Paper

Social systems for a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society

Potential solutions for greater societal connection and collaboration

TNO Vector
Centre for Societal Innovation and Strategy



Contents

1. The need for a strong social fabric 3
2. Barriers to collaboration between society and policy 5
3. Challenges in collaborative systems 6
4. Potential solutions 7

References 10

This paper is part of a series of papers written for the 2025 TNO Vector Symposium: De kracht van samenwerkende systemen – Sturen naar een vitale, competitieve en veilige samenleving.

The goal of this paper is to provide additional insight to participants on the subject of discussion.

1. The need for a strong social fabric

The Netherlands faces major societal challenges in areas including healthcare, housing, labour, energy, and security. Existing systems are buckling at the seams, while new systems are still under construction, and we must learn to embrace them. At the same time, broad prosperity is under pressure (CBS, 2024a,b,c), inequality is growing, and people feel insecure and confused (NSOB, 2024a). Despite social cohesion being stable overall, many people in the Netherlands actually perceive this to be declining, and greater differences between groups have also emerged (SCP, 2022; SCP, 2024). 'These differences are mainly in the type of education people have received', more so than in age or doing voluntary work for example (SCP, 2024). Moreover, we are seeing that the increase in structural inequality is accompanied by 'a sense of unease and distrust in politics' (CBS, 2024d). Social cohesion in our country therefore requires attention. In this paper, we refer to the importance of a strong social fabric. By this, we mean the way social systems are intertwined (Blokland, 2006) that enable all people to participate (see Box 1): from informal networks such as family, neighbours, and voluntary organisations, to formal structures such as policy, healthcare, and education. This is essential for a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society[1].

But this very social fabric is under pressure. Poverty (CBS, 2024e), loneliness (CBS, 2024f), mental health problems among young people (CBS, 2024g), increased feelings of polarisation and exclusion (UNICEF, 2024), and pressure on healthcare services (NZA, 2024) are on the rise. Many people, especially those in vulnerable positions, lack the resilience or resources to participate fully in society, let alone actively participate in social change (TNO, 2023). Above all, we are seeing problems building up among vulnerable people, who are serving as 'the canary in the coal mine'. When people disengage or withdraw from society, it weakens the collective capacity of social systems to withstand challenges and connect with one another.

Box 1: The social fabric of society is as strong as the interaction between social systems

By 'social fabric' in this paper, we mean the extent to which informal and formal structures, as well as the relationships (social systems) between people in society, are all intertwined. People are part of multiple social systems. These include the social networks we are part of and shape, and our behaviour in them: how we intertwine living together and working together. Examples of social systems include families, groups of friends, work circles, and people you might say hello to in the local area. Government agencies, businesses, social enterprises, knowledge institutes, interest groups, trade unions and the connections within them, between them, and with the public are also all social systems. Within social systems, social capital is exchanged. Social capital is the 'degree to which people feel connected to each other, to institutions, and to government, so that they experience security and trust.' (Rli, 2024:16).

Civil society refers to a wide range of networks, organisations, and social entrepreneurs operating outside the government (Regioplan, 2008). These organisations represent different views and interests, and provide support and advocacy for particular people and social challenges in society.Social fabric ensures that communities, organisations, and society as a whole can continue to function in spite of the major external challenges they face. By continuously being open to others' opinions, experimenting together, giving and receiving feedback, and being attuned to each other, people come together to work on missions without excluding groups. Our collective culture and behaviour ultimately helps determine how we design our world and shape social change (Kramer, 2024), including in terms of social fabric (TNO, 2023).

1 This is one of TNO's themes. See Healthy society | TNO

At the same time, all kinds of initiatives are emerging, out of both society and policy, to strengthen the social fabric; these include such as Little Free Pantries, energy coaches, and local cooperative projects. Yet these efforts often remain fragmented and insufficiently coordinated. A strategic vision and implementation plan (of what to do exactly, and when and where) is often lacking, and local and policy initiatives sometimes appear to influence each other negatively. This does not strengthen the social fabric and may even inadvertently degrade it further. In this paper, we explore how societal and policy initiatives can be better connected and help strengthen the social fabric (see Figure 1).

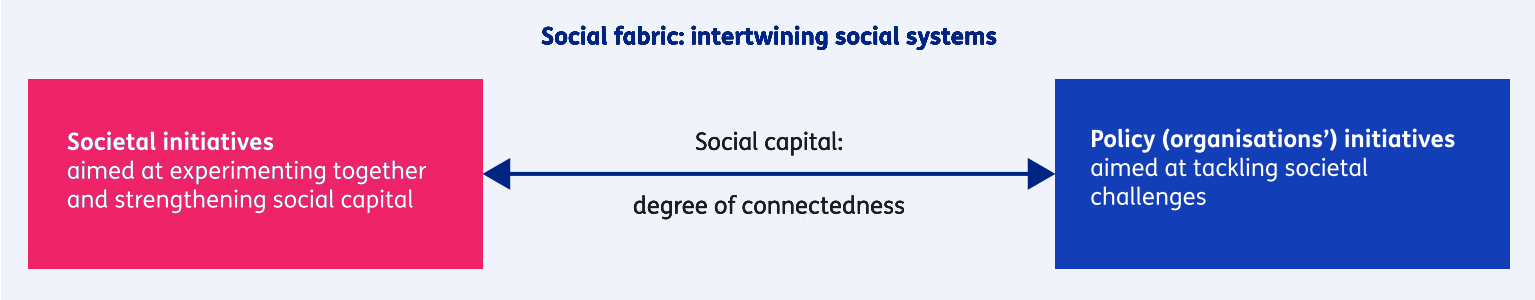
We analyse why current initiatives – despite all good intentions – fail to bring enough structural change, and we suggest solution pathways for a coherent approach that would help forge a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society.

A healthy, inclusive, and resilient society cannot exist without a strong social fabric. That fabric forms the basis for interaction between the initiatives that emerge from society and those that emerge from policy and its organisations. Initiatives cannot function without social capital. Social capital is the 'degree to which people feel connected to each other, to institutions, and to government, so that they experience security and trust.' (Rli, 2024:16). The ability to shape and maintain networks, relationships and resources, norms and values, and community engagement is an essential building block in this (TNO, 2023). 'Social capital is a vital component of social or collective resilience' (TNO, 2023:17). Examples of social capital include a weekly meet-up for coffee nearby, mixed housing, and cooperative management of neighbourhood green spaces by residents and the municipality. Social capital contributes to both individual well-being of and the broad prosperity of society (Rli, 2024).

However, social capital is not created in a vacuum, nor does it function in one. It depends on the extent to which social systems – social, physical, and economic – are intertwined. Initiatives that emerge from both society and policy should reinforce each other, rather than work against each other. In practice, however, we often see these systems suffering from structural barriers that actually weaken or underutilise the social fabric and hinder collaboration. Why is that? In chapter two, we first look at barriers in society and policy. In chapter three, we then focus on the challenges faced in collaboration between these social systems.

The core question of this paper is:
How can we better strategically connect societal and policy initiatives and enable them to work together, so that social capital and social fabric can be strengthened and harnessed to address societal challenges, in a way that fosters a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society and adds value for all stakeholders?

Figure 1: Social fabric: intertwining all informal and formal initiatives, structures, and relationships within social systems



2. Barriers to collaboration between society and policy

Both within society and policy initiatives, there are differences in perspectives, interests, values, and norms, which can hinder effective collaboration. In Table 1, we list examples of these barriers in the institutional environment, divided into four institutional system layers (NOSB, 2024b). The institutional environment largely determines how people behave (NOSB, 2024b).

Institutional tensions often arise from the dominant norms and values, different interests, and interpretation of roles and responsibilities of both domains: procedures and systems are often prioritised over human relationships and local experiences. As a result, opportunities for effective collaboration often remain unexploited.

2.1 Society and policy approached as separate worlds

Although policy and society are often considered and approached as separate worlds, in reality they are inextricably linked. After all, policymakers are also citizens, and communities are partly shaped by policy choices. Yet it often proves difficult to effectively align policies with the actual and changing needs of society. For instance, public outrage over the government recovering part of a woman's social security payments after accepting free groceries (NRC, 2021) did not lead to structural policy adjustments. Policy still appears too often focused on formal rules, neglecting the human aspect.

2.2 Lack of trust between initiatives in society and policy

To strengthen the social fabric in the long run, it is essential to make institutional changes that encompass relational values such as equity and reciprocity. This requires real connection and constructive willingness to cooperate between initiatives in society and policy, thus making their interdependence explicit, i.e. where they do reinforce each other and where they do not.

2.3 Scaling up of societal initiatives limited

While societal initiatives show potential to bring about change, the impact often remains limited. Many projects now often lack structural embedding, institutional anchoring, or strategic alignment, causing frustration and making the social fabric vulnerable to exhaustion, despite the growing energy and eagerness from society to want to roll up its sleeves.

In Table 2, we give some examples of these initiatives.

Fortunately, more and more initiatives are emerging and pursuing this intertwining approach towards a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society. Residents are taking the lead in cooperative housing projects, care communities, energy collectives, and local solidarity funds. At the same time, governments are working on policy instruments that support social capital and cooperation, such as the subsidy scheme for residents' initiatives (*Subsidieregeling Inwoners-initiatieven*, Overheid.nl, 2025), compulsory stakeholder consultation under the Environment and Planning Act (*Omgevingswet*, Dutch Government, 2025a), and the Comprehensive Care Agreement and Supplementary Care and Welfare Agreement (*Integrale Zorg Akkoord en Aanvullend Zorg en Welzijnsakkoord*, Dutch Government, 2025b).

Table 1: Examples of barriers in society and policy

System layer	Society	Policy
Human and world view	Individualisation and fragmentation	Economic thinking and short-term focus
Perception of institutions	Declining trust in and knowledge about the role of institutions	Sectoral policies, limited comprehensive strategy
Ecosystem	Public resentment and decline in trust in democracy	Lack of human dimension in implementation
Interaction	Reduced social capital as a safety net	Insufficient attention paid to distribution effects and equity

Table 2: Examples of social capital strengthening initiatives that have emerged from society and policy

Topic	Societal initiatives	Policy measures
Climate and sustainability	*Operatie Steenbreek*	*Nationaal Burgerberaad Klimaat*
Energy	Energy cooperatives	Energy surcharge and energy fixers
Social security	Bread funds	Social security benefits
Care	Caring communities	Home care, healthcare legislation and agreements (IZA & AZWA), and supplementary agreements
Safety and security	Neighbourhood watch	Social resilience conversation tool (NCTV)

3. Challenges in collaborative systems

To actually strengthen the social fabric, we need to move beyond isolated initiatives and work on strategic, well-thought-out structural connections between society and policy. This chapter highlights some aspects of why it is so difficult to jointly address the rapidly changing needs in society and policy, and what deeper system dynamics are at play. We then explore action perspectives for a more strategic and integrated approach in chapter four.

While collaboration between societal initiatives and policy interventions offers opportunities to strengthen the social fabric, there are also fundamental challenges that hinder this cooperation. Three challenges are discussed in the following sections.

3.1 Lack of structural change

Within political and administrative practice, the emphasis is often on improving existing systems: making them more efficient, more effective, and cheaper, rather than achieving structural change (ROB, 2022:50). As a result, latent problems are not taken seriously until the social, humanitarian, or environmental breaking point is reached. Moreover, policy plans for system renewal often get grounded in abstract goals or delayed implementation (TNO, 2025a). This causes frustration for individuals and hinders collective action.

At the same time, societal initiatives are also diverse among themselves. Some focus on concrete, small-scale actions, such as setting up a community garden, while others aim for profound social change, for instance by addressing power relations or redistributing responsibilities. It is precisely some of these civil society initiatives that run into institutional barriers such as exclusion at the discussion table, lack of structural funding, and an underestimated value of social initiatives.

3.2 Limited mutual engagement and collaboration

Effective engagement and cooperation requires different parties – citizens, governments, businesses and knowledge institutions – to actually seek each other out, understand each other's perspectives and opportunities, and build from there. We see three crucial conditions for greater connection and collaboration:

- **Representation:** Policy-making and citizen initiatives should meet the needs of various target groups and harness people's knowledge, experience, strengths, and capabilities.
- **Equality:** More ownership and control for citizens is essential for structural collaboration.
- **Trust:** Improving trust can be achieved through open public debate, accessible communication, and shared insights on how to tackle societal challenges.

3.3 Increasing complexity of societal challenges

Many societal challenges are complex: various different parties are involved, with different perceptions of both the problem and potential solutions. They also often affect multiple domains. Furthermore, the more profound system dynamics such as underlying barriers and patterns often remain hidden. A clear view of complex problems is needed in order to take collective action against societal challenges (CBS, 2021). This requires not only multiple sources of knowledge and information but also the skills to effectively translate this into joint steps as part of a strategic approach (see Box 2).

Box 2: From complex problems to collective steps forward

Many organisations struggle with complex, cross-domain social challenges. They have the desire to tackle a challenge together and structurally, and to engage in societal change but lack the skills to do so.

Developed by TNO, UNLOCK offers a practical and scientifically based pathway for organisations not only to develop concrete ways to improve their situation, but also to gain skills and insights for effective comprehensive collaboration. This accelerates the path to sustainable transitions and prevents short-termism. Organisations learn to work systemically on complex tasks and discover how to incorporate diverse perspectives to make real impact. Through a structured process, insights are translated into workable strategies and well-supported solution pathways (TNO, 2025d).

4. Potential solutions

In this paper, we have shown the importance of connecting society-based initiatives and policies to strengthen the social fabric and build a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society. The question of how to strengthen this social fabric goes beyond overcoming barriers within each individual system (see chapter 2) and requires mutual trust between the public, institutions, and policy.

A strong social fabric is created through the commitment, competence, and credibility (ROB, 2022:8) of those working on societal challenges from a policy or social perspective, ensuring everyone continues to support and strengthen each other. Building on the work of the Council for Public Administration (*Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur*), we define these concepts, in a slightly adapted way, as follows:

- **Commitment:** Work structurally with all stakeholders, including civil society, to tackle societal challenges. Remove barriers encountered by civil society initiatives.
- **Competence:** Recognise the perspective from which societal challenges are approached (e.g. economic thinking) and increase awareness of how social systems are intertwined and the importance of underlying barriers and habits that can prevent change.
- **Credibility:** Take small, continuous steps together, building trust and cooperation towards a shared mission of a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society.

We conclude this paper with three potential solutions to strengthen the social fabric and continue working together for a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society (see Figure 2).

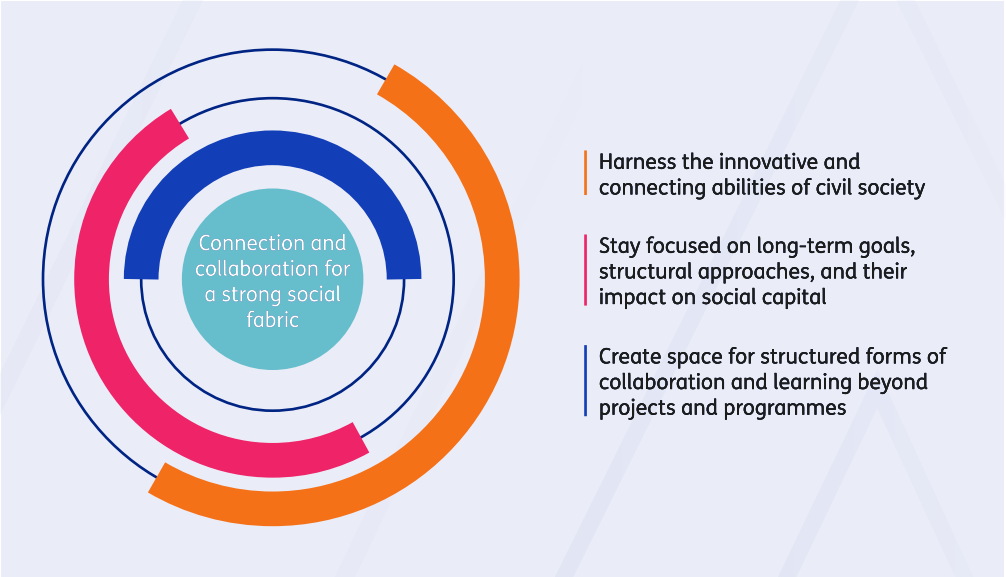
4.1 Harness the innovative and connecting abilities of civil society

Civil society plays a key role in strengthening social fabric within society and as a link between people and policy. Invest in this innovative and connecting capacity by 1) giving civil society a role and providing civil society initiatives with 2) space and preconditions.

Give civil society an explicit role

Civil society organisations such as foundations, energy collectives, and social enterprises often function as *boundary spanners or key figures* (Doci, 2025; TNO, 2023) between society and policy. They can translate government messages to the public and, conversely, translate societal signals into policy agendas. (Doci, 2025). They can also act as community representatives when scaling up initiatives (Doci, 2025). Methodologies such as *Asset-Based Community Development* (ABCD) offer tools to leverage existing strengths in neighbourhoods and networks. Within the *TNO Better Together* project, these kinds of community engagement methodologies are being further developed for resident collectives in civil society (Better Together, 2025).

Figure 2: Three potential solutions to strengthen the social fabric



Create space and framework conditions for initiatives
Many society-based initiatives are not yet sufficiently exploited, even though they can help break down the barriers within and between policies (see Box 3). Therefore, it is important to focus on the right framework conditions. There are also opportunities to strengthen the social fabric by creating space and agency for social initiatives that want to initiate action and change (TNO, 2023). This can be done, for example, by better coordinating policy initiatives across domains and pooling resources, such as through concepts like *multiple value creation* (KAP, 2025) or *Urban Financial Metabolism* (Woestenburg and Puts, 2018).

Box 3: Policy coherence as a starting point for strengthening social systems

Policies are often developed by one sector and can unintentionally conflict with one another. This is known as policy incoherence. A policy coherence framework helps to counteract this. Input from citizens and collectives about barriers often serve as good indicators for where to improve policy coherence. How these social initiatives use their social capital to overcome barriers also offers policy insights on how to increase policy coherence (Bouma et al., 2024).

4.2 Stay focused on long-term goals, structural approaches, and their impact on social capital

Long-term goals and structural approaches (see also Box 2) help to maintain social capital sustainably. Innovative policy concepts such as health and equity in all policies (Bucciardini et al., 2024), mission-driven innovation policies (Mazzucato, 2018; TNO 2025a), overall well-being (CBS, 2024a,b; TNO, 2025b), and transformative government (Braams, 2023; TNO, 2025c) offer guidance for a strategic approach. For this solution, we envisage three firm starting points: 1) forward monitoring, 2) social embedding of innovations, and 3) social capital mapping.

Explicitly map out social capital
Map the impact of initiatives at the level of:

- Total social capital in society
- Social capital of groups and individuals

To do so, use an integrated approach to social capital and monitor the effects on social capital, in particular accumulation, distribution effects, and inequality. Research on energy poverty, mobility poverty, and health shows how targeted investments can reduce inequality and strengthen social capital (TNO, 2024; TNO, 2025e).

Make use of forward monitoring
Forward monitoring is a new form of monitoring where progress and insights are interpreted in the context of strategic goals (i.e. looking forward rather than looking back). This helps with making timely adjustments, continuing to focus on the most structural interventions, and preventing unwanted side effects for society.

Ensure social embedding of technology innovations
Ensure technological innovations such as AI and robotisation in healthcare do not weaken the social fabric. Paying attention to the long-term and structural effects of technological innovations means looking beyond the state of the art. Ensure social embedding through *Societal Embeddedness Levels* (SEL) as a counterpart to *Technology Readiness Levels* (TRL). Social embedding also means paying attention to 1) environmental impact, 2) stakeholders, 3) policy and regulation, and 4) market and financial resources (Sprenkeling et al., 2022).

4.3 Create space for structured forms of collaboration and learning beyond projects and programmes

A structural collaboration between society and policy requires room to grow and calls for continuous learning. This is the only way to build mutual trust and sustainable cooperation beyond the horizon of projects and programmes. This requires: 1) connecting learning processes, 2) the use of different types of information, and 3) explicit learning agreements.

Connect learning across domains and levels
From local to national, government to citizen collective: connecting learning processes contributes to a shared understanding of what works.

Use different types of information
Combine numerical data with practical knowledge and stakeholders' experiences. This marks a shift from what is fact-based to evidence-informed (Head, 2015). One example is how researchers adapt indicators of overall well-being to what people themselves consider important (Pauw and Van den Berg, 2025).

Make explicit learning agreements
Draw up agreements on interim reflection and adjustment before the collaboration begins. This creates a continuous learning process that can respond to changing goals, roles, and perspectives.

Conclusion

Social systems need a deeper understanding of how to address challenges structurally and how they can help strengthen social capital, especially among vulnerable groups. At the same time, society and policy initiatives can be better utilised. This requires commitment at three levels:

This means that all parties, including TNO, must be even more strongly committed to the continuous interaction of:

Strategic anchoring and support
Link initiatives to policy and support them with knowledge and innovation agendas, methodology, and technology.

Knowledge integration and societal connection
Build a bridge between (TNO's) domain knowledge, social science insights, and issues arising from policy and society.

Shared language and cooperation in trust
Work towards mutual understanding and common language to remove physical, social, economic, and institutional barriers. This way, we can continue to work together towards a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society.



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