

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS PART OF REGIONAL VITALITY

A Guide for Regional Decision-makers, Developers
and Funders



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A GUIDE TO SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Social entrepreneurship means creating solutions to social problems in a financially sustainable way.

Why has this guide been written?

Social entrepreneurship is a form of entrepreneurship that responds to concrete social and regional needs. It combines the tools of business with social impact: the enterprise operates in the market, but its primary purpose is to solve identified problems and create value for a community, region or the environment.

This guide has been written for regional decision-makers, regional developers and funders - people who, in practice, can influence what kinds of services, businesses and jobs emerge in different regions. Social entrepreneurship does not develop in a vacuum. It requires decisions, funding, operating environments and an attitude climate that enable new kinds of solutions to be tested and scaled.

In Finland, social entrepreneurship is still a relatively unfamiliar phenomenon for many people. It is often understood narrowly as a way to employ people in a disadvantaged labour-market position. In reality, it is a much broader field. Social entrepreneurship can respond, for example, to the disappearance of services, environmental challenges, weakening regional vitality, or communities' need to take greater responsibility for their own future.

The aim of this guide is to:

- increase understanding of what social entrepreneurship is and why it matters
- challenge common misconceptions about the phenomenon
- offer regional actors concrete perspectives on how their choices affect the conditions for social entrepreneurship

This guide is not a manual for starting a business. Instead, it invites readers to look at regional development and vitality from a new perspective: social entrepreneurship as a way to address real needs in a financially sustainable manner.



SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN BRIEF

Social entrepreneurship means creating solutions to social problems in a financially sustainable way.

Social entrepreneurship is a form of entrepreneurship whose primary aim is to create positive change in society. The goal may relate, for example, to environmental protection, sustainable development, regional vitality, culture, education or inclusion in the labour market.

A social enterprise is not a charity. It mainly operates according to the same logic as other businesses: it seeks to generate income by selling goods and services. The difference is that it uses most of its profit or surplus to promote social good. The main objective of a social enterprise is therefore not financial profit for its own sake; profit is a means to create social value. Of course, a social enterprise must also provide an appropriate livelihood for the entrepreneur and employees. Social enterprises also follow principles of openness and democracy in their decision-making.

Social entrepreneurship is not the opposite of business. On the contrary: it requires a functioning business model, the ability to identify markets, and the willingness to develop services for which there is a genuine need.

In this guide, social good refers to issues that have a positive effect on society, the well-being of people living in it, and the state of the environment.

Social entrepreneurship is not a new phenomenon. Perhaps the best-known social enterprise in Finland is the Linnanmäki amusement park: by operating and developing the amusement park, the [Children's Day Foundation raises funds for child welfare](#).

A social enterprise may aim, for example, to:

- reduce loneliness among older people
- support employment opportunities for people with partial work ability
- reduce food waste
- improve the accessibility of premises
- support the employment of immigrants
- prevent social exclusion
- promote the use of renewable energy
- remove plastic waste from the sea
- improve access to health and social services
- promote the circular economy
- or solve another social or environmental problem.



Social entrepreneurship in a nutshell

Social entrepreneurship is a form of entrepreneurship in which the primary aim of business activity is to solve a social or environmental problem and create measurable positive change.

The aim may relate, for example, to environmental protection, sustainable development, regional vitality, culture, education or inclusion in the labour market.

The key ingredients of social entrepreneurship



Solutions to real problems

Social enterprises develop social innovations. These are genuinely impactful solutions to social problems.

For example, the Finnish maternity package was originally developed to support low-income mothers and to bring mothers and babies within the reach of health care.



Stronger together

The people affected by a particular social problem are often the best experts on it. For this reason, social enterprises listen carefully to their stakeholders.

Social challenges are usually complex, and they cannot be solved instantly or by one actor alone. Many social enterprises therefore work together with other businesses, the public sector and the third sector.



No impact without profitability

For a social enterprise to create impact, its business activities must naturally be financially viable.

Most of the profit or surplus generated by a social enterprise is used to pursue social change by investing it in the development of the enterprise's own activities or by donating it, for example, to non-profit activities.



Responsible in multiple ways

Responsibility lies at the core of social enterprises.

In responsible business, an enterprise seeks to prevent and remedy the negative impacts of its own activities and its entire value chain on people, the environment and society.

Responsible business includes environmental responsibility, social responsibility and responsible governance.



Well governed

Openness, participation and democracy are often emphasised in the governance and personnel policies of social enterprises.

The aim in all activities is to operate in a resource-efficient and responsible way, with as much transparency as possible.

Social entrepreneurship in Finland

Collecting comprehensive and precise statistical information on Finnish social enterprises is challenging, because there is no strictly defined, established definition of a social enterprise.

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Social entrepreneurship is not limited to a particular sector or legal form. **A social enterprise may be a limited liability company, a cooperative, or a foundation or association engaged in business activities.** It may be small or large, and its social impact may be broad or directed at a clearly defined target group.

Further information on social entrepreneurship

Information, advice and guidance

The Finnish Centre of Expertise for **Social Enterprises (YYO)** (<https://yyo.fi/en/home/>) provides advice for social enterprises and for those planning to establish one. Useful resources include:



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- Frequently asked questions. <https://yyo.fi/en/frequently-asked-questions/>
- Entrepreneur's material bank: information on topics such as establishing and financing a social enterprise. <https://yyo.fi/en/knowledge-bank/> and <https://yyo.fi/en/services/>



Network of social enterprises

ARVO ry, the Finnish Association of Social Enterprises, is a network of social enterprises and other impact-oriented actors. Its mission is to help its members succeed and to increase the visibility and significance of social entrepreneurship. <https://arvoliitto.fi/briefly-in-english/>



The Social Enterprise Mark

The Association for Finnish Work grants the Social Enterprise Mark. However, an enterprise can be a social enterprise even if it does not have this mark, as only some Finnish social enterprises use it. <https://suomalainentyo.fi/en/membership-and-marks/social-enterprise-mark/>

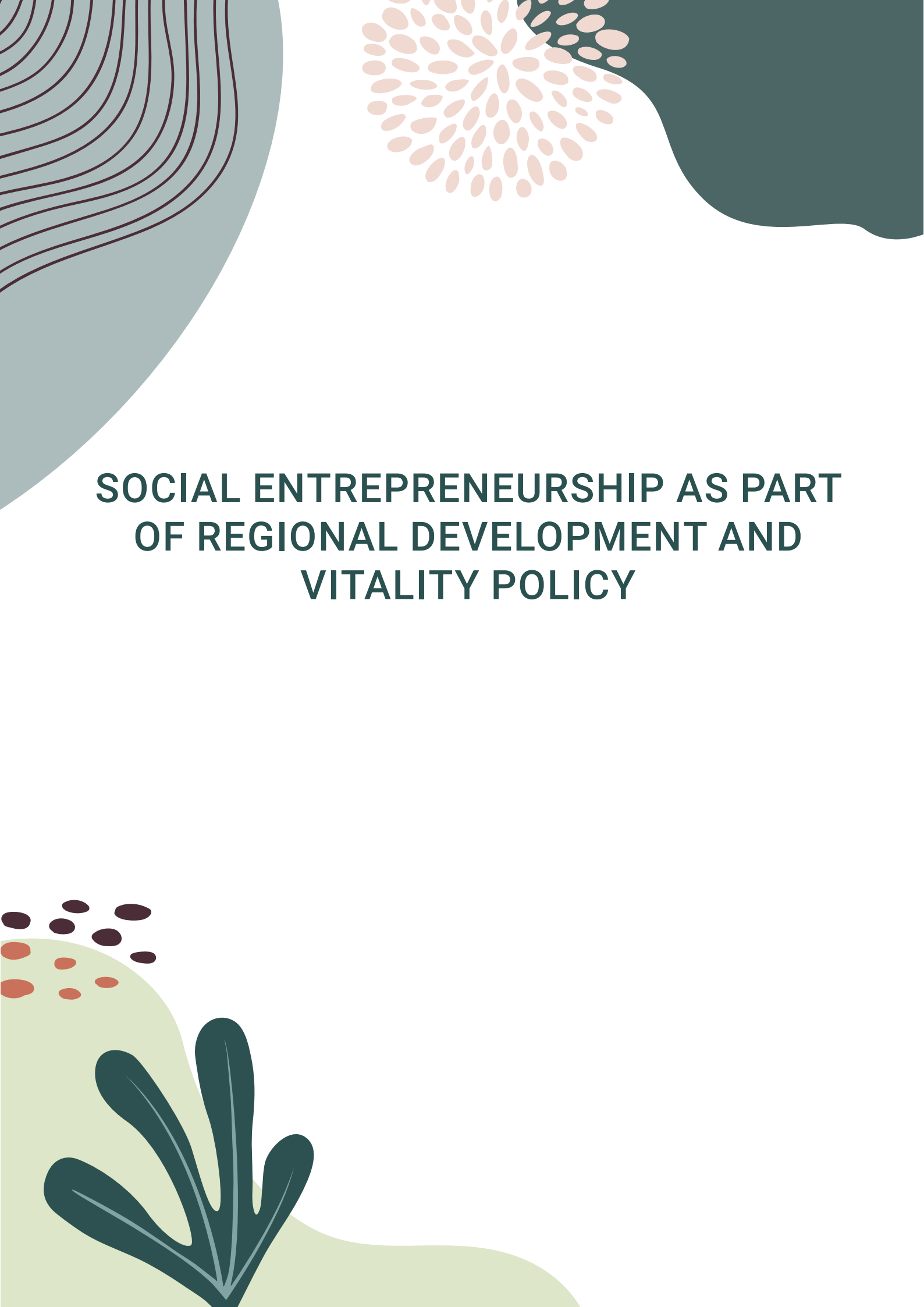


Publications:

Social innovations The publication Society's Developers and Reformers: Social Innovations of Social Enterprises discusses the social innovations and innovativeness of social enterprises and provides policy recommendations for developing the operating environment. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-232-9>

Measuring social impact: How can the impact of social enterprises be measured? This question is examined in ARVO ry's publication Hyvän mitta: Simple Tools for Impact Assessment (PDF) (in Finnish). <https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Hyvan%20Mitta%20yksinkertaiset%20ty%C3%B6kalut%20vaikuttavuuden%20arviointiin.pdf>



The background features several abstract organic shapes. In the top left, a grey shape contains concentric dark brown lines. In the top center, a circular pattern of small pink ovals radiates from a point. In the top right, a dark teal shape overlaps a white area. In the bottom left, a light green shape contains a dark teal plant-like form with five leaves and a cluster of small dark brown and orange dots above it.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS PART OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND VITALITY POLICY

Social entrepreneurship as part of regional development and vitality policy

Social entrepreneurship is not a separate phenomenon at the margins of regional development. It is directly connected to the questions that regional decision-makers, developers and funders work with every day: vitality, services, employment, sustainable development and the wise use of resources.

Regional development means making choices: what kinds of business activities are supported, what needs are addressed, and what kinds of signals are sent to those considering entrepreneurship or the development of new services. Social entrepreneurship offers one way to respond to these choices in a long-term and impactful manner.



The decision-maker's perspective: strategies, decisions and direction

Social entrepreneurship is not only a matter for individual companies or projects. It is connected to broader European, national and regional development objectives. In Finland, the Strategy for the Social Economy and Social Enterprises 2026–2030 renews and expands the previous strategy for social enterprises, bringing it in line with the EU recommendation on the social economy. The strategy's vision is a growing and impactful social economy that strengthens employment, inclusion, and ecologically and socially sustainable growth.

The decisions made by regional policymakers directly influence the kind of operating environment that exists in the region. Strategies, programmes, ownership policies, public procurement and land-use planning are not merely administrative documents. They provide concrete direction for the types of solutions that can emerge and grow in the region.

In Lapland, the social economy and social innovations are linked to the development of a sustainable local economy. The Lapland Agreement 2026–2029 emphasises a sustainable local economy, the development of sustainable business practices, sustainable public procurement, and cooperation between regional development, land-use planning and different actors.

When social entrepreneurship is recognised as part of regional vitality policy:

- regional needs can be seen as business opportunities
- local actors are encouraged to develop solutions based on their own operating environment
- enterprises can emerge whose benefits remain in the region

Social enterprises can complement public service provision, respond to new or changing needs, and provide services in situations where traditional market-based business alone is not sufficient or where there is limited commercial interest.



The role of regional developers and business advisors: from needs to solutions

Regional developers and business advisors are often in a key position in shaping the direction of business ideas. They meet people who are looking for work, considering entrepreneurship or seeking to develop new services.

Social entrepreneurship broadens this discussion. Instead of asking only “**which business idea is profitable?**”, it becomes possible to ask:

- which regional need is currently not being met
- which problem widely affects residents, communities or the environment
- whether a solution could be provided by an enterprise whose aim is both profitability and impact

In business advisory services, this requires the ability to recognise the special characteristics of a social enterprise and to support entrepreneurs who may not fit the traditional growth-company model, but whose activities may have a significant effect on regional vitality.

The funder's perspective: long-term impact

The choices made by funders strongly steer the development of business activities. What kinds of projects are considered eligible for funding? What kinds of risks are tolerated? What kinds of objectives are set for funding?

Social enterprises are not inherently riskier than other enterprises. Their strength often lies precisely in the fact that they respond to a real and persistent need. When a customer base and demand exist, the foundation of the business is also more stable.

From the funder's perspective, social entrepreneurship offers:

- an opportunity to combine financial and social objectives
- long-term impact instead of short-term projects
- solutions that can reduce public costs over the long term

Taking impact into account in funding decisions does not mean abandoning financial criteria. It means complementing them.



Choices build the operating environment

Social entrepreneurship does not develop solely through individual entrepreneurs. It needs an environment where:

- social needs are recognised as starting points for development
- entrepreneurship is seen as a way to solve problems, not only to generate profit
- cooperation between the public sector, enterprises and communities is possible

Regional decision-makers, developers and funders are not bystanders in this development. They are active actors whose choices affect what kinds of solutions emerge in regions - and whether they emerge at all.





WHAT DOES A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE NEED IN ORDER TO SUCCEED?

How can social entrepreneurship be promoted in practice?

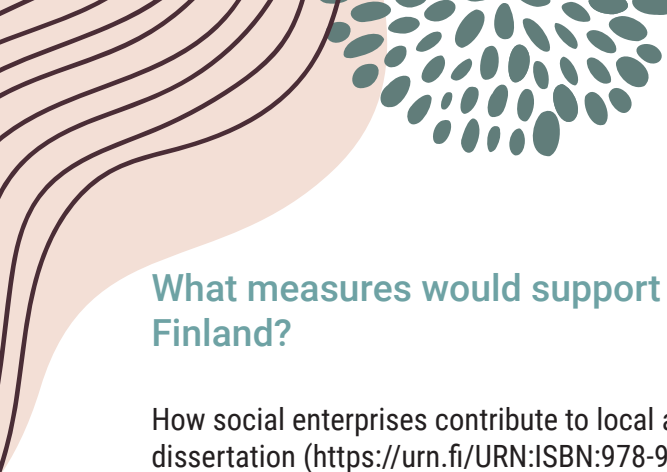
Social entrepreneurship needs structures, decisions and operating practices that enable new kinds of solutions to emerge. Regional decision-makers, developers and funders have several concrete levers at their disposal through which social entrepreneurship can be promoted or hindered. Often the question is not about creating entirely new tools, but about directing existing tools in a new way.



Why is it worthwhile to establish social enterprises in Finland?

The following points summarise the impacts of social enterprises on local and regional economies, drawing on Annu Kotiranta's doctoral dissertation (<https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-412-253-5>):

- Social enterprises grow as well as other enterprises. In the long term, their growth rate is as fast as that of commercial enterprises, even though they use a significant share of their resources to advance their social mission. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 4, 55-56, 69)
- Social enterprises are, on average, more growth-oriented than other enterprises.
- Social enterprises act as a buffer in the economy during crises. One of the most politically significant findings of the dissertation is that social enterprises perform better than commercial enterprises during economic downturns. They grow relatively faster in recessions, while commercial enterprises overtake them during periods of economic growth. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 4, 51-52, 62)
- Social enterprises produce well-being without weakening economic growth or the economic performance of others. According to Pareto efficiency, social enterprises have positive effects on reducing unemployment, increasing social well-being and supporting economic growth. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 61-62)
- Social enterprises are innovative. From the perspective of the Finnish innovation system, social enterprises perform well in using new technologies because their business models and service solutions are based on innovativeness. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 52-53; pp. 60-61)



What measures would support the emergence of social enterprises in Finland?

How social enterprises contribute to local and regional economies (source Annu Kotiranta's doctoral dissertation (<https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-412-253-5>):

- Social enterprises must be recognised as a phenomenon in their own right. (Kotiranta 2025, p. 61; p. 63)
- Public funding should support social enterprises on an equal basis. Socially oriented hybrid enterprises benefit less from public RDI funding than market-oriented enterprises. For this reason, the assessment of social value creation should be included as a funding criterion alongside economic impact. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 53-54; pp. 58-59; p. 62)
- Social enterprises should also be supported structurally. Compared with other enterprises, they do not receive tax advantages, special treatment in procurement or financial incentives, even though they produce social benefit. Supporting social enterprises would not endanger economic growth; on the contrary, it could strengthen it. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 55-56; pp. 61-62)
- Decision-makers and funders should recognise the hybrid nature of enterprises that combine financial and social objectives. If this hybrid logic is not understood, growth opportunities may be weakened. (Kotiranta 2025, pp. 53-54; 58-59; 69)
- Social enterprises are financially sustainable, crisis-buffering and innovative actors. Supporting them can increase social well-being without undermining economic growth. The problem is that current structures do not yet recognise or support them sufficiently.

Funding - what kinds of activity are considered worthy of support

Funding is one of the most central steering mechanisms. It communicates what kinds of solutions are considered desirable and possible in a region.

From the perspective of social entrepreneurship, it is essential in funding to:

- recognise that a social enterprise can be financially viable even when its main objective is not profit maximisation
- enable experiments and pilots that respond to identified needs
- include impact as part of funding criteria

Social enterprises can easily fall between traditional funding instruments: they do not always fit a pure growth-company model, but nor do they fit the logic of project funding. Regional funders have an opportunity to recognise this gap and develop flexible funding solutions that support long-term, market-based activities.

Public procurement - a market that can be opened to impact

Public procurement is a significant way to influence what kinds of services and enterprises operate in a region. Procurement is not merely a cost item; it is also a strategic instrument.

Procurement practices that support social entrepreneurship can include, for example:

- considering qualitative and impact-related criteria alongside price
- dividing procurements into smaller lots so that new and smaller actors can also participate
- using market dialogue to explore how regional enterprises and communities could respond to identified needs

Procurement can create demand for services that might otherwise never emerge. At the same time, it can encourage entrepreneurs to develop solutions to precisely those challenges that have been identified in the region.

Premises and land-use planning - resources that enable action

Premises, land areas and infrastructure are often underused resources. Empty or partly used premises may become either a significant barrier or a significant opportunity for social entrepreneurship.

Social enterprises can be supported, for example, by:

- making premises available during experimentation and piloting phases
- enabling flexible terms of use and temporary solutions
- taking social activities into account in land-use and premises planning

Premises are not only a physical question. They also signal who has room to act in a region and what kinds of activity are considered valuable.



Advice and guidance - what is said about entrepreneurship and how

Business advisory services, education and guidance shape perceptions of what kinds of entrepreneurship are possible and desirable. If social entrepreneurship is absent from these discussions, it easily remains outside the range of options.

In practice, this means:

- recognising social entrepreneurship as one form of entrepreneurship
- providing advice that considers both business and impact
- encouraging the use of business activities to solve regional needs

For many social entrepreneurs, the most important support is that their idea is taken seriously and seen as potential rather than as an exception.

Attitude climate - an invisible but decisive factor

Attitudes, ways of speaking and informal messages have a strong effect on what kinds of ideas people dare to present and develop. Social entrepreneurship needs a climate where:

The communication, examples and public statements of regional decision-makers and developers matter greatly. What is highlighted as a success also guides future action.

- solving problems is valued
- experimentation is seen as an opportunity to learn
- failure does not permanently close doors

An integrated whole is built from small choices

Promoting social entrepreneurship does not require one major decision or a single programme. Often, what matters is how funding, procurement, premises, advice and attitudes form a mutually reinforcing whole.

When these levers are recognised and used consciously, an operating environment emerges in which social entrepreneurship can develop naturally as part of regional vitality.





The foundation of a social enterprise: six key elements

Based on the Social Enterprise Academy framework

A social enterprise does not emerge by accident. Scotland has long had a strong community economy ecosystem that has identified the basic elements behind successful and sustainable business. These elements create the foundation for an enterprise’s activities and enable its development. They can be organised into two groups: **bedrock elements and operational elements**.

Bedrock elements concern *why* the enterprise exists and *what* it is built upon. **Operational elements** concern *how* the enterprise functions in everyday practice.

Bedrock elements	Operational elements
• Identified need and clear purpose • Community-based approach and ownership • Trust and recognition of resources	• Effective leadership and governance • Financial sustainability and funding • Ability to learn, develop and demonstrate results

Bedrock elements

1. Identified need and clear purpose

The starting point of a social enterprise is always an identified need. This may be a service gap, an environmental problem, a social challenge or a shortcoming experienced by a community for which no functioning solution has been found.

It is essential that:

- the need is real and identified together with those affected by it
- the enterprise’s purpose is clear and understandable
- activities remain consistently focused on addressing this need

Without a clear purpose, a social enterprise can easily become fragmented or lose its connection to the problem it was created to solve.

2. Community orientation and ownership

At the heart of social entrepreneurship is the idea that if problems exist in a community, solutions can also be found within the community. This does not mean that everything must be voluntary or based on unpaid work. Rather, it means that local knowledge, experience and commitment are key resources.

Community orientation can be seen, for example, in:

- local ownership or a strong stakeholder connection
- participatory decision-making
- the sense that the enterprise is “our solution”, not a model imported from outside

This creates a foundation for trust and long-term activity.

3. Trust and identification of resources

Trust is one of the most important forms of capital for a social enterprise. It is built through openness, honesty and the fact that activities match promises. Trust is not created through words, but through actions and results.

At the same time, it is essential to identify existing resources:

- people and competences
- networks and social capital
- premises, infrastructure and other local strengths

A social enterprise is not built on what a region lacks, but on what is already there.



Operational elements

4. Functioning leadership and governance

A social enterprise needs a clear and functioning leadership structure. The purpose of leadership and governance is to ensure that the enterprise can operate professionally and in a goal-oriented way without losing sight of its social purpose.

This means:

- clear roles and responsibilities
- governance that supports activities rather than slowing them down
- the ability to combine business competence with a social perspective

Leadership can be organised in different ways, but it must be appropriate to the size and activities of the enterprise.

5. Financial sustainability and funding

Without financial sustainability, there is no impact. A social enterprise needs:

- predictable basic funding to run activities
- opportunities to invest and develop
- funding that understands the logic of a social enterprise

Project funding alone, or an uncertain income stream, makes activities vulnerable. A financial surplus is not a problem - on the contrary, it is a prerequisite for continuity and for increasing impact.

6. Ability to learn, develop and demonstrate results

A social enterprise often operates in a complex environment. It must therefore be able to:

Demonstrating impact does not require heavy measurement systems. It means being able to explain credibly what has been achieved and why it matters.

- learn from experience and change direction when necessary
- develop its activities step by step
- show what impacts its activities have



The special role of regional decision-makers, developers and funders

In light of these elements, regional decision-makers, developers and funders have an important role in helping enterprises succeed in a sustainable way. They can:

- create a positive and encouraging climate in which social solutions are seen as opportunities
- provide funding and forms of support that enable long-term, market-based activity
- recognise social enterprises as part of the region's vitality and service structure

When the operating environment supports these basic elements, social entrepreneurship does not remain dependent on isolated experiments. It can become a permanent and impactful part of regional development.



SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS PART OF A FUNCTIONING ECOSYSTEM



Social entrepreneurship as part of a functioning ecosystem

The previous chapter described the basic elements on which a social enterprise is built: identified need, community orientation, trust, functioning leadership, financial sustainability and the ability to develop. These elements, however, are not created by an individual entrepreneur alone.

Their realisation depends on the type of operating environment that exists for social entrepreneurship. In this guide, this whole is referred to as an ecosystem.

An ecosystem means the way in which the actors, decisions, resources and practices of a region together support - or prevent - the emergence and development of social enterprises.

The ecosystem connects the enterprise's foundation with everyday practice

The foundation of a social enterprise and its everyday activities need support around them. This can be understood in a simple way:

- Bedrock elements need trust, community and available resources.
- Operational elements need funding, competence and functioning structures.
- The ecosystem is the whole in which these conditions meet and reinforce one another.

When the ecosystem works, a social enterprise is not left alone to meet all these requirements. It can rely on its environment.

Entrepreneurs and communities - experts in needs and solutions

Social entrepreneurs and communities identify everyday needs and develop solutions for them. Their work is the core of the ecosystem, but without a supportive environment, their risk becomes too great.

The task of the ecosystem is to lower the threshold for taking action and to support long-term continuity.

The public sector - enabler and direction-setter

The public sector influences the ecosystem in many ways:

- strategies and programmes
- funding decisions
- procurement practices
- use of premises and infrastructure

Through these choices, the public sector can either create conditions for social solutions or exclude them from the operating environment. The public sector is therefore not only a bystander, but an active shaper of the ecosystem.

Funders - enablers of continuity and growth

Funding is a central part of a functioning ecosystem. Social enterprises need funding that:

- understands their social purpose
- supports financial sustainability
- enables development and investment

A functioning ecosystem recognises that impact is often created over time, not through quick fixes.

Advice, education and networks - strengthening competence and trust

Business advice, education and networks influence what forms of entrepreneurship are considered possible and desirable. When social entrepreneurship is recognised as part of this whole:

- entrepreneurs receive the right kind of support
- competence gaps can be addressed
- actors can find one another

Networks are not an end in themselves, but they can decisively strengthen trust and learning.

When does an ecosystem not work?

A poorly functioning ecosystem does not always appear as direct barriers, but as contradictions:

- impact is discussed, but funding does not support long-term activity
- entrepreneurship is encouraged, but procurement excludes small actors
- experimentation is promoted, but failure is not tolerated

In such cases, social entrepreneurship remains marginal, even when the need for solutions is obvious.

The ecosystem is a shared task

A functioning ecosystem does not require new structures or governance models. It requires:

- a shared understanding of the significance of social entrepreneurship
- a willingness to examine existing practices from a new perspective
- cooperation between different actors

When the ecosystem supports both the foundation of a social enterprise and its everyday operations, it creates an environment in which social entrepreneurship can develop naturally as part of regional vitality.



SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS PART OF FUTURE REGIONAL VITALITY

Social entrepreneurship is not a single solution or a ready-made model that can be transferred unchanged from one place to another. It is a way of thinking about regional development, service provision and the building of vitality from a new perspective - starting from the region's real needs and existing strengths.

This guide has examined what social entrepreneurship is, which basic elements it is built upon, and what kind of operating environment supports its emergence and development. The growth of social entrepreneurship requires decisions, structures and an attitude climate that enable new types of solutions to be tested, embedded and scaled.

The idea is not unfamiliar in regional development. In Finland and across regions, it has already been recognised that vitality increasingly emerges from collaboratively built ecosystems in which the public sector, enterprises, educational institutions, funders and communities work towards shared objectives. These ecosystems emphasise the strengthening of competence, support for innovation, a culture of experimentation and the ability to respond to changing social needs. For example, the City of Rovaniemi has an ecosystem agreement with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment.

Social entrepreneurship fits naturally into this way of thinking. It brings solution-orientation, local ownership and impact that extends beyond purely financial indicators. At the same time, it offers a route to respond to service needs, sustainability challenges and the building of vitality in a market-based but socially responsible way.

Regional decision-makers, developers and funders have a central role in this whole. Their choices - in funding, procurement, the use of premises, advisory services and strategic policy choices - influence what kinds of solutions are given room to emerge in the region. Often the question is not about creating new measures, but about how existing tools are used and what kinds of objectives are set for them.

Social entrepreneurship offers an opportunity to strengthen regional vitality in the long term. Through it, it is possible to build services, jobs and activities that respond to local needs and create value for the region in the future as well. When the operating environment supports these solutions, social entrepreneurship can become a natural and permanent part of regional vitality.



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