Scaling of social initiatives: the role of entrepreneurial skills and positions

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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.

Keywords Scaling, Social initiatives, Public innovation, Entrepreneurial behaviour, Effectiveness

Paper type Research paper

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?"

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

Expectations on the influence of entrepreneurial skills

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.

Expectations on the influence of position

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, 2024). This means that initiators in central positions are expected to mobilize stakeholders more than those in peripheral positions.

As for the relationship between a central position and a 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.

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 focusing 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 focusing 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; Grabher, 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 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 the focus on retention 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 their 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 of these relations.

Methodology

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. 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 three 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 work 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 for 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 expenditures, such as energy and housing.

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 (ten), public health organization (two), commercial organizations (five), ministries (six), municipalities (two), executive organizations (two) and platforms (one). 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 not only asked about business cases and funding but also about their strategies for reaching new audiences or how backup is organized in case the initiator stops. Table 1 shows our 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

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 1.
Coding scheme

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 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 the 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 a license trained staff or kept close supervision of 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 positions and h, l and m, refer to high, low and moderate entrepreneurial skills, respectively.

Results

In this section, we present our findings on the expectations for the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and position on the 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.

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

The findings in Table 2 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 and 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 programme 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 that promoted the social initiative among their members.

Table 2 also shows that two initiators with high and five with moderate entrepreneurial skills did not mobilize stakeholders. These two people with high entrepreneurial skills were part of organizations one, of which was 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 scale 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 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 2 also provides support for expectation 2 since initiators with high entrepreneurial skills are more focused 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 focused 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, so they maintained control over the conditions for effectiveness. The fourth had developed a monitor to measure effectiveness in another context.

Table 2. 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

Source(s): Author's own creation

Influence of position on mobilizing stakeholders and focus on retaining effectiveness

Table 3 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 also in private as well ("Top down is not going to work. There are so many egos there", I-ph1).

The findings presented in Table 3 do not support expectation 4 either. Table 3 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) and 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).

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

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 3. Results on the relationship between position and scaling process

Comparative analyses: testing expectation 5 and 6

So far, we have described individual relationships between entrepreneurial skills, 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 focusing on retaining effectiveness. Table 4 summarizes our findings on these relationships.

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

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 4. Comparative findings

Table 4 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 4). It was remarkable that four out of six initiators with high entrepreneurial skills in peripheral positions (ph) that mobilize stakeholders focused on social initiatives in the debt area. Although their social initiatives were different, they shared the social purpose and joined 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 private 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 4 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 the 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.

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 organisationally 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.

Discussion

Our findings show that entrepreneurial skills are more important than a formal position for both mobilizing stakeholders and focusing on the retention of effectiveness. In public organizations, initiators can have high entrepreneurial skills, but for them also, scaling is as difficult as for those in peripheral positions. Our findings show that space to scale and joining forces help scaling in 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 on 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, which (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 also 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 focusing on effectiveness compared to initiators' positions. In addition, in centralized sectors, initiators with high entrepreneurial skills at the local level may be less hindered by organizational boundaries, so entrepreneurial skills are a condition and a guarantee. Comparative studies between centralized and decentralized public sectors would

increase our knowledge of 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 programmes (Alidousti and Sahli, 2024), so we recommend further research on the scaling of social initiatives in other sectors, including the focus on retaining effectiveness.

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 focusing on retention of effectiveness. Our findings also support our expectation that entrepreneurial skills would be more important than positions for mobilizing stakeholders. However, contrary to our expectations, 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 change readiness in the environment, which confirms studies on institutional pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Experimental space is commonly associated with idea generation (e.g. Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008) and focuses on the opportunities and challenges of co-creation rather than 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' positions 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 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

and 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 facilitating 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.

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