



## Our Fifth Roundtable Discussion: Social Enterprise (SE) and Philanthropy in Canada

On March 27, 2026, WiP held our fifth nation-wide roundtable discussion online. Women philanthropists who live and work across Canada joined to discuss challenges and opportunities in the sector.

### Defining Social Enterprise

SE as an umbrella concept

- Social Enterprise (SE) is widely understood as an umbrella concept, but its boundaries remain debated
- SE generally refers to revenue-generating activities that advance a social mission, with profits reinvested into community benefit
- There is a tension about if SE is defined by *intent*, *structure*, *profitability*, or *market competitiveness*

### Applying Social Enterprise Models

- Nonprofits face regulatory, structural limits on how much they can reinvest or build in financial reserve
- There are ongoing questions about whether *profitability* must be central to SE, and if it must be *distinct* from a charity or can exist *within*
- There a lack of clarity if adjacent activities like hospital laundry services, gift shops, or facility rentals qualify as SE or simply earned revenue

### Social Enterprise & Sustainability

SE is a long-practiced activity

- Many organizations have been practicing social entrepreneurship long before and without using the term
- Questions around SE make it difficult for boards, funders, and the public to understand and support the models as integrated with philanthropic purpose
- SE is often framed as a sustainable solution, but it should complement, not replace, philanthropy

### Need for Revenue Diversification

- SE is largely a response to a decline in funding from traditional sources: grants, donation, fundraising
- SE as a way to diversify revenue streams, reduce vulnerability to funding cycles, reinvest surpluses, and build longer-term financial resilience
- SE cannot be relied on as sole source of funding, sometimes fails complicating funding models

### Economic Tool for Social Outcomes

SE as engines for impact

- SE can be *double impact*: value of both social good and economic contribution
- Short-term relief can lead to long-term outcomes
- Examples of impact/outcomes: workforce training, renting equipment/space to community for programming, community building/engagement

### Competitive Landscape

- Recurring challenge is that many SE are not sufficiently market-ready
- SE needs to fully understand how they are situated
- SE must compete on open market, as customers rarely buy social for social purpose
- Good intentions also need compelling value proposition

Organizations are struggling with finding balance.

The future is not either/or. It is both/and.

Making profits is good when governed well and returned to community.



## Suggestions from the Roundtable

*Questions and ideas about social enterprise and philanthropy in Canada:*

1. Is social enterprise a scalable path to long-term sustainability or a complex, risky response to a broken funding system?
2. What are the best ways to ignite policy reform, increase governance capacity, inspire supportive philanthropy, and have honest conversations about profit and power?
3. Is “philanthrocapitalism” overriding democratic accountability? We need to ask harder questions about who benefits, who decides, and who is included/excluded.
4. How can boards develop *business readiness* to take on risk as Executive Directors are often burdened with pitching, managing, and defending social enterprise initiatives?
5. Canada Revenue Agency, public policy frameworks, and grant makers must evolve to support innovation and scaling for social enterprise infrastructure and governance in the third sector.

## Roundtable Insights

- “Traditional philanthropy helps people *survive*, social enterprise has the potential to help people *thrive*.” ~ Marsha Clyne, MPNL
- Social enterprise, especially when pursued collaboratively, holds real promise for impact and community empowerment.
- Organizations, and their boards, require realistic capacity assessments and clear mission alignments.
- The sector needs to explore how different actors - charities, nonprofits, corporations, philanthropists, and foundation - might work together to create social enterprises.
- Social enterprise can support long-term stability, structural change, and leverage financing and purchasing power, but human capacity (skills, time, leadership) remains important to effective social enterprise.

*We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed with their stories and insights.*

**Women in Philanthropy will be hosting online roundtables throughout 2026.  
Email [WiP@carleton.ca](mailto:WiP@carleton.ca) for more information and to join the conversation.**