

Enabling Social Innovation in New Zealand

Country Snapshot

Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." ¹

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from New Zealand's social innovation ecosystem.

 Direct focus on social innovation  Connected but indirect focus on social innovation  No focus on social innovation

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Official Definition of Social Innovation



While there is no consistently used legal definition of "social innovation," government discourse often uses adjacent concepts such as "social enterprise" and "social investment" to describe impact-focused approaches and outcomes-based public commissioning. ^{2 3}

Government Body for Social Innovation



Rather than a dedicated social innovation ministry, enabling responsibilities are spread, with a prominent role for the Social Investment Agency (SIA), a stand-alone central agency (since 1 July 2024) leading a "social investment" approach across the public service. ^{3 4}

The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) has issued policy statements and managed sector-development procurement for social enterprise (a common vehicle for social innovation). ^{2 5}

Government Strategy for Social Innovation



While there is no single, standalone national "social innovation strategy" identified in public sources, SIA articulates a whole-of-system "social investment" approach and the establishment of a Social Investment Fund to support outcome-focused commissioning, including innovation and scaling. ^{6 7}

Policies, Laws & Regulations



New Zealand Government procurement policy encourages agencies to consider "broader outcomes", including social, environmental, cultural, and economic benefits when awarding public contracts. ⁸

Climate-related financial disclosure requirements (mandatory for designated large entities) can indirectly strengthen impact/ESG data ecosystems relevant to purpose-led business and investment. ⁹


Official Statistics



While there are no official statistics that comprehensively measure "social innovation" as a distinct category, the state has supported efforts to improve "better data on social enterprises" through sector-development programming. ⁵

Government does maintain social science evidence infrastructure via "The Hub" repository (supporting evaluation capacity relevant to social innovation), albeit not as a social innovation statistic set. ¹⁰

Government Programs




Social Investment Fund: Budget 2025 allocated NZ\$190m over four years for a Social Investment Fund to invest in services that deliver measurable improvements and to support “new approaches” and scaling; the fund has defined application pathways and evaluation expectations. ⁷ ¹¹

Social enterprise sector development: DIA contracted a three-year Social Enterprise Sector Development Programme with the The Ākina Foundation as delivery partner (after co-design), with explicit workstreams including access to finance and markets. ¹³

ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders




Government–sector partnership infrastructure is visible in the Social Enterprise Sector Development Programme (government-funded, delivered with sector partners), including a cross-agency advisory group and sector working group in programme design. ¹³

Knowledge and capability intermediaries include the Centre for Social Impact (established 2014 by Foundation North) supporting funders and community partners to “invest for impact,” including evaluation and capability development. ¹⁴

Impact investing ecosystem coordination includes the Impact Investing Network Aotearoa as a “peak body” connecting, educating, and advocating for impact investing. ¹⁵

Note on ecosystem continuity: the Ākina Foundation (a major intermediary in prior government programming) publicly announced it would cease trading on 30 April 2025. ¹⁶


Support Initiatives



The Social Enterprise Sector Development Programme described support approaches including regional hubs, capability-building, and practical work on access to finance and markets (e.g., social procurement). ¹²

The Impact Initiative platform also produced thematic work on legal/structural constraints for impact-led business through “Structuring for Impact,” linked to improving the enabling environment for social enterprise. ¹⁷

Collaboration



SIA states the Social Investment Fund is intended to work “in partnership with social sector organisations, iwi and other agencies,” including pathways such as co-investment and community commissioning. ¹¹

Formal collaboration examples include the prior DIA–Ākina partnership contract and governance arrangements for programme delivery. ¹² ¹³

Events & Awards



New Zealand hosted the Social Enterprise World Forum (Christchurch, 2017), with reported sector milestones and ecosystem “launch” outcomes associated with the event. ¹⁸

Awards exist that recognize social impact entrepreneurship (example: EY Entrepreneur of the Year NZ “Social Impact Award” reported by Ākina as recipient in 2024). ¹⁹

FINANCE

Financing Schemes

Public commissioning and grants: the Social Investment Fund is a major new mechanism (NZ\$190m over four years) designed to invest in measurable outcomes and support new approaches, with multiple pathways including “co-investment.” ^{7 11}

Earlier government investment to enable social enterprise ecosystems included the Social Enterprise Market Development Programme budgeted at NZ\$5.55m over four years (via DIA procurement) and a later three-year sector development contract. ^{5 12}

Impact venture and private capital: the Impact Enterprise Fund reports it completed a final close in November 2018, raising close to NZ\$9m, targeting market-rate returns alongside impact. ²⁰

Estimated annual amounts (availability limits)

A single, authoritative national estimate for “annual total funding available specifically for social innovation” is not published in a standardized way in publicly available sources; however, major identifiable government allocations include NZ\$190m (four-year) for the Social Investment Fund and multi-year social enterprise sector-development budgets noted above. ^{7 5}

Financing inclusivity

The Social Investment Fund targets priority groups for early intervention (e.g., children experiencing highly challenging parental/school circumstances) and includes pathways designed to partner with iwi and community organisations, which can support more locally grounded and culturally anchored delivery. ¹¹

The earlier social enterprise sector development contract explicitly emphasized engagement strategies focusing particularly on youth and Māori. ¹²

SOCIETY

Public Awareness of Social Innovation

Public recognition is often framed via “social enterprise” and “impact investing” narratives (enterprise delivering social/environmental goals and reinvesting surpluses), which are explicitly acknowledged in government policy statements. ²

High-profile ecosystem “moments” (e.g., hosting SEWF 2017) typically emphasize social enterprise as a vehicle for societal problem-solving and partnership-building. ¹⁸

Research

New Zealand participates in the World Values Survey (Wave 7; 2019–2020 fieldwork), enabling analysis of trust, civic attitudes, and social values relevant to solidarity and social innovation enablers (data are publicly documented and accessible). ²¹

Practitioner-oriented research on enabling settings for impact-led enterprise includes “Structuring for Impact,” focused on whether legal structures disadvantage social enterprises and other impact-driven businesses. ¹⁷

Education & human capital

Formal education example: a Master of Social Work is offered by the Auckland University of Technology (qualification listing). ²²

No consistent national estimate was found for the proportion of graduates receiving social innovation-focused credentials each year; available information is program- or provider-specific. ²²

Entrepreneurship



Business Environment

EIU analysis positions New Zealand among the top environments for doing business in its Business Environment Rankings commentary (exact rank/score series are not always fully open in primary sources).²³



Innovation Capacity

WIPO's Global Innovation Index 2025 ranks New Zealand 26th with a score of 45.5; strongest pillar is Institutions (rank 6th).²⁴



Social entrepreneurship prevalence

Social & Environmental Consciousness



Solidarity

Climate change disclosure culture (ESG infrastructure): regulatory requirements for climate reporting entities indirectly support sustainability transparency in capital markets.²



Political participation

EIU's Democracy Index 2024 reporting shows New Zealand as a top-ranked "full democracy," with a political participation score of 10.00/10 in the "top ten" table reproduced in EIU's release distribution.²⁵



53% population

Volunteering

government-derived statistics summarized by Volunteering New Zealand indicate 53.0% of New Zealanders volunteered in the previous four weeks (Stats NZ 2023 General Social Survey, wellbeing statistics update March 2025).²⁶

33rd / 180 countries

Sustainability

Yale's 2024 Environmental Performance Index ranks New Zealand 33rd overall (score 57.3).²⁷