



ROOTED AND RISING:

Social Enterprise in New Brunswick, A Sector Finding Its Footing

July 2026



Social Enterprise New Brunswick
Entreprise Sociale Nouveau-Brunswick

STEWARDED BY



**POND
DESHPANDE**
CENTRE



INTRODUCTION

Across New Brunswick, communities are grappling with compounding crises—from tariffs to AI, to cost-of-living increases, to extreme weather and other effects of climate change. These issues involve so many causes and complications that solving them will demand a radical reworking of our social systems, not just patchwork fixes.

This work of social transformation is, like the systems themselves, complex. It requires a range of tools and approaches, and among these, social entrepreneurship is one of the most powerful levers of social change.

Entrepreneurs get excited about discovering problems and turning them into opportunities. Their engines run on creativity, collaboration, and persistence. And when non-profits embrace these qualities, they invent novel, sustainable solutions to advance their social mission.

From one end of the province to the other, a growing cohort of social entrepreneurs are creating products and services to solve some of the province's most pressing challenges. They are using the mechanisms of business to generate both revenue and social impact, addressing concerns such as poverty, ecological threats, and systemic oppression of equity-deserving groups.

Pursuing a social purpose with a market mindset brings many advantages. For starters, **social entrepreneurship opens a new revenue stream, reducing dependency on grants.** It can also enable innovative partnerships, financial frameworks, and governance structures.



THE CHALLENGES HAVE SHIFTED — AND SO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITIES. SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CAN HELP NEW BRUNSWICK MEET BOTH.

INTRODUCTION

For instance:

- **Key Industries**, a charity supporting people with disabilities operates a number of social enterprises including a print shop, a communications agency and a plumbing enterprise
- **Les Forces-Vives**, a Caraquet-based charity supporting adults with intellectual disabilities, sells handmade goods through its Atelier La Rencontre boutique, returning all profits directly to the artists who made them.
- **Brilliant Labs**, a charity that teaches youth digital literacy and coding, maximizes its impact by maximizing the marketing and sales value of its Intellectual Property
- **Hospice Southeast New Brunswick** fundraises by operating a retail thrift store – a popular social enterprise model
- **The Saint John Learning Exchange** operates a popular cafe, a cleaning enterprise and a communications agency.
- **The NB Multicultural Council** has replaced some its government funding by charging organizational clients for a course on intercultural competency

And these examples just scratch the surface of social entrepreneurship in NB.

This report provides a more complete picture, created through direct input from the province's social enterprise sector. In 2021 and 2024, UNB's Pond-Deshpande Centre (PDC) was supported by the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) of NB to conduct the Social Enterprise Survey. The goal of this research was to identify opportunities for increasing the capacity and sustainability of social enterprises within non-profit organizations.

The survey data provide a detailed snapshot of NB's social enterprise activity at two moments in time, and they tell a hopeful story. **The numbers demonstrate that social enterprise is firmly rooted in New Brunswick non-profits and showing signs of promising growth.**

The sections below describe the survey results in detail and point to opportunities to nurture this valuable part of our provincial economy.



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SURVEY METHOD

For the two rounds of the survey (2021 and 2024), social enterprise was defined as a revenue-generating enterprise or project operated by a non-profit organization.

Survey respondents were recruited through the networks of the PDC, ESIC, and their partners. The survey form explicitly targeted non-profits, but for-profit businesses were not prevented from participating.

Both survey rounds collected self-reported information. In 2021, 69 respondents participated through an online form, and in 2024, 70 respondents completed a second instance of the same form. Across the 2 years of the survey, 6 of the same organizations participated in both.

Not all the survey questions applied to all respondents, so the number of respondents per question varied.

FINDINGS

Respondents identified with a variety of social missions and described organizations of different sizes, ages, and growth stages, ranging from startups to historical institutions. The survey findings capture this diversity while also examining common challenges, such as garnering board support for social entrepreneurship, accessing funding, and measuring impact.

Judging from the self-reported data, **social enterprise is emerging as a vibrant subsector within the non-profit world. Indeed, it has already become a sector in its own right, with high potential to intensify both its economic and social impact.**



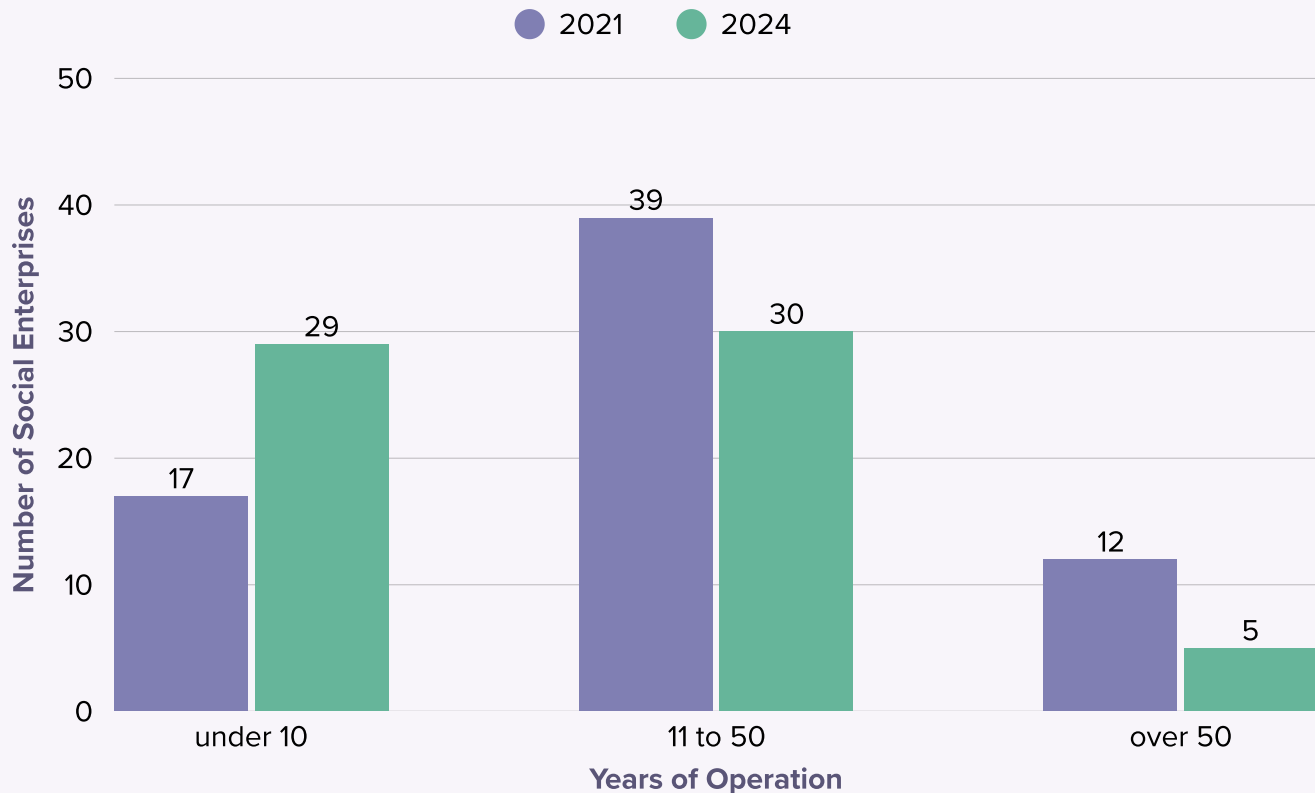
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YEARS OF OPERATION

Respondents represented non-profits spanning a wide spectrum of ages. **In both survey years, more than half of the respondents said their organization had been in operation for more than 10 years (75% in 2021 and 55% in 2024).** In addition, a portion of respondents came from entities with more than half a century of service behind them (12 organizations in 2021 and 5 in 2024).

The two survey rounds also indicate that the number of newer non-profits might be increasing, evidence of the growing vitality of the non-profit sector. In 2021, 17 respondents said their enterprise was under 10 years old, and in 2024 that figure increased to 29.

Social Enterprise Years of Operation



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LOCATION

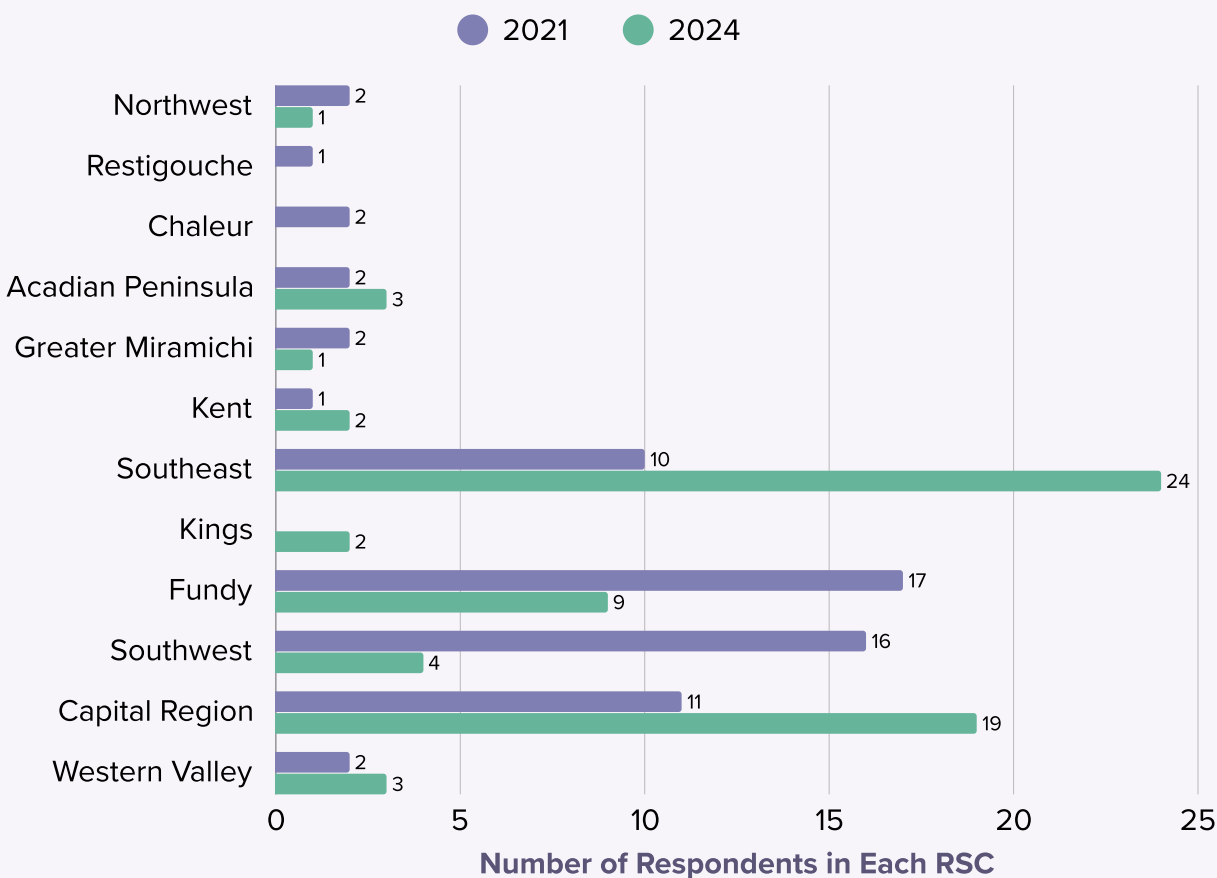
Respondents hailed from every corner of New Brunswick, with most located in the south of the province. Respondents were organized into the 12 regional service commission areas of New Brunswick.

In 2021, the Regional Service Commission regions of Fundy and Southwest were home to the most respondents. In 2024, the top locations shifted to Southeast (34% of respondents) and Capital Region (27%).

In both survey rounds, rural areas were generally less well-represented than urban areas (Southeast, Fundy, and Capital Region). The exception to this pattern was Southwest. In 2021, the second-largest group of respondents came from this region, although that number shrank in 2024.

Location of Respondents

(Regional Service Commission of New Brunswick)



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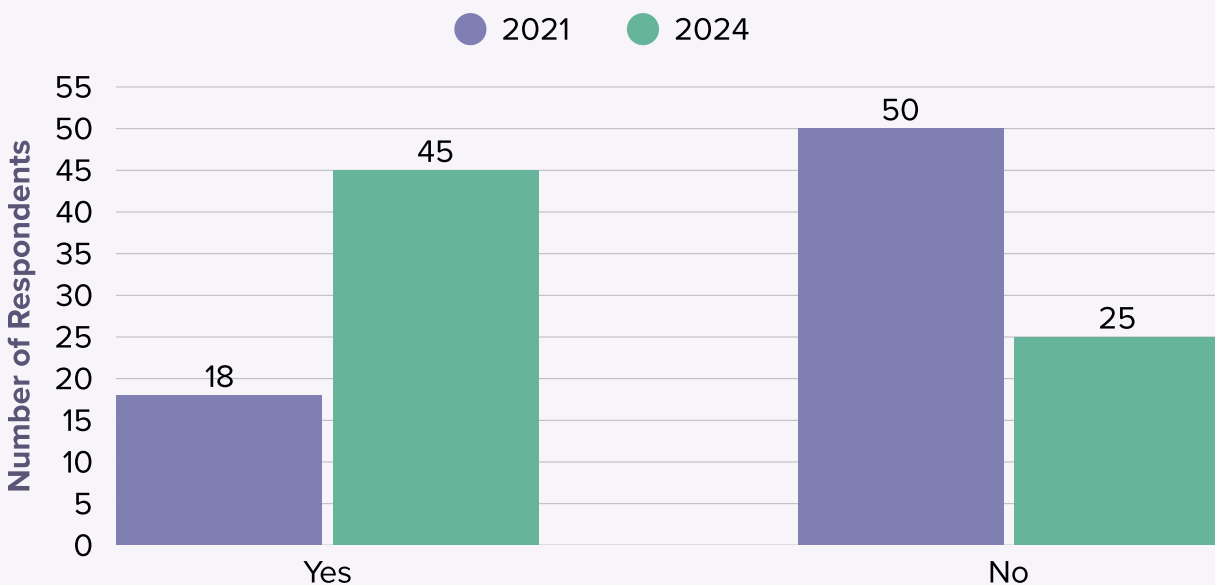
PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

In the 2021 cohort, most respondents had not yet ventured into social enterprise. Fifty of the 68 organizations respondents (74%) said they were not running a social enterprise.

By 2024, the situation had flipped, and the majority of respondents (45 of 70, or 64%) indicated they were already engaged in social entrepreneurship.

This dramatic reversal demonstrates how quickly social enterprise is gaining traction in NB, infusing new energy into nonprofits and amplifying their impact, or it may also reflect the growing reach of Social Enterprise NB — with more organizations already on the social enterprise journey choosing to engage with the survey in 2024.

Are you currently running a social enterprise?



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STAGES OF GROWTH

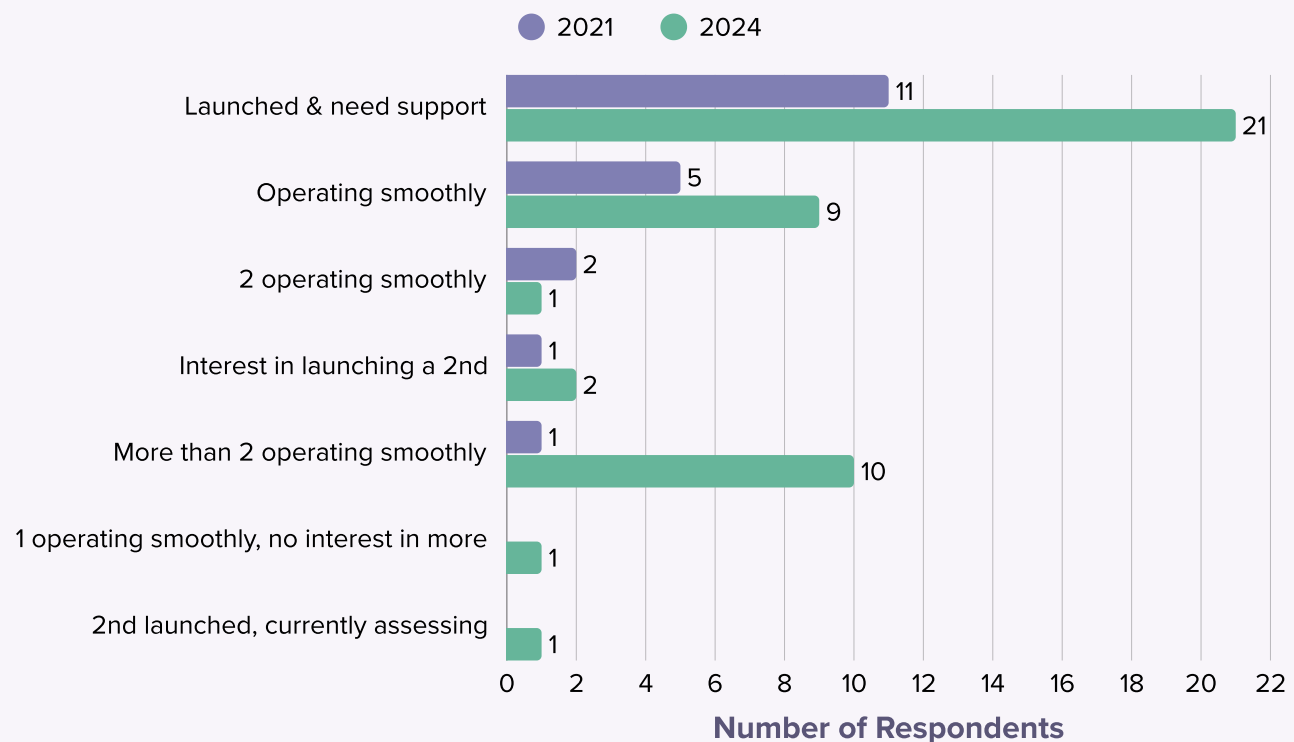
Social enterprises in New Brunswick range in age from just-launched to over 200 years old. Given this age spread, it is not surprising that NB's social enterprises also differ widely in their stage of growth.

The survey data captures this variety while also revealing remarkable growth across all stages:

- In 2021, 11 respondents said that they had launched a single social enterprise that needed support. By 2024, that number had almost doubled to 21.
- The number of respondents with a single social enterprise “operating smoothly” jumped from 5 in 2021 to 9 in 2024, an increase of 80%.
- Between 2021 and 2024, the number of respondents with more than two social enterprises operating smoothly increased ten-fold (from 1 to 10).

These numbers may reflect both genuine sector growth and the expanding reach of Social Enterprise NB — but either way, the direction is clear: **social enterprise is taking hold across New Brunswick non-profits at every stage of the journey.**

Social Enterprise Stage of Growth



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ECONOMIC IMPACT

Progress in terms of growth stage also shows up in scaling revenues. In the first survey, almost half of respondents (47%) reported less than \$50K in annual revenue. **By the second survey, over 40% reported more than \$250K in annual revenue — a shift that, while not a direct comparison, points to meaningful revenue growth across the sector.**

Reported Social Enterprise Annual Revenue



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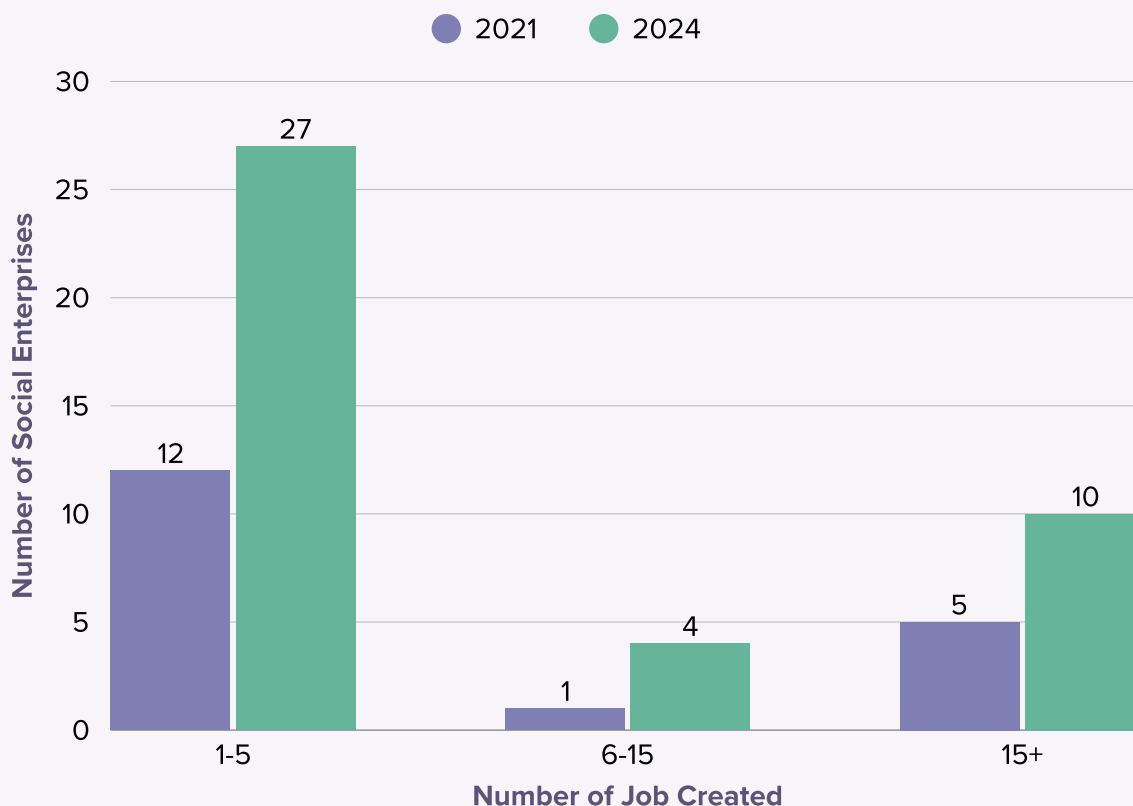
On its own, the dramatic increase in revenue makes the case for recognizing social enterprise as a developing economic driver in NB. Coupled with data on job creation, the data are even more compelling.

In 2021, only five respondents employed more than 15 employees. Flash forward to 2024, and that number had doubled, and the number of respondents with 6-15 employees had also quadrupled.

At the same time, most 2024 respondents were employing five or fewer employees. This means two-thirds of them were running micro-organizations, exactly the same proportion as in the 2021 survey.

This consistency at the smaller end of the scale represents an investment opportunity. Building up small social enterprises into larger organizations with a bigger payroll creates local jobs at a time when many New Brunswick communities are facing mounting economic pressures.

Jobs Created by Social Enterprises



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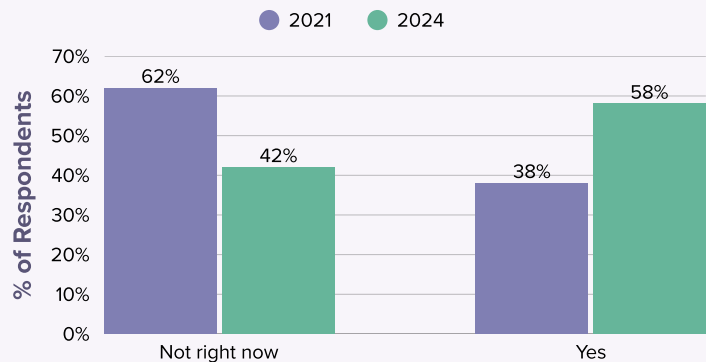
DESIRE TO LAUNCH AND EXPAND

In addition to measuring growth in the number of active social enterprises, the survey also gauged interest in developing future enterprises.

The data signals strong potential for expanding the social enterprise sector. In 2021, 38% of respondents who had not yet launched a social enterprise expressed interest in starting one. Three years later, that number had climbed to 58%.

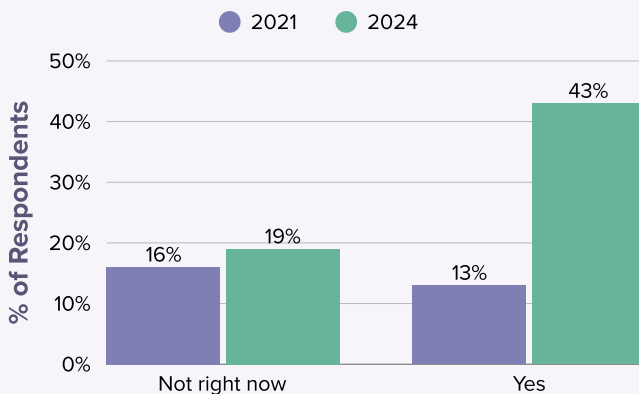
Interest in Launching New Social Enterprises

(Among Non-Operating Organizations)



Interest in Expanding Current Social Enterprises

(Among Active Social Enterprises)



We see a similar result in the data regarding respondents already running a social enterprise. In 2021, one-fifth of this group said they were interested in expansion. In 2024, the proportion had grown to more than two-thirds (68%).

This appetite for growth suggests that serial social entrepreneurship is already catching on among early adopters. Properly fanned, this enthusiasm could ignite a movement across NB's non-profit landscape.



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STATE OF PRE-LAUNCH SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Pre-launch social enterprises are still in the chrysalis, existing somewhere between a rough concept and a legitimate, revenue-generating organization. To assess the needs of these emergent enterprises, the survey asked respondents to rate the following:

- **Their readiness to launch**
- **Their interest in pre-launch support**
- **The support received from their board of directors**
- **Their willingness to dedicate staff to the new initiative**



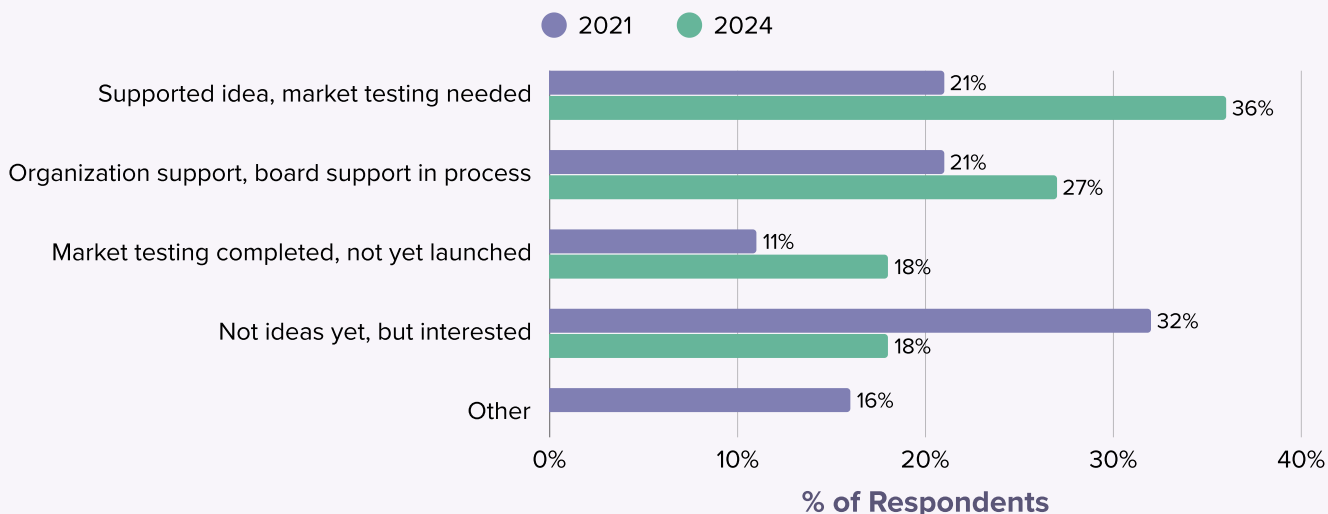
The charts below document some of the challenges non-profits face as they try to bring an entrepreneurial idea to life.

Readiness to Launch

The survey defined readiness along a four-point scale, ranging from having a supported idea (the highest point of readiness) to being interested without having any definite idea (the lowest point).

Between 2021 and 2024, the proportion of respondents increased for all of the top three levels of readiness. This change is especially striking at the top level, where we see 15% growth. That increase represents seeds of entrepreneurial ambition that could germinate into self-sustaining social enterprises over the coming years.

Social Enterprise Readiness to Launch Among Non-Operators



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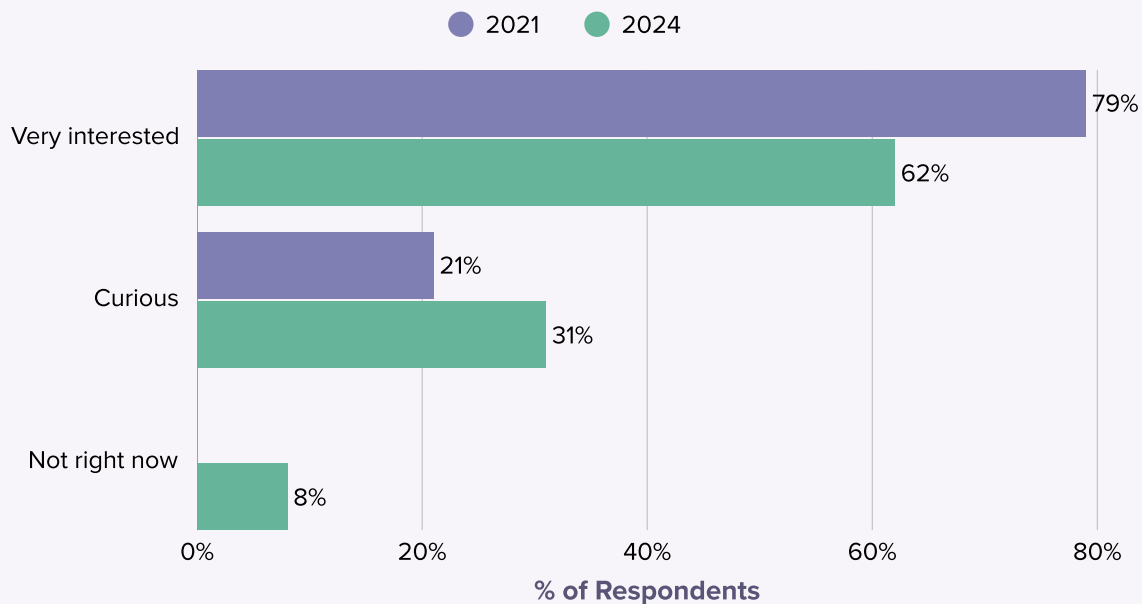
Interest in Pre-Launch Support

For non-profits not yet operating a social enterprise, the survey measured their degree of interest in accessing pre-launch support. In both years, respondents expressed strong interest.

However, the number of “very interested” responses declined from 2021 to 2024, and the number of “not curious” answers increased.

Further research could help uncover the reasons for this decline. **For example, the lack of interest in support may be linked to shifting attitudes toward training in general or to operational pressures, such as understaffing. Given the significant increase in the degree of launch readiness, some respondents might also have felt they had advanced beyond the need for program-based support.**

Interest in Early-Stage Support from Ideation to Launch



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Board Support

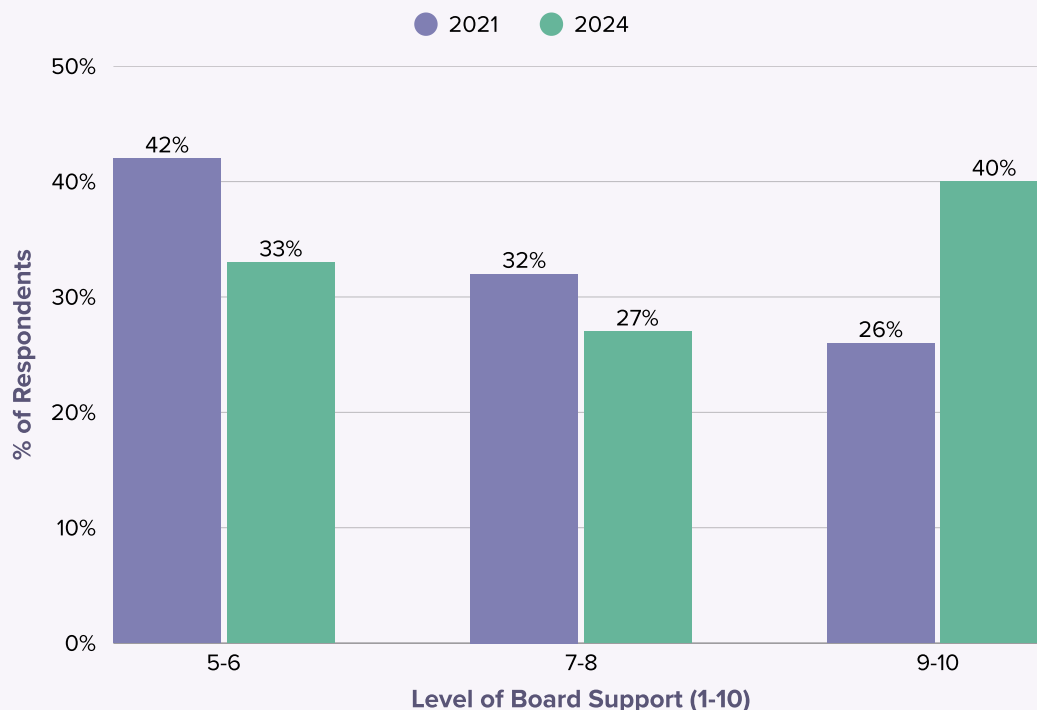
Among non-profits considering the possibility of starting a social enterprise, the survey rounds show widening support from boards of directors.

Respondents rated the level of board support from 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high. In both rounds of the survey, the lowest rating was 5, indicating that most boards were taking a neutral or at least mildly supportive attitude toward social entrepreneurship.

While this finding is generally positive, the story becomes more optimistic when we examine the distribution of ratings across the scale. In 2021, the largest proportion of respondents said their board was in that lukewarm zone. **By 2024, however, the largest proportion said their board's attitude had shifted from warm to hot. Fully 40% of respondents rated the level of board support as 9 or higher.**

This finding provides further evidence of a cultural change sweeping across NB's non-profits, as more and more leaders embrace social-enterprise as the way forward.

Self-Reported Rating of Board Support for Social Enterprise Activities



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Willingness to Dedicate Staff

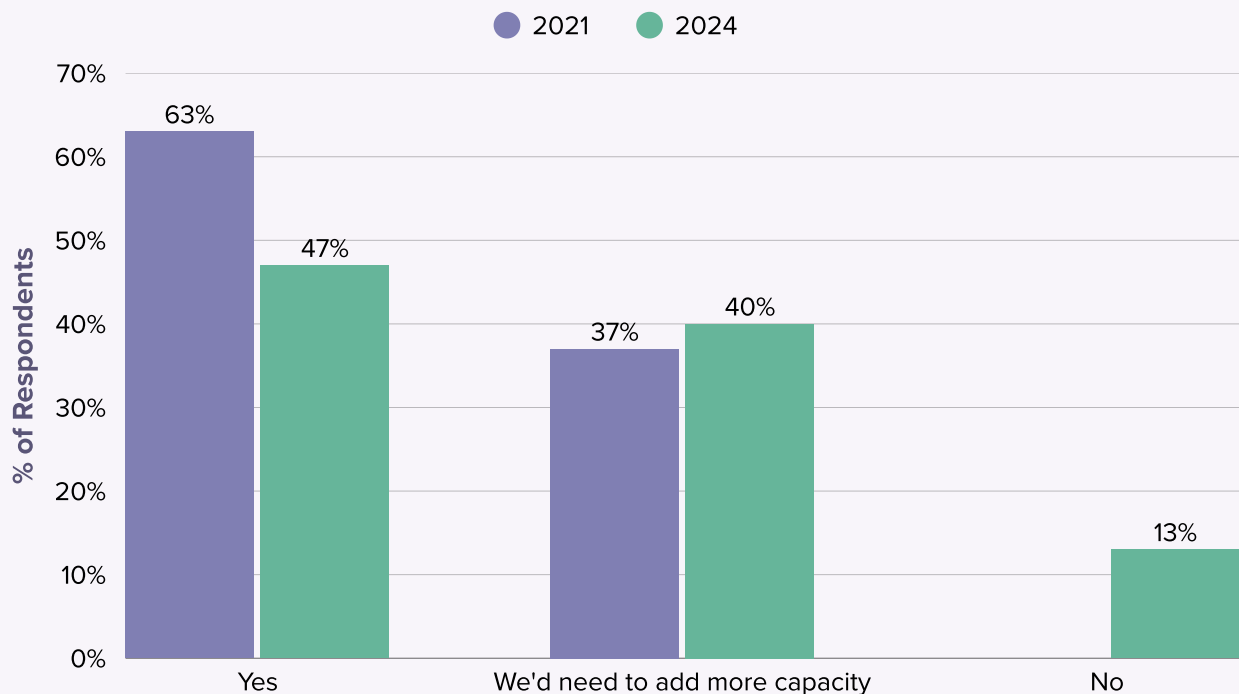
Besides board support, a non-profit needs people to power social entrepreneurship.

In the 2021 survey, 63% of respondents said they would be willing to dedicate staff to test and launch a social enterprise. The rest said they would need to add capacity (more staff) before taking on a social entrepreneurship project.

In the 2024 survey, however, respondents showed less openness to assigning staff to a social enterprise launch. Only 47% said they would be willing to do this, and 13% said they would not be willing. (In 2021, zero respondents said “no” to dedicating staff to a new social enterprise.)

This shift might be linked to chronic understaffing among non-profits, or to other factors the survey did not examine. Further research into staffing issues in the non-profit sector could shed light on a significant barrier to social entrepreneurship and ways to remove it.

Willingness to Dedicate Staff for Social Enterprise Testing & Launch



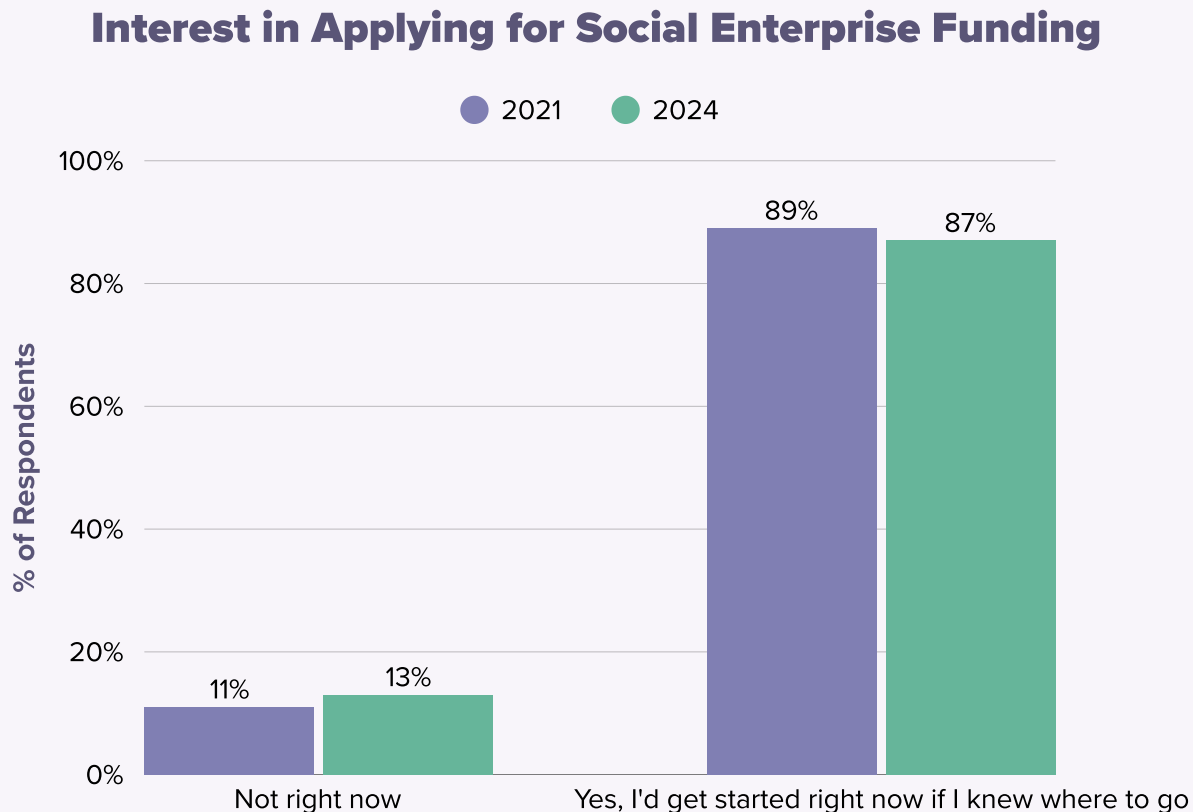
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Interest in Applying for Social Enterprise Funding

Social entrepreneurship offers non-profits a way to improve their financial sustainability, but like any other venture, a social enterprise requires startup funds. These cover such expenses as market research; legal and professional fees; permits and licences; purchasing of inventory, equipment, technology, and/or office supplies; staff training; insurance; salaries; and so on. Without dedicated startup funding, non-profits face a difficult choice: delay their social enterprise ambitions or draw down from operating reserves and core program budgets — resources that were never intended to absorb entrepreneurial risk.

Between 2021 and 2024, the proportion of respondents that expressed interest in applying for social enterprise funding remained relatively stable. In 2021, 89% said they would submit an application, and the 2024 number was 87%.

In line with other findings described above, this data shows that most of NB's non-profits are demonstrating a high level of readiness to pursue social entrepreneurship, provided they can access the right supports.



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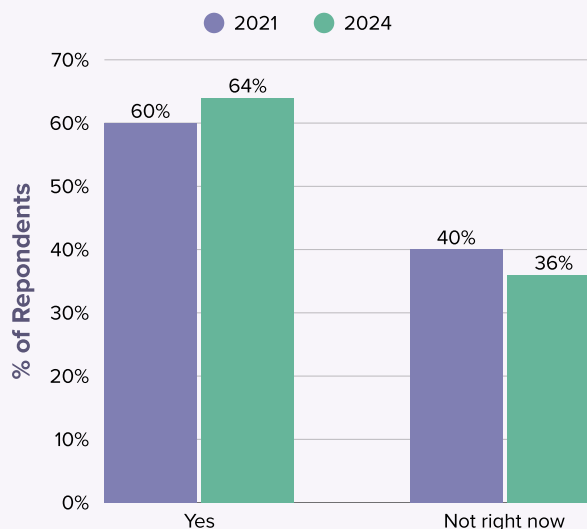
STAGES OF ESTABLISHED SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

An established social enterprise has evolved from the idea phase to the operational stage. To assess the needs of these organizations, the survey asked respondents to indicate their intent to seek growth capital, the type of capital required, and the kinds of other support needed for growth.

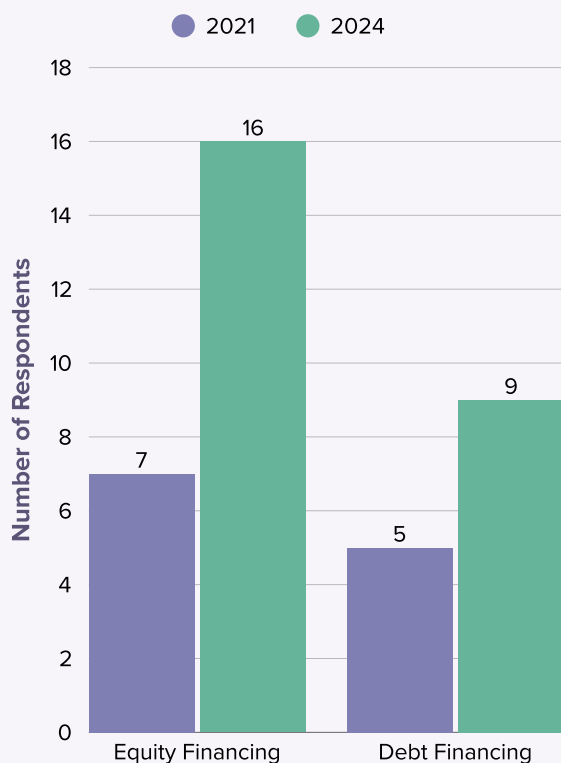
Intent to Seek Growth Capital

In both survey years, more than half of respondents said they planned to seek growth capital. The percentage remained relatively the same (from 60 to 64%) between 2021 and 2024.

Social Enterprises Seeking Growth Capital



Financing Types Evaluated for Growth



Type of Capital Required

In 2024, respondents showed a greater interest in equity financing than was evident in the first survey. The percentage of respondents evaluating this route to capital increased from 58% to 64%, a modest but notable shift in orientation.

This upward movement toward more complex forms of financing could indicate that the social enterprise sector is maturing. Organizations that have historically operated on grants and donations often carry a deep aversion to debt, and equity financing requires networks and persistence that few non-profits have yet had reason to develop. Currently, both debt and equity financing remain unfamiliar territory for many non-profits. As more non-profits begin to look toward investor capital, their growing ambition underscores the need for a social finance ecosystem that can meet them where they are.

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Non-Capital Supports Needed

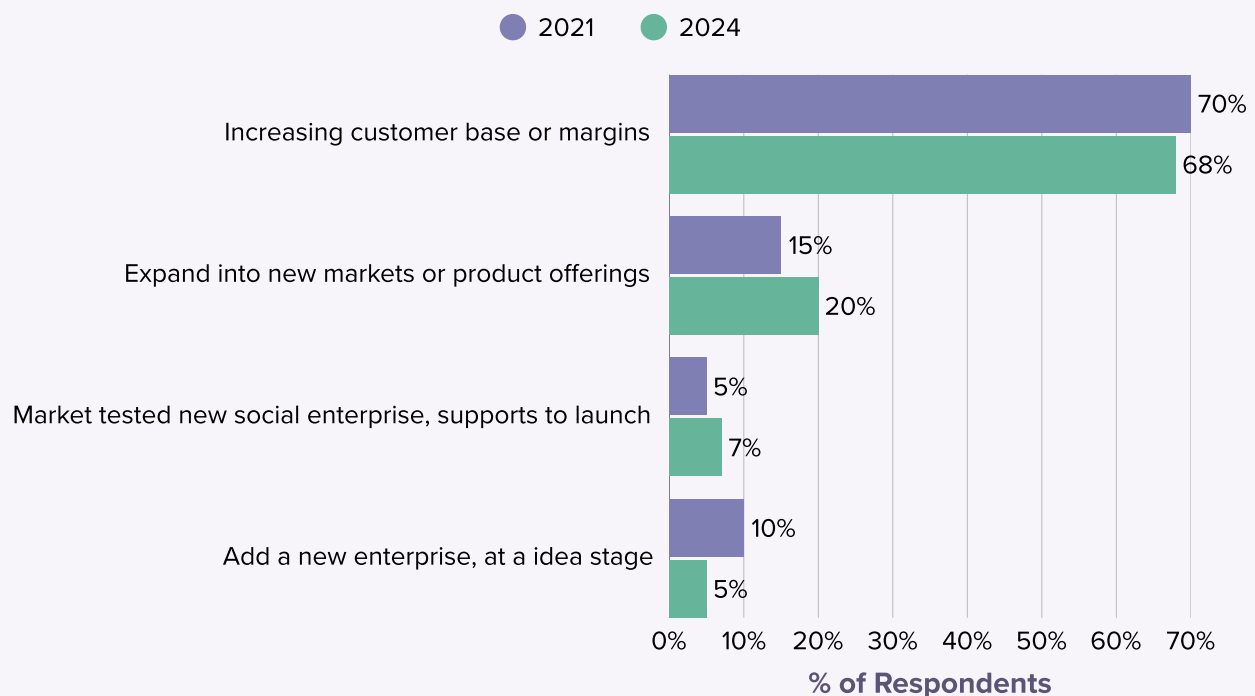
The survey also asked respondents to identify non-capital supports required to grow their social enterprise.

In both 2021 and 2024, the greatest need was for help increasing customer base or margins (70% or responses in 2021 and 68% in 2024), followed by help expanding into new markets or product offerings (15% in 2021 and 20% in 2024).

These requirements point to opportunities for entrepreneurial skill development and mentoring, similar to programming provided to leaders of for-profit businesses.



Non-Capital Supports Required to Grow your Existing Social Enterprise



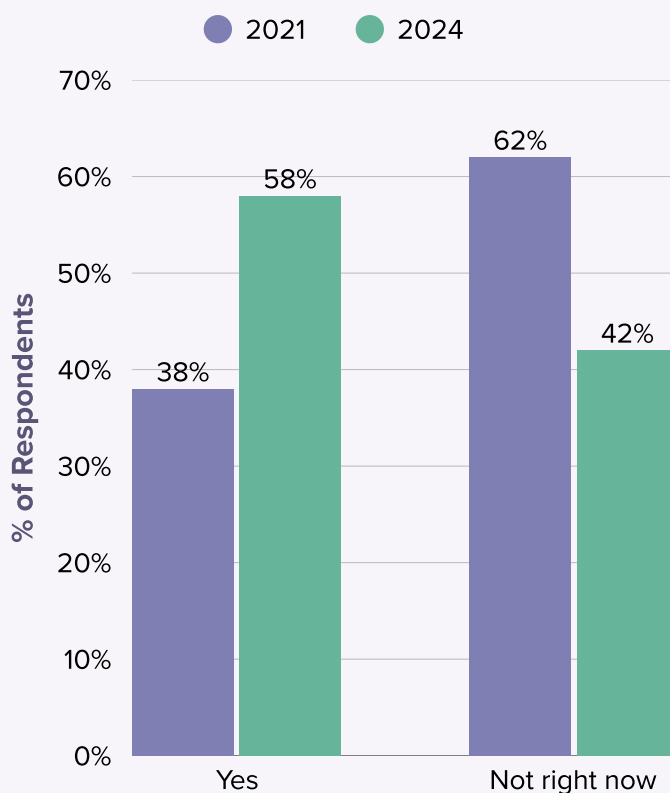
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MEASURING NON-FINANCIAL IMPACT

One of the most credible indicators of maturity in the social enterprise sector is the contrast between the 2021 and 2024 data on measuring non-financial impact. In the first survey, just 38% of organizations said they were evaluating their impact by evaluating results outside their financial statements. In the second survey, that proportion increased to 58%.

This shift reflects a sector growing in both sophistication and accountability. Measuring non-financial impact requires intentionality and dedicated capacity — and it signals a belief that the work of social enterprise extends well beyond the balance sheet. More organizations asking how they are making a difference, not just whether they are staying afloat, is one of the most encouraging findings in this report.

Measurement of Non-Financial Impact



ADDITIONAL RESPONDENT INPUT

Besides answering the questions examined above, survey respondents also had the opportunity to provide additional comments. Participants shared information about their social mission and their operations as well as challenges and opportunities before them. Here are a few common themes that emerged:

- **Appreciation for support to develop a social enterprise**
- **The need for a clearer definition of social enterprise**
- **Interest in learning more about launching and running a social enterprise**
- **Difficulties accessing funding**

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IMPLICATIONS

As many New Brunswick communities are experiencing, social entrepreneurship provides a vehicle for social change that is remarkably adaptable and effective. It gives us a strategic, sustainable way to help combat the converging storms now menacing our social systems, our economy, and our environment.

The findings from the two rounds of the Social Enterprise Sector Survey show more non-profits adopting an entrepreneurial approach to solving complex social problems:

- **Among non-profits that have not yet ventured into social entrepreneurship, we see an increasing readiness to give it a try, including rising levels of board support.**
- **Among those who have already started down the entrepreneurial path, we find a growing appetite to expand in this direction, including increased interest in equity financing.**

Such evidence paints the picture of a sector that is growing in size and maturity despite some of the barriers that make it challenging for non-profits to engage in social entrepreneurship.

The survey findings also illuminate some of those barriers, such as access to staff and funding. In both survey rounds, more than 80% of respondents declared that they would apply for social enterprise funding if it were available. Without that funding, though, many potential social enterprise projects will die on the drawing board or stall at the pilot phase.

Through the Social Enterprise Sector Survey, NB's non-profits have spoken. They have told us that **the culture of social entrepreneurship is already ingrained in their organizations and spreading.** They have also reported a consistently high interest in applying for social enterprise funding, along with an increasing appetite for using equity financing to fuel their missions.

These are all obvious signals of readiness to expand. What aspiring social entrepreneurs need now is easier access to capital.

At the national level, the federal government has recently (2023) invested \$755 million in a new Social Finance Fund to increase the flow of capital to social enterprises. In addition, across Canada, several other provinces have adopted financial strategies to foster social enterprise and have successfully used these to catalyze growth.



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Closer to home, **Seafair Capital** has recently been selected to lead the next phase of development for a proposed **Atlantic Social Finance and Community Investment Fund**, with support from Realize Capital Partners as a wholesaler for the federal Social Finance Fund. The proposed fund is designed to address capital gaps for social purpose organizations and community-led initiatives across Atlantic Canada that cannot always be met through traditional financing, philanthropy, or government funding alone — a signal that the regional social finance ecosystem New Brunswick's social enterprises need may be closer than ever.

New Brunswick requires a similar strategy to keep the social enterprise momentum going and enable expansion across the province, especially in northern regions. **Quebec offers a compelling model: its Social Economy Act, passed in 2013, formally recognizes the social economy as an integral part of the province's socioeconomic structure, establishes a government-wide obligation to take the sector into consideration in measures and programs, and requires the development of a social economy action plan renewed every five years. That kind of legislative and policy architecture does not happen by accident** — it is the result of sustained advocacy and political will, and it has helped Quebec build one of the most mature social economy ecosystems in North America.

We at the PDC encourage policymakers to formally coordinate, support, and capitalize the social enterprise sector so that more communities can reap the financial and more-than-financial benefits it delivers.

To find out more about our vision, check out [Capitalizing on National Momentum: A Call to Action for a Social Finance & Social Enterprise Strategy in New Brunswick](#).



CHECK OUT MORE RESOURCES ON OUR MICROSITE:
WWW.SOCIALENTERPRISENB.CA

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