R7 (Debts)	Expertise/network Practical support: validation, proposals Capacity: advise support by implementation	Volumes and effectiveness of all initiatives	Out Increased volumes Up Changed working routines Deep Part of scaling up	High

Those that focused on professionals and policy advisors rather than on the initiator provided more intensive support, including practical assistance such as manuals and formats for building business cases. Their support aimed to make it easier for others to adopt the initiative. For example, the collaborative

network of staff (R6) organized workshops, shared their manuals, and set up a website to support colleagues elsewhere. Accelerators (R5, R6, R7) also provided capacity, such as a professional helpdesk or grant writing ('We act as salesmen', R7). Most of the accelerators that did not focus on initiators also provided monitoring and measurement tools (R4, R5, R6, R7). For example, the spontaneous network of staff who developed a monitor showing the impact of Early Warning on costs for municipalities. Two accelerators also closely monitored the implementation of the evidence-based method (R5, R7).

In sum, we conclude that all accelerators supported the mobilization of stakeholders by providing networks, but the support of those who focus on professionals and policy advisors more than on the initiator was more extended, including practical support for implementation and more focus on the effectiveness.

Our research also aimed to show the relation between the support and the effect on the scaling of social initiatives. Columns 3, 4 and 5 of Table 15 summarize the picture that emerges from our exploratory study and highlights the difficulties in measuring results. Three public sector accelerators (R1, R2, R3), that all focused on the initiator, did not keep records of results ('even if only one is affected, it makes a big difference', R2). For one of R3's initiatives, we did find evidence of growth. For accelerators that focused on professionals or policy advisors, we found increased volumes for the social initiatives they supported. Looking at their support (column 2), there is a link. In addition to expertise and networks, social initiatives that scaled out also received practical support.

As for scaling up, four public sector accelerators also monitored effectiveness (R4, R5, R6, R7). In addition, we found that the two temporary collaborative organizational forms (R5 and R6) impact legislation ('It also helped scale out because it became a priority for municipalities', R6). The results for scaling deep were hardly measurable. It was obvious that R1 and R2 contributed more to scaling deep than to scaling up as they were both anti-stigma platforms. For most of the public sector accelerators, their contribution to scaling deep was part of their efforts to scale up and out ('Then we had CEOs walking with young people', R7; 'We helped professionals to tell the story', R6; 'He said he should fire the HR director because of this, but he didn't, so we have a long way to go', initiative of R3). As said, the support of accelerators was not primarily focused on framing, so the contribution of accelerators to scaling deep was by reinforcing the frame than by setting the frame.

Overall, we rated the contribution of two public sector accelerators as low (R1 and R2) because they did not contribute to scaling out. Two public sector accelerators made a moderate contribution, as

became clear by the mixed results we found. One of these accelerators (R3) did not measure results, but one of the social initiatives it supported showed an increase in volume. R4 provided only a qualitative overview as it focused on developing measurement methodologies for social initiatives. Although the aim was to scale out, it was too early to measure increased volumes. However, early signs were promising, and they had already developed a strategy for scaling out, so their contribution was rated as moderate. R5, R6 and R7 made a high contribution to the scaling process. Two of them were collaborative organizations that only supported one social initiative. These public sector accelerators succeeded in making the social initiative a widespread practice in other geographical areas. R7 also contributed significantly to the scaling process of social initiatives. In fact, their contribution was even greater than R5 and R6, as they supported more than one social initiative, and their role as accelerator was not temporary.

In addition to their contribution to scaling out, up, and deep, our research showed that two public sector accelerators (R6 and R7) also influenced the existing ecosystem for scaling. These two public sector accelerators, both in the debt assistance domain and both focused on professionals and policy advisors, were relatively inexperienced players in the ecosystem. The spontaneous network of employees (R6) created something that could be labeled a 'mini ecosystem' for their own social initiative. They set up an advisory board representing key interest groups and maintained good contacts with the relevant ministry to lobby (successfully) for changes in legislation. They also ensured that monitoring and implementation activities were well embedded in the activities of interest groups after the project ended. However, this temporary network was only set up for one initiative and was not maintained after the project ended. No new ecosystem was created for other initiatives. This contrasted with R7, an organization that was generally accepted as an important stakeholder in the social initiative ecosystem. Illustrative was the interest group respondent's statement that new initiatives always had to be approved by this accelerator before they started working on them. R7 had a clear mission focused on scaling evidence-based social initiatives in an efficient way. This accelerator had built a solid network in a relatively short time and was well connected to national and local levels, so that it functioned as a spider at the center of the web. It worked closely with both public and private stakeholders. In this way, the accelerator not only supported social initiatives, but also contributed to an ecosystem that facilitated scaling for all social initiatives in the debt domain.

5.5. Discussion

Table 16 Summary of findings on public sector accelerators

What are they?	<p>Organizational form:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation (3) • Part of government (1) • Part of interest group (1) • Collaborative form (2) <p>Temporary (3)</p>
Who do they support?	<p>Selection social initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open call (2) • Network/arbitrary (3) • Own initiative (2) • Evidence-based (5) • =< 2 initiatives (3) <p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiator (3) • Initiator/Professional (1) • Professional/Policy advisor (3)
How do they contribute to the scaling?	<p>Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise/network (7) • Funds (3) • Practical support (5) • Capacity (2) <p>Contribution to scaling Low (2) Moderate (2) High (3)</p> <p><i>Scaling out:</i> Measuring volume (3) Too early to measure (1) Increased volumes of social initiatives (1)</p> <p><i>Scaling up:</i> Measuring effectiveness (4)</p> <p><i>Scaling deep:</i> Part of scaling up (4)</p> <p><i>Scaling beyond:</i> Influencing the scaling ecosystem of social initiatives (1)</p>

The purpose of our exploratory research was to develop a theoretical and empirical understanding of the role of public sector accelerators in the scaling of social initiatives. Building on the definition of private sector accelerators, we developed a definition of public sector accelerators. We were able to identify seven accelerators that met the criteria. We explored what they are, who they support and how they contribute to the scaling of social initiatives.

Table 16 highlights that public sector accelerators occur in collaborative and temporary organizational forms, supporting only one or two social initiatives. Our study showed that public sector accelerators selected social initiatives through their network rather than through open calls. Sometimes it was not clear why they did this. Table 16 also highlights that accelerators in the public sector context vary in their target audience, which could be initiators or professionals or policy advisors. The variety in target audience is also reflected in the support that public sector accelerators offer. All accelerators provided their networks and some of them offered training and tools for implementation. The contribution of public sector accelerators to the scaling out, up, and deep is difficult to measure, but we found increased volumes for social initiatives that were supported in their implementation in other contexts. The effect of accelerators' support for scaling up and deep are even more difficult to measure and to delineate from the contribution of other actors. Public sector accelerators did not set the frame but reinforced a frame already created by the initiators of social initiatives. Our explorative study also showed that (new) public sector accelerators impact the ecosystem of social initiatives by providing a platform for scaling and building new networks that cross the regional and functional borders.

The findings of this explorative research indicate that the accelerator phenomenon, as it is known in the private sector literature, is different from accelerators in the public sector due to its specific nature and complexities. The theoretical and empirical exploration highlight the difficulties of the scaling out process in the public sector and offer guidance for the potential role of accelerators in the ecosystem of scaling social initiatives.

First, public sector accelerators can fulfill a role in scaling out by supporting the initiator to mobilize stakeholders, for example by training or providing measuring tools. They can also support professionals or policy advisors who are the target audience of the social initiative. We found that practical support for implementation is particularly helpful for the scaling out process, as well as a role in measuring effectiveness (also in other contexts). This type of support is helpful in the scaling out process and – at the same time – in spreading frames and impact existing (local) routines on a larger scale.

Second, our study shows that the impact of social initiatives could be improved by using the networks of accelerators more systematically to scale other social initiatives. Public sector accelerators can obtain a distinct and complementary role in the ecosystem by functioning as platform for scaling, not only for the purpose of scaling one social initiative, but for many others. Our exploratory study has shown that accelerators can create such a position by building new and sustainable networks that cross both geographic and domain boundaries. We suggest that this process should be perceived as a separate

dimension of scaling and propose "scaling beyond" to describe all activities that influence the dynamics in the ecosystem.

An interesting question remains which social initiatives should be supported by public sector accelerators. A focus on supporting only those initiatives that have a proven record of accomplishment at the local level is worth considering. In addition, one might inquire as to why there is a dearth of public sector accelerators that extend invitations to social initiatives through open calls. The role of the accelerators would then be to disseminate and investigate the extent to which effectiveness is maintained in other contexts. The point is that such decisions on the potential role should preferably not be made by the (potential) accelerators themselves but should be broadly supported by the ecosystem in which they operate. However, a sharp vision and frame for scaling social initiatives in the public sector is currently lacking. So, the role of accelerators in the ecosystem is still in progress and needs to be further developed collaboratively by the ecosystem actors.

5.6. Conclusion

We started our exploratory research with the aim of bringing a new perspective and providing a first understanding of the accelerator phenomenon in the public sector context. Our research aimed to contribute to the debates in the literature on scaling public sector innovation and to provide tools for public managers in their efforts to improve the scaling process of social initiatives. We also aimed to contribute to the management literature on accelerators.

We contribute to the literature on public innovation by exploring the role of accelerators in the public sector context. By focusing on organizational actors, our study enriches the literature on roles in the scaling process of social initiatives (Meijer, 2014; Ansell and Gash, 2012), especially as most studies on roles focus on individuals rather than organizational actors (Hansen *et al.*, 2022). By doing so, the study also contributes to the academic debates on innovation labs (Lewis, 2021; Tönurist *et al.*, 2017) since we have brought insight into how accelerators relate to labs and influence the ecosystem. Labs support in the idea generation, framing and validation of social initiatives and may support the scaling of these initiatives to other contexts. Accelerators can be complementary by supporting the scaling out of social initiatives that are not created by labs, but they may also support social initiatives that are created in labs, for example by providing networks that crosses the borders of a specific domain.

The findings highlight that the accelerator phenomenon differs from that in the private sector. In this, our study also contributes to the literature on accelerators, responding to the call by Crişan *et al.* (2019) to study accelerators in different contexts. We found that the management literature on private sector accelerators has limited applicability to the public sector context, due to the specific nature of the public sector. Our findings confirm studies that address the various roles and difficulties of the scaling out process in the public sector (Schot and Geels, 2010; Crosby *et al.*, 2017), and the interrelationship with scaling up and deep (Moore *et al.*, 2015). Organizational forms, selection methods and target audiences are less clear, and the contribution to the scaling is difficult to measure. The great added value of exploring the accelerator phenomenon, as it is known in the private sector, in the public sector context is that it provides guidance on the potential of the role of accelerator in the ecosystem. They could play a distinct role in the scaling process of social initiatives by supporting initiators, policy advisors or professionals by providing practical support and support for measuring effectiveness. By doing so, they could function as coordinative platforms for scaling.

The findings of our exploratory study also suggest that - in addition to scaling up, deep and out - there is another dimension to scaling, namely scaling beyond. This refers to all activities that have an impact on the ecosystem itself, such as building networks between different geographical levels and across sectors. Scaling beyond also implies scaling deep, out, and up, but goes beyond the embedding of initiatives (scaling up) at the local or at the national level. Our study showed that accelerators can facilitate and contribute to scaling beyond. It also touches on the related debate about the role of labs, as it provokes the same question in the literature about how the next generation labs might attempt to grow their influence and impact beyond their current sphere of influence and bring the entire system towards creating and sustaining these new ways of working (Cole and Hagen, 2023). We suggest that more research on the contribution of actors, such as labs and accelerators, to the dynamics of the ecosystem, particularly that on scaling, would increase our knowledge of public innovation in general and scaling and the ecosystem of public value creation in particular. We recommend that researchers explicitly focus on the interrelationship between the different dimensions of scaling, because this is an important feature in the public sector context. The literature on social and public R&D (Foray *et al.*, 2012) may be helpful, as social R&D also aims to build sustainable ecosystems to address difficult social challenges.

Our strongly explorative study in the Dutch social sector has its limitations, because it focuses on a decentralized sector in a small country. It is quite possible that in other, larger countries, local differences are much greater. It would be interesting to see how the process of scaling innovation is

organized in decentralized and centralized sectors in other countries. It would also be of interest to see what we can learn about coordination and focus on effectiveness in other contexts (Meijer *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, there is a need for measuring results. As for the latter, the work of Rønning *et al.* (2022), which suggests that public value should be much more about assessment than measurement, can be helpful.

Our research provides insights for public managers, policy advisors, interest groups and other stakeholders in the ecosystem of social initiatives to take a step forward in the acceleration of social initiatives. Our findings highlight that accelerating social initiatives can be improved by building sustainable networks for scaling and more focus on the effectiveness (in other contexts). Public managers at all levels may start by looking beyond the boundaries of their organizations and invite others to build sustainable networks for scaling and implementation of local initiatives in other contexts, e.g. by making temporary networks sustainable. In addition, they might consider developing a common vision on scaling and the various roles actors have in the scaling process. This touches on the academic literature debates on the position of innovation labs and social R & D. The key to success is to create an environment that allows for innovation while preventing it from becoming a system in itself. It is beneficial to have an accelerator within the ecosystem, but the specifics of how this will be implemented are still being determined. More academic research on the building of an ecosystem for scaling will help, but we advise public managers not to wait, but to experiment with organizational forms, and remain aware of the distinct role of accelerators in the public sector in scaling to other contexts.

Chapter 6 Synthesis

6.1. Introduction

The question of how social initiatives can be transferred to other contexts was the starting point for this dissertation. The need to scale social initiatives in the public sector is great because there are many challenges that require smart solutions that meet the needs of residents (Bason, 2010; Torfing, 2016; Crosby *et al.*, 2017). Scaling social initiatives to other contexts allows more citizens to benefit from the innovation and it would also save public money by avoiding the generation of similar initiatives. However, scaling is challenging given the specific nature of the public sector environment (Torfing, 2016, Bacq and Janssen, 2011). This dissertation focused on the scaling out process of social initiatives in the Dutch, decentralized, social sector.

To answer the central research question of this dissertation, 'How do social initiatives manage to scale?', four sub-studies were conducted. Chapter 2 (sub-study 1) reviewed the existing literature on scaling, which also formed the basis for the three empirical studies in chapters 3, 4 and 5. These three sub-studies focused on social initiatives that fully or heavily rely on public resources and operate in or on the fringes of public organizations. Chapter 3 (sub-study 2) looked at the influence of the institutional environment and chapter 4 (sub-study 3) at the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives. Chapter 5 (sub-study 4) examined the phenomenon accelerators in the public sector environment and their role in the scaling of social initiatives. This concluding chapter of the dissertation synthesizes these four studies and the contribution of these studies to academic knowledge and practices.

This chapter has the following structure. It starts with a summary of the conclusions on Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 as presented in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively, followed by the overall conclusion on the central research question of this dissertation 'How do social initiatives manage to scale?' Section 6.3. discusses the contribution of this dissertation to academic literature. Section 6.4. reflects on the research strategy, followed by recommendations for further research and practice in section 6.5. and 6.6. This dissertation ends with a final note.

6.2. Conclusions

6.2.1. What do we know about the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q1)

The systematic literature review on 133 articles on scaling social and sustainable initiatives showed that although the purpose of social initiatives, realizing social impact, was not always well defined, it could be conceptualized as the result of two different pathways (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Hermans *et al.*, 2016): ‘scaling out’ (extending geographical space or volume) and ‘scaling up’ (influence on public discourses, political agendas, and legislation). Pathway choice is one of the two strategic choices indicated by the literature, next to organizational form (Smith and Stevens, 2010). The literature indicates that a focus on open structures generates speed and higher impact, but there were also critical views found on this (Hatzl *et al.*, 2016). A collaborative structure for scaling dominates in the grassroots literature, mostly on sustainability issues, and this may be caused by stakeholders’ dependency on resources. The literature showed that these two strategy choices, pathway, and organizational form, are influenced by actor characteristics and the institutional environment. Actor characteristics, such as ambition, equal focus on the economic and the social logic, entrepreneurial skills and leadership are positively related to the level of impact realized through scaling. A supportive institutional environment in which there is room to experiment with different approaches and strategies helps the social initiative to scale. The review resulted in a compact framework that provides an overview of the key factors that influence the scaling process: the institutional environment and actor characteristics and the two strategic choices: pathway and organizational form. The framework provides a basis for further research on scaling in different disciplines and has also been used for the three empirical studies of this dissertation.

6.2.2. How does the environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q2)

The literature review showed that the institutional environment, next to actor characteristics, is a key factor in the scaling process of social initiatives. Building on this, the influence of the institutional environment on the scaling of social initiatives was examined for the Dutch social sector. Based on the complementary literature on institutional entrepreneurship, homogeneity and heterogeneity of the institutional environment were expected to influence two important components in the scaling process: support and coordination. Homogeneous environments, characterized by a few dominant organizations with similar norms and practices, were expected to be less supportive of scaling than heterogeneous environments, characterized by a diversity in organizations with their own norms and practices (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Bason, 2010). In contrast, scaling in homogeneous environments would be more coordinated.

The research showed that heterogeneous environments were indeed more supportive of the scaling of social initiatives, but there was no evidence that the scaling process was more coordinated in homogeneous environments. Environments with a balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity are best for scaling social initiatives because they are both supportive and coordinated. The research also showed that the institutional environment needs to be understood from a dynamic perspective at different geographical levels, and that a common frame helps to move stakeholders' activities and roles in the same direction, but exchange of knowledge even within domains is rare.

6.2.3. How do actor characteristics influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q3)

The literature review showed that actor characteristics, next to the institutional environment, are a key factor in the scaling process of social initiatives. Building on this, the influence of actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives in the Dutch social sector was explored. Based on the complementary literature on social and institutional entrepreneurship, it was expected that the entrepreneurial skills and position of the initiators of social initiatives would influence two important components of the scaling process: the mobilization of stakeholders and the focus on retaining effectiveness. Based on the literature, it was expected that high entrepreneurial skills and a central position would both be positively related to stakeholder mobilization and focus on retaining effectiveness (North, 1991; Micelotta *et al.*, 2017), but for stakeholder mobilization, entrepreneurial skills would be more important than position. In contrast, position would be more important than entrepreneurial skills for the focus on retaining effectiveness.

The research showed that entrepreneurial skills are indeed more important than position for mobilizing stakeholders but also for the focus on retaining effectiveness. However, entrepreneurial skills are a condition rather than a guarantee, as initiators with high entrepreneurial skills influence stakeholder support but cannot fully control the scaling process themselves. In practice, there is a lack of coordination of the scaling process, which can easily lead to a reduction in the effectiveness or efficiency of the use of public funds. The study also showed that space for scaling is important and actors in peripheral positions tend to join forces rather than to compete.

6.2.4. How do accelerators influence the scaling process of social initiatives? (Q4)

Private sector accelerators are recognized as important stakeholders in the scaling ecosystem of start-ups (Crişan *et al.*, 2019). The literature on accelerators is strongly based on the management literature. Building on this literature, the study explored what accelerators in the public sector environment are and what role they have or can have in the scaling of social initiatives to other contexts, including their support for mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness in other contexts.

The research found that accelerators in the public sector come in a variety of organizational forms, including collaborative and temporary organizational forms, such as networks with public organizations. They select their initiatives through their own networks rather than open calls and vary in target audience from professionals and policy makers to initiators of social initiatives. Accelerators in the public sector support social initiatives by providing their networks and some of them also provide practical support for implementation, such as training and manuals. The contribution of public sector accelerators to the scaling process was difficult to measure. Not only because measuring public value is difficult, but also because accelerators and social initiatives did not keep records on this point. The study showed that the management literature on accelerators is limited applicable to the public sector environment. However, the explorative study raises interesting questions on the role accelerators can play in the improvement of the scaling process of social initiatives in the public sector. The study showed that accelerators in the public sector can act as a platform that actively links different networks and social initiatives and monitors the effectiveness in different contexts. The research showed that public sector accelerators can contribute to a fourth pathway of scaling, scaling beyond, next to scaling out, up and deep. Scaling beyond refers to all the activities that influence the dynamics of the scaling ecosystem, such as building new and sustainable networks that cross both geographic and or domain boundaries, not just for the purpose of scaling one social initiative, but for the whole. However, the development of the role of accelerator cannot be separated from the development of other actors, such as labs. Since a sharp vision and frame for scaling social initiatives in the public sector is currently lacking, the role of accelerators in the ecosystem is still in progress.

6.2.5. Overall conclusion

In general, social initiatives manage to scale by a combination of factors related to the characteristics of the initiator and those of the institutional environment in which they scale. Social initiatives scale by choosing (a combination of) pathways, scaling up, deep and out, and an organizational form, from open

to closed. Zooming in on the Dutch social sector, social initiatives manage to scale because initiators succeed in mobilizing stakeholders while keeping focus on retention of effectiveness. Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more successful in mobilizing stakeholders for scaling and are more focused on retaining effectiveness than initiators with low entrepreneurial skills, regardless their position. However, entrepreneurial skills are a condition, rather than a guarantee, because initiators with high entrepreneurial skills still need the support of stakeholders in their environment.

An environment with a balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity of stakeholders is best suited for scaling social initiatives in an effective and efficient way. One of the roles in the environment of social initiatives is acting as accelerator, but in the social sector this role is still in progress and does not yet have a permanent place in the environment of social initiatives. A common frame and sharp vision on roles, including that of accelerator, in scaling helps stakeholders to align their activities. However, the Dutch social sector is lacking a sharp vision on how to balance a one-size-fits-all approach with local diversity, and there is no sustainable scaling environment. The result is that there is no sustainable network for scaling that acts as coordinating platform to link the different geographical and functional levels while keeping the focus on the effectiveness of social initiatives. At the domain level, stakeholders refer to the autonomy of local public organizations, interest groups waver, and at the local level, stakeholders are mostly preoccupied with change in their local areas. Stakeholders are still struggling with their role after decentralization, and a new balance has not yet been found. None of the interviewees expressed a desire to go back to the way things were, because they wanted to keep their autonomy. But there was a sense that having so many different initiatives at the local level was not the answer either. This dissertation highlights that the role of accelerator is important for the scaling out of social initiatives, because it could function as platform and extend beyond the support for one or a few initiatives and transcend the domain, ensuring the optimal use of both social initiatives and networks at various levels, while keeping focus on the effectiveness, also in other contexts.

6.3. Contributions to academic literature

The systematic literature review and the further exploration of the literature in the three empirical studies highlight the different focuses and debates in the literature on scaling. The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to these debates by addressing 9 research gaps as discussed in chapter 1 and summarized in Table 1. Gap 1 (overview of literature on scaling is missing) includes all studies of scaling initiatives with a social purpose, ranging from water management to health. This dissertation contributes to the general

literature on scaling by conceptualizing impact as a result of strategic choices 'pathway' and 'organizational form', and by identifying 'actor characteristics' and 'institutional environment' as two key factors influencing these two strategic choices. Based on the findings from the literature on scaling, this dissertation provides a framework for research applicable to different disciplines. Gaps 2 - 9 are related to one of two dominant theories in the literature on public innovation, institutional entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and private sector management. Below is how this dissertation contributes to the gaps identified in the literature by discipline.

6.3.1. Contribution to the public innovation literature

The findings of this dissertation contribute to six gaps in the public innovation literature (2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9), as shown in Table 1 and Table 17. This dissertation focuses on the social sector, as most studies on scaling have been conducted on sustainable issues (addressed as gap 2). Although it was not the intention of this dissertation to compare scaling in the social sector with scaling in the sustainability sector, the findings from the literature review and empirical studies suggest that initiatives in the sustainability sector are more resource dependent than those in the social sector. As a result, collaborative networks may be stronger than in the social sector. In addition, social issues concern human behavior, which is less tangible than a green box or solar panels. This may explain the high casualness of scaling and the low attention paid to measuring effectiveness in the social sector. As in other disciplines in the public sector, the findings of this dissertation confirm that the collaborative forms of scaling dominate and the scaling pathways include scaling up, out and deep (Westley *et al.*, 2014; Peeters and Mohout, 2020). This dissertation contributes to the literature by addressing an additional pathway, scaling beyond, to express all activities that influence the dynamics in the scaling ecosystem, such as building new and sustainable networks that cross both geographic and sector or domain boundaries.

The findings of this dissertation confirm that heterogeneous environments are more supportive than homogeneous environments, not only for the generation of innovative ideas (Grin, 2020; Bason, 2010; Doberstein, 2016), but also for the scaling process (gap 3). This is related to the debate on experimental space (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008), which implies that experimental space must be located at different geographical levels. In other words, experimental space, a heterogeneous environment, must accompany the scaling out of social initiatives. The findings confirm studies on public value creation that the environment must be considered as multi-level and dynamic (Osborne *et al.*, 2022). This dissertation

contributes to literature by demonstrating that a widely supported societal frame facilitates collaboration among different stakeholders.

This dissertation enriches the literature on public innovation by addressing the need for coordination (gap 4). The findings show that no one felt responsible for coordinating the scaling process. In individual cases, this coordinating role was sometimes fulfilled, but this dissertation highlights the lack of a sustainable ecosystem for scaling, so that each social initiative had to start the wheel of scaling from scratch. This dissertation also enriches the literature on roles in scaling by addressing gap 5, focusing on the role of organizational actors instead of individuals (Hansen *et al.*, 2022; Ansell and Gash, 2012). In this way, this dissertation addresses the struggle of organizations, such as interest groups and ministries, with their role in scaling. In line with the findings on gap 4 and 5, lack in coordination on the organizational actor level, this dissertation confirms earlier research of Williams (2014) that there is little attention to the retention of effectiveness in other contexts (gap 8). In the social sector measuring results is not a widespread practice.

Exploring the role of accelerators in the public sector context (gap 9) contributes to the academic debates on innovation labs (Lewis, 2021; Tönurist *et al.*, 2017) and public value creation ecosystems (Osborne *et al.*, 2022), since the study have brought insight into how accelerators relate to labs and contribute to the ecosystem and addresses the important question of what that role should be in a sustainable way. The role of accelerators can be complementary function as coordination platform by supporting scaling out of both social initiatives created in labs and those that are not. It requires however a common vision on roles in scaling social initiatives. This touches the debate on the role of labs and social enterprises as it provokes the same question in the literature about how next generation labs and social enterprises might attempt to grow their influence and impact beyond their current spere of influence and bring the entire system towards creating and sustaining these new ways of working (Cole and Hagen, 2023; Defourny *et al.*, 2021). Currently, a common vision on scaling out social initiatives is missing.

6.3.2. Contribution to the institutional entrepreneurship literature

The findings of this dissertation contribute to three gaps in the relevant literature on institutional entrepreneurship: the limited knowledge on the influence of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the environment on the scaling process (gap 3), the limited knowledge on the relationship between the

initiator's position and entrepreneurial skills and their influence on the scaling process (gap 7) and the limited knowledge on the retention of effectiveness in other contexts (gap 8).

Gap 3 has been discussed in section 6.3.1. In the context of institutional entrepreneurship literature, it is relevant in relation to the concept of 'multi-embeddedness', which means that change agents are well connected in several environments. According to the theory, multi-embedded agents are more successful in scaling because they can act freely but at the same time embed the innovation in current routines (Micelotta *et al.*, 2017; Grin, 2020). This dissertation highlights the difficulties with this concept of multi-embeddedness in relation to agents considered at the organizational level and brings a more nuanced understanding of the concept of multi-embeddedness. The research shows that organizations can be multi-embedded, for example a ministry that has different departments, or an insurance company that has links with public organizations in the domains of mental health and debt. These organizations are considered multi-embedded. However, the findings of study 2 show that these stakeholders act differently depending on the domain in which they operate. This confirms studies on institutional pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in that the pressure then comes from the domain of work more than from the organization. There seems to be little internal exchange of learning experiences in scaling or networking. Thus, the theory of multi-embeddedness does not seem to be applicable when it comes to domains, but rather to the difference between public and private or large and small organizations.

This dissertation also brings a more nuanced understanding of the concept of 'position' in relation to initiators' entrepreneurial skills (gap 7), as it shows that entrepreneurial skills are more important than position for mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on retaining effectiveness (gap 8). The empirical study confirmed previous research that having a strong position in the environment in which social initiatives scale is important for scaling, but this position may be the result of initiators having high entrepreneurial skills. However, the definition of position as 'authority in the eyes of others' (Hoogstraaten *et al.*, 2020) is too imprecise for scaling studies. Since the institutional environment must be understood as multi-level, studies must also be precise at the level of the position of the initiator. Someone may have a strong position at the local level but not at the national level, and vice versa. This distinction is important for understanding the complex scaling process of social initiatives, particularly the scaling from one context to another.

6.3.3. Contribution to the social entrepreneurship literature

The findings of this dissertation contribute to three gaps in the literature on social entrepreneurship: the limited knowledge on the differences between initiators' entrepreneurial skills inside and outside public organizations and their relation to the scaling process (gap 6), the limited knowledge on the relationship between the initiator's position and entrepreneurial skills (gap 7) and the limited knowledge on retention of effectiveness in other contexts (gap 8). The findings of this dissertation support research that argues that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills also exist in public organizations (Mazzucato, 2013). Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills have high ambitions and are likely to have a higher need to control the scaling process than those with low entrepreneurial skills. This dissertation confirms that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills, both inside and outside public organizations, mobilize stakeholders more and are more focused on retention of effectiveness than those with low entrepreneurial skills (gap 6 and 8). So far, social entrepreneurship theory has also been applied to the public sector (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2016). However, contrary to what social entrepreneurship theory suggests, initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in the public sector context choose collaborative organizational forms instead of closed forms. They do so because they cannot fully control the scaling process and depend on stakeholder support. In the public sector context, high entrepreneurial skills are therefore a condition rather than a guarantee.

The empirical studies in this dissertation did not focus on the relationship between organizational form and impact, but the findings provide clues. The literature on social entrepreneurship suggests that open networks speed up scaling more than closed organizational forms, but the findings in the literature are equivocal (Smith and Stevens, 2010; Hatzl *et al.*, 2016). Open networks that speed up the scaling process were supported for the scaling of social initiatives that focused exclusively on influencing meanings in society. For them, scaling deep went hand in hand with scaling out, and primarily through open networks. This is much faster than the collaborative processes of initiatives that focused on implementation in public organizations, which scaled up. However, the empirical findings of this dissertation do not suggest that more closed organizational forms would hinder scaling (Smith and Stevens, 2010). On the contrary, the findings show that the sometimes noncommittal collaborative nature of scaling and too much heterogeneity in the environment lead to coordination problems that hinder rather than support the scaling process. Thus, it may well be that the organizational form is related to the pathway chosen by the social initiative. At this point, this study contributes to the theory of strategic choices in the scaling process.

6.3.4. Contribution to the private sector management literature

This dissertation also contributes to the private sector management literature by exploring the contribution of accelerators to the scaling process of social initiatives in the public sector context (gap 9), thereby answering the call for more research on accelerators in other contexts (Crişan *et al.*, 2019). The findings of this dissertation show that theories on private sector accelerators are hardly applicable to the role of public sector accelerators. In the public sector accelerators can have temporary organizational forms that support only one social initiative. Moreover, the target audience is not always the initiator and the contribution to scaling is less measurable in terms of hard outcomes. In addition, the contribution to the scaling process differs, as scaling to other contexts (scaling out) in the public sector is inextricably linked to scaling deep and up (and beyond), whereas in the private sector scaling out dominates.

The empirical study on accelerators in the public sector context enriches the literature on scaling in the private sector because the distinction in scaling pathways and their interrelation can also bring a new perspective to scaling strategies in the private management literature. While profit is a primary objective, there are also similarities. It is also possible to view consumers and business customers as a system. The dissemination of initiatives is also closely linked to the same dimensions as scaling deep and scaling up. Scaling deep could be considered a form of branding. As evidenced by the research, this approach reinforces the spread of initiatives. However, it can also be a standalone strategy, particularly for products that are not easily replicated, such as shares and art. In some cases, it may also be necessary to modify established procedures and practices to enhance the dissemination of initiatives. In such cases, a strong lobby for subsidies or lower taxes can be an effective strategy. The study also demonstrates that collaboration rather than competition can be mutually reinforcing. This may also apply to parcel distributors who now all operate with their own vehicles and limited personnel. Aside from environmental concerns, there may also be a win-win scenario. Conducting a comparative analysis of additional studies from public and private sectors could provide further insights.

Table 17 summarizes the contribution of this dissertation to the academic literature.

Table 17 Overview contribution to the literature gaps

Literature	Gaps	Contribution
<i>Scaling in general</i>	<p>1. Overview of the literature on scaling process of social initiatives is missing (Hossain, 2016; Hermans <i>et al.</i>, 2016; Zahra <i>et al.</i>, 2009)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualization of impact as result of strategic choices pathway and organizational form • Identification of two key factors for scaling: actor characteristics and institutional environment • Framework for research in different disciplines
<i>Public innovation</i>	<p>2. Limited knowledge on scaling in the social sector compared to sustainability issues (Hossain, 2016)</p> <p>3. Limited knowledge on influence of institutional environment on scaling (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009)</p> <p>4. Academic understanding of coordination of the scaling process is lacking (Ansell and Gash, 2012; Karré, 2022)</p> <p>5. Limited knowledge on the role of organizational actors in scaling (Hansen <i>et al.</i>, 2022; Ansell and Gash, 2012; Meijer, 2014)</p> <p>8. Limited knowledge on focus on retention of effectiveness in another context (Williams, 2014)</p> <p>9. No empirical understanding of the role of accelerators in the public sector context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also in the social sector scaling is a collaborative process (Meijer, 2014; Ansell and Gash, 2012) • Social issues may be less dependent on resources, so the networks may be more open than the scaling in the sustainability sector • Also, for scaling out, experimental space, heterogeneous environments, are more supportive for the scaling than homogeneous environments (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008). • Homogeneity and too much heterogeneity negatively influence the coordination of the scaling process. An environment in which homogeneity and heterogeneity are balanced is best (Grin, 2020) • There is no sustainable network for scaling, an ecosystem for scaling is lacking, so coordination is ad-hoc (Osborne <i>et al.</i>, 2022) • Roles of organizational actors are ambiguous and not clear. Stakeholders struggle with their role • Measuring results in the social sector is scarce • Initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more focused on retaining effectiveness but cannot fully control the scaling process • Public sector accelerators can play a key role in the scaling process of social initiatives (Crişan <i>et al.</i>, 2019; Osborne <i>et al.</i>, 2022; Cole, 2022; Dekker <i>et al.</i>, 2020) <p><i>Additional insight:</i> Scaling beyond as fourth pathway (Westley <i>et al.</i>, 2014; Peeters and Mohout, 2020)</p>

<p><i>Institutional entrepreneurship</i></p>	<p>3. Limited knowledge on influence of institutional environment on scaling (Micelotta <i>et al.</i>, 2017)</p> <p>7. Limited knowledge on the relation between initiators' skills <i>and</i> position on the scaling process (Micelotta <i>et al.</i>, 2017; Hoogstraaten <i>et al.</i>, 2020)</p> <p>8. Limited knowledge on focus on retention of effectiveness in another context (Hoogstraaten <i>et al.</i>, 2020; Schot and Geels, 2010)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings on different behavior of colleagues in different departments confirms literature on institutional pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) • Institutional environment must be understood from a dynamic and multi-level perspective (Hoogstraaten <i>et al.</i>, 2020; Micelotta <i>et al.</i>, 2017) • A widely supported societal frame supports the collaboration in scaling • High entrepreneurial skills are more important than formal central position for mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retention of effectiveness • More nuanced understanding of 'multi-embeddedness' (Micelotta <i>et al.</i>, 2017; Grin, 2020) • High entrepreneurial skills are more important than position for focus on retention of effectiveness
<p><i>Social entrepreneurship</i></p>	<p>6. Limited knowledge on relation between skills of initiators in and outside public organizations and the scaling process (Mazzucato, 2013; Smith <i>et al.</i>, 2016; North, 1991; Zahra <i>et al.</i>, 2009)</p> <p>7. Limited knowledge on the relation between initiators' skills <i>and</i> position on the scaling process (Smith <i>et al.</i>, 2016)</p> <p>8. Limited knowledge on focus on retention of effectiveness in another context (Zahra <i>et al.</i>, 2009)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirms earlier research that initiators with high entrepreneurial skills also act in public organizations • Entrepreneurial skills in the public sector are a condition • Entrepreneurial skills are more important than position • Informal position can be the result of high entrepreneurial skills • High entrepreneurial skills are more important for retention of effectiveness than position <p><i>Additional insight</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No evidence that collaborative organizational form speeds up the scaling process more than closed forms. Too much heterogeneity hinders the scaling process (Smith and Stevens, 2010)
<p><i>Private sector management</i></p>	<p>9. No empirical understanding of the role of accelerators in the public sector context (Crişan <i>et al.</i>, 2019)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of accelerator in the public sector needs adjustments • Selection method, target audience differ • Outcomes more difficult to measure • Scaling pathways in the public sector may help to better understand the scaling in the private sector management as well

Table 17 demonstrates the relevance of combining literature from different disciplines. At the same time, it was difficult to get articles in the peer review process because the topic did not fit the scope of the journals. For example, because the study did not focus exclusively on voluntary or social enterprises, or the journals focus on scaling strategies in the market rather than the public sector. However, once an article was in the peer review process, the reviewers found it interesting, and the feedback from different sides further improved the articles. Thus, while there is an urgent need to combine the literature on scaling social initiatives, there is no journal or discipline that covers the broad picture of social impact. This may also be indicative of the current fragmentation of the scientific disciplines.

The various specific points in Table 17 provide a rich overview of the manifold contributions of this dissertation to the development of concepts and debates in different research areas. At an overarching level, however, this dissertation's main academic contribution is to address the importance of the identification of the need for a sharp vision on the scaling of social initiatives and the need for an actor to assume a coordinating role in implementing this vision, including the role for scaling out within the ecosystem of social initiatives. Others have clearly highlighted the need for government to play a critical role in public innovation by articulating vision and ambition (Braams et al., 2023; Boon and Edler, 2018). Decentralization could be seen as a strategy for innovation, as it creates space for local experimentation. As the focus is on generating innovative ideas rather than scaling, there is currently no vision for scaling social initiatives to other contexts. This dissertation shows that a specific vision is needed to address the complexities of scaling. This includes the question of when it makes sense to scale to other contexts, considering local differences and the costs involved. So, a vision of innovation needs to be accompanied by an overarching vision of how local innovation can be scaled to achieve wider impact.

This sharp vision of scaling also includes a vision of the roles of different actors. As entrepreneurial skills are a condition, social initiatives in or on the fringes of public organizations will not scale without the support of stakeholders in the ecosystem. There is a lack of a sustainable role focused on scaling to other contexts. This role should go beyond one or a few initiatives and transcend the domain to ensure optimal use of both social initiatives and networks, as well as to further develop the measurement of effectiveness in different contexts. Building on the variety of insights presented in Table 17, this dissertation provides an empirical and conceptual understanding of the role of government in coordinating the scaling of social initiatives, as delineated in this dissertation, in the innovation ecology.

6.4. Reflection on research strategy

The systematic literature review on scaling social and sustainable initiatives was useful in identifying the two key factors that influence the scaling process of all initiatives with a social purpose: institutional environment and actor characteristics. It has provided a broad perspective on the concepts used and academic debates on scaling small initiatives in different disciplines. The multiple case study design for the empirical study was useful in exploring the influence of environmental and actor characteristics on the scaling process of social initiatives in the social sector. A case study approach was valuable given the exploratory nature of the research questions Q2, Q3 and Q4, and the in-depth interviews together with additional information from websites or obtained by attending events provided a broad picture of the context in which social initiatives scale. However, the research strategy also had its limitations.

Firstly, the variety of terms used in different disciplines to describe small-scale experiments made the choice of search terms for the systematic literature review difficult. The choice of entrepreneurship resulted in the inclusion of initiatives that had started within public organizations. An additional check using the search term 'social enterprise' did not reveal any other disciplinary focus. Using the term social entrepreneurship instead of institutional entrepreneurship helped to enrich the literature from different disciplines and to identify gaps. However, the term institutional entrepreneurship may be more common in the public innovation literature. The terms grassroots and bottom-up initiatives were more common in the sustainability disciplines, while community initiatives were more common in the social sector. This may have excluded relevant literature in the first study of this dissertation, the systematic literature review. However, relevant literature, including that from later than May 2017, was included in studies 2, 3 and 4, due to the depth of the literature in each sub-study.

The second limitation concerns the selection of cases. The focus on the Dutch social sector was useful and necessary to avoid having too many variables and the choice for three domains within the social sector provided enough variety to compare the influence of heterogeneity and homogeneity in the environment on the scaling process. Although this selection method limited the variation in case types, there were still differences that proved to influence the scaling process. For example, the scaling process of social initiatives that focused exclusively on influencing societal meanings differed from that of social initiatives that focused on influencing routines, because they were less dependent on the support of (local) public institutions to implement their initiative. The dissertation looked at the characteristics of the initiator of social initiatives, those of the initiative itself were not a criterium, which may have affected the findings. However, this dissertation's findings are supported by the rich data from interviews,

including data on social initiatives not included in the research.

The third and final limitation of the research strategy was that the study looked at the process of scaling in the past up to the time of the interviews, 2019, but the social initiatives were not followed in the years after. Time can have an impact on the scaling process. Indeed, the dissertation showed that the institutional environment is dynamic and can therefore change, so in theory, initiators with low entrepreneurial skills could ultimately manage to scale their social initiatives. Although, based on the findings, the likelihood of them scaling is low, a longer-term study might show different results.

Overall, the research strategy worked out well, because the organic process also led to unexpected twists, such as the identification of accelerators and the exploratory study that followed.

6.5. Recommendations for research

Based on the findings and reflections, there are four recommendations for further research. First, more studies on the role focused on the scaling of social initiatives to other contexts, such as accelerators, in the ecosystem of social initiatives, would provide a better understanding of the scaling process in the public sector. This role's main function is to connect different networks at different levels and in different disciplines, considering the effectiveness of social initiatives in other contexts. And not on a one-off basis, but on a structural basis. The development of this role contributes to the debate on the role of government and other stakeholders such as innovation labs and policy labs in the ecosystem of social initiatives. In doing so, it is also interesting to see how the development of roles, such as accelerator, contributes to the dynamics or the ecosystem, indicated as scaling beyond. These studies are recommended to include social initiatives that have started in public organizations, because this dissertation demonstrated that a movement can be constituted precisely by joining forces of social initiatives, regardless of their point of origin.

Second, comparative international research on the scaling process in centralized and decentralized social sectors is recommended. This would increase academic knowledge on the influence of governmental systems – and visions - on the scaling process of social initiatives and bring new insights to the challenge of organizing a sustainable scaling ecosystem for social initiatives that start at the local level. Comparative studies with other decentralized social sectors could also validate the findings of this dissertation.

The third recommendation concerns comparative research on the scaling process of social initiatives in other sectors. The findings of this dissertation highlight the lack of attention to measuring outcomes and focus on retaining effectiveness in other contexts. This may be due to the characteristics of social initiatives themselves, as they often deal with human behavior, which is more difficult to measure than, for example, technological performance. Characteristics of the initiatives were not considered in this dissertation, as this dissertation focused on characteristics of the initiator. However, characteristics of the social initiative, such as the type of service, may influence the scaling process of social initiatives. Comparative research on the scaling process of social initiatives in other sectors will increase academic knowledge on both the influence of the institutional environment and that of the characteristics of social initiatives, not the initiator.

Fourth, longitudinal research on the scaling process of social initiatives is recommended. This dissertation took a retrospective approach, meaning the social initiatives were not followed over a long time. The social initiatives in this dissertation started at least three years earlier, so they had survived the initial stages of scaling. Longitudinal studies of social initiatives in the later stages of scaling would increase academic knowledge about the impact of scaling strategies and processes and the sustainability of impact. This is important because, in addition to the findings discussed, the picture that emerged from the interviews was one of unpredictable government caused by changing political views, temporary funding rather than structural and fragile processes dependent on individuals. These studies should focus not only on those social initiatives that have gone a long way towards scaling, but also on those that have not (yet). The latter would provide insights into the influence of entrepreneurial skills on the speed of scaling, because in this dissertation those with high entrepreneurial skills scaled more than those with low skills, but we do not know whether those with low skills would have scaled in the end.

6.6. Recommendations for practice

This dissertation aims to contribute to practice by providing insights for public managers, policy advisors, interest groups and other stakeholders at the sector and domain level, public managers at the local level and initiators of social initiatives. At the sector level, this dissertation exposes the structural coordination problem in scaling of social initiatives in the social sector. Decentralization has led to innovation at the local level indeed, but also to a change of power balances and roles. No thought was given to this beforehand and there are no triggers, as in the market, that automatically lead to a new equilibrium. Therefore, the first recommendation is for government to develop a sharp vision on scaling social

initiatives in the public sector environment, including a common vision on which type of initiatives are suitable for scaling out and space for variety at the local level. With stakeholders at the sector level, the government can discuss the roles in the scaling process from the perspective of a shared responsibility to improve the performance of the entire social sector. A better understanding of the effectiveness of initiatives in different contexts is helpful. Scaling social initiatives is not an end. If something somewhere still works well, it does not need to be replaced immediately. A fundamental discussion on roles and the usefulness and necessity of scaling may help in finding a way to organize a sustainable scaling ecosystem for social initiatives.

The second recommendation is for public managers at the domain and local level to recognize and encourage entrepreneurial behavior. This dissertation confirms that there is a lot of potential and creativity among employees. Those with high entrepreneurial skills are likely to stand out, but there are also ideas among employees who are less able to sell their ideas or who are less ambitious. This research shows that public managers can support the scaling to other contexts by creating 'space for scaling'. Initiators who were part of local public organizations managed to increase impact because their local manager had given them green light to act freely. This way, they provided practical support for implementation to colleagues elsewhere and organized the lobby for new legislation. In recent years, the emphasis in public organizations has been on collaboration with external stakeholders for innovation purposes. This is a good thing, but it can also lead to overlooking the entrepreneurial potential of employees in public organizations.

The third recommendation is for initiators of social initiatives. The study confirms that joining forces and diversity of stakeholders increases the potential for innovation. It is worthwhile for initiators to invest in building these networks, also with other initiators who have the same goal and do not see them as competitors. Especially for initiators outside public organizations, this turned out to be a promising strategy to gain access to well-established networks in the public arena. This dissertation also shows that it is worth investing in creating a frame that is widely supported because it helps to bridge the diversity of stakeholders. Above all, this dissertation shows that entrepreneurial skills are a condition, so that initiators who do not have these skills would be better off looking for stakeholders who do.

6.7. Final note

This dissertation shows that there is a wonderful challenge for interest groups, ministries, local governments, initiators, and private stakeholders to think about a sustainable ecosystem for scaling. After

almost 10 years of decentralization of the Dutch social sector, no one is really taking the initiative so far. It also raises puzzling questions. This dissertation shows that a one size-fits- all approach does not work, nor can it count on broad support. A uniform approach would also ignore the very idea behind decentralization, which is to achieve more diversity at the local level. But too much *couleur locale* is not desirable either, because it hinders the efficient and effective scaling of initiatives and thus their impact on the social sector as a whole. So how then?

Local diversity was part of the reasons for decentralization of the Dutch social sector. Identifying these differences, but also the similarities, could be a first step in the creation of an ecosystem for scaling. Diversity can vary from domain to domain. Domains where local differences in target group and region are less important, such as debt, may benefit from a national ecosystem for scaling. In domains where regions are very different, such as the labour market, a regional ecosystem is likely to be more appropriate. In this research, the formation of such networks was already visible, so it seems logical to use these networks more for scaling social initiatives in a particular domain.

It also raises the question of which parties should be involved in creating an ecosystem for scaling. This dissertation shows that a balance between well-established public organizations, such as interest groups, and private organizations, including small and fresh players who act as spiders in the web, is best. The big challenge is to ensure that the ecosystem does not become an institution in itself and remains open to change. This requires constant reflection by all parties and the courage to involve those who will shake things up from time to time.

Stakeholders in the ecosystem for scaling would be well advised to create a vision of scaling in a particular domain and start a discussion on roles. This dissertation has shown that there is now mostly a non-binding exchange of knowledge and no triggers for binding agreements. To avoid non-committal, stakeholders could agree on the conditions for initiatives that would be scaled jointly to another context. One could think of covenants as in business, with enough space for local (political) decisions, e.g. by giving several options. Stakeholders may think freely and be inspired by marketing techniques such as flavor variations, unique packaging designs or gift cards with a selection of products. To encourage collaboration in scaling social initiatives, the national government could consider financial triggers. For example, a bonus for municipalities, but also local private organizations, that adopt initiatives developed elsewhere (and proven effective), or funds for implementation.

In fact, creating an ecosystem for scaling is a social initiative in itself. It starts small, for example in one domain, but it is desirable to spread the ecosystem experience to other domains and sectors in a way that takes into account local differences. And that is what this dissertation is about.

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Samenvatting

Sociale initiatieven, ontwikkeld binnen of buiten publieke organisaties, zijn een belangrijke motor voor innovatie in de publieke sector. Decentralisatie maakt het mogelijk om op lokaal niveau te experimenteren. Wanneer bewezen effectieve experimenten worden opgeschaald, kunnen meer inwoners van de innovatie profiteren. Dit voorkomt ook onnodige verspilling van publieke middelen omdat het wiel niet steeds wordt uitgevonden. Het opschalen van initiatieven is in de praktijk echter een uitdaging en (academische) kennis hierover schaars. 'Hoe lukt het sociale initiatieven op te schalen?' is daarom de centrale vraag in dit proefschrift.

Het proefschrift bestaat uit een breed literatuuronderzoek en drie empirische studies gericht op initiatieven op het terrein van mentale gezondheid, schulden en arbeidsparticipatie in het sterk gedecentraliseerde sociaal domein in Nederland. Deze initiatieven zijn vaak moeilijk commercieel te maken en opereren in of net buiten publieke organisaties en zijn (bijna) volledig afhankelijk van publieke middelen.

Uit het systematische literatuuronderzoek blijkt dat het doel van het opschalen – impact vergroten – het resultaat is van twee belangrijke strategische keuzes: de richting van het opschalen en de organisatievorm. Die keuzes worden beïnvloed door actor kenmerken, zoals ambitie en ondernemersvaardigheden, en support van de omgeving. De literatuurstudie resulteert in een onderzoeksframe voor vervolgstudies in verschillende disciplines.

De drie empirische studies zoomen verder in op de invloed op het opschalingsproces van respectievelijk de omgeving, actor kenmerken en de rol van accelerators. Zoals verwacht blijkt een homogene omgeving minder stimulerend voor het opschalen, maar – anders dan verwacht – is de coördinatie van het proces niet beter dan in een heterogene omgeving. Een omgeving waarin de diversiteit in stakeholders niet te groot en niet te klein is, is het meest bevorderlijk voor het opschalen. Daarbij helpt een gezamenlijk frame.

De studie naar actor kenmerken laat zien dat ondernemersvaardigheden belangrijker zijn dan een centrale positie (lees: binnen publieke organisaties) als het gaat om focus op effectiviteit. Anders dan verwacht geldt dit ook voor het mobiliseren van stakeholders. Ondernemersvaardigheden zijn echter een voorwaarde en geen garantie dat het opschalen ook lukt, want het opschalen gebeurt in interactie met de omgeving. Initiatiefnemers bundelen daarbij soms ook hun krachten.

Uit de verkennende empirische deelstudie naar de rol van accelerators in de publieke sector blijkt dat deze een andere betekenis hebben dan in de private sector. Accelerators komen voor in tijdelijke samenwerkingsverbanden en richten zich niet alleen op initiatiefnemers, maar ook op professionals. Hun bijdrage aan het opschalingsproces bestaat vooral uit beschikbaarstelling van netwerken en is moeilijk meetbaar. De studie laat zien dat accelerators in potentie een coördinerende rol kunnen vervullen bij het opschalen en netwerken met elkaar kunnen verbinden. Hoe die rol eruitziet en zich verhoudt tot andere rollen, daarvoor is meer studie nodig.

Dit proefschrift laat zien dat er potentie is voor het opschalen van goede initiatieven, maar in het Nederlandse sociaal domein gebeurt dit veelal ad-hoc en is er weinig aandacht voor effectiviteit. Een gedragen visie op het opschalen en de verschillende rollen daarin zou een eerste stap zijn naar een duurzaam ecosysteem voor het opschalen.

Summary

Social initiatives, developed within or outside public organizations, are an important driver of innovation in the public sector. Decentralization allows experimentation at the local level. When proven effective experiments are scaled, more residents can benefit from the innovation. It also avoids unnecessary waste of public resources by not reinventing the wheel each time. However, scaling social initiatives is challenging in practice, and (academic) knowledge on this is scarce. Therefore, 'How do social initiatives manage to scale?' is the central question of this dissertation.

The dissertation consists of a broad literature review and three empirical studies focusing on initiatives in the areas of mental health, debt and labour participation in the highly decentralized social sector in the Netherlands. These initiatives are often difficult to commercialize, operate in or just outside public organizations and are (almost) entirely dependent on public funding.

The systematic literature review shows that the purpose of scaling - increasing impact - is the result of two main strategic choices in scaling: the direction of scaling and the organizational form, which are influenced by actor characteristics such as ambition and entrepreneurial skills, and by environmental support. The literature review provides a framework for follow-up studies in different disciplines.

The sub-study of actor characteristics shows that entrepreneurial skills are more important than a central position (read: within a public organization) when focusing on effectiveness. Contrary to expectations, this is also true for mobilizing stakeholders. However, entrepreneurial skills are a condition and not a guarantee for successful scaling, because scaling happens in interaction with the environment. Sometimes initiators join forces in this process.

The exploratory study on the role of accelerators in the public sector context shows that this concept must be understood in a different way than in the private sector. Accelerators occur in temporary collaboration forms and focus not only on initiators but also on policy advisors and professionals. Their contribution to the scaling process is mainly the provision of networks and is difficult to measure. The study shows that accelerators can play a coordinating role in scaling and connecting networks. Further research is needed to better understand what this role looks like and how it relates to other roles.

This dissertation shows that there is potential to scale good initiatives, but in the Dutch social sector this is often done on an ad hoc basis and little attention is paid to effectiveness. A shared vision of scaling and the various roles in it would be a first step towards a sustainable ecosystem for scaling.