Social innovation in the Netherlands: its ambitions, challenges and practices
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In the Netherlands social innovation was first used as a concept in the context of workplace innovation and labour productivity. Only recently both on the ground and on a policy making level the Netherlands is catching up with the European understanding of social innovation that is referring to new ideas, products and services addressing urgent and complex social questions such as ageing populations, immigration and youth unemployment.

The concept finds practical expression in a wide range of smart solutions, often devised by social entrepreneurs or highly educated citizens. Examples may include a retirement home equipped with the latest technological gadgets, an international job vacancies website for unemployed youth or an end-of-life clinic for assisted dying. There is no shortage of creativity, which is portrayed in the Social Innovation Network Netherlands and also in the latest social innovation challenge 'Radical Innovators of the Netherlands'. The Dutch government is recognising the value of social innovation on a national policy level in the 'Top Sectors', a Dutch policy to support cooperation and business between industries, science and government. But do these kind of policies and solutions deliver enough value to place more vulnerable people in an optimal position to grow and develop too? And do they really create change on institutional levels in terms of new work cultures, new processes, new laws?

Challenges
In 2014 the Dutch Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) published the report 'The Power of Social Innovation' that argues for more recognition of value in both technological and non-technological aspects of social innovation in the Top Sectors. AWTI notices a bias towards technological innovation that results in too little attention for non-technological innovation. Their appeal to the Dutch government is to focus on more awareness, networking, organizing learning experiences and building knowledge in the Dutch Top Sectors.

But where are the citizens? Kennisland, a leading think tank on social innovation in the Netherlands wonders if it's enough to narrow social innovation down by investing in Top Sectors that generate 'solutions'. Kennisland argues to broaden and deep the current scope of both the Dutch government and social innovators themselves. Could social innovators look beyond this trend for new (technological) solutions and become more intentionally political? And could the government invest in new citizen-state relations beyond the industries and sciences? Kennisland thinks that new solutions often fail to develop further than the level of small-scale experiments as they often encounter resistance within established institutions and organisations. They therefore also fail to eventually deliver value to a broad range of citizens, and might sometimes be even perpetuating social inequalities.

Practical ambitions
Ideally social innovation must therefore be more ambitiously interpreted than the current solution-focussed innovation trend in the Netherlands and Europe has shown to date. What if the Netherlands aspires to become an international frontrunner of social innovation that aims to bridge the gap between systems (institutes, laws, rules, procedures) and the daily lives and experiences of those who badly need better services in smarter and better ways? In practice this means a better focus on changing underlying opinions, values or ingrained patterns of behaviour and include working towards changing laws, organisational processes and cultural values. An example of this kind of innovation is the project 'Our New School', where ideas for new schools were crowdsourced from Amsterdam's citizens while simultaneously

local rules and criteria for starting new schools were adjusted. Another example is 'Social Labs', a new way of making social policies and doing research with citizens and local government.

This approach should be reflected in policy levels by enabling industries, universities and governments, politicians, service-providing bodies and citizens to work together. This includes devoting special attention to how we can prevent and deal with antisocial innovation (unintended or negative consequences of innovations) and how we can share and multiply newly created value most effectively. In this way, a process is created in which the parties involved are able to exert influence on the end result in an equal manner.

Examples of some inspiring social innovation initiatives in the Netherlands are:

Social Labs https://www.kl.nl/en/cases/labs-proeftuinen-terra-incognita/
Social Innovation Network Netherlands http://socialeinnovatienederland.nl/
AWTI Report 'the power of social innovation'
http://www.awti.nl/documenten/adviezen/2014/1/31/de-kracht-van-sociale-innovatie
Knowledge Centre for Social Innovation Hogeschool Utrecht
http://www.research.hu.nl/kenniscentra/sociale-innovatie
Midpoint Centre for Social Innovation http://www.midpointcsi.nl/