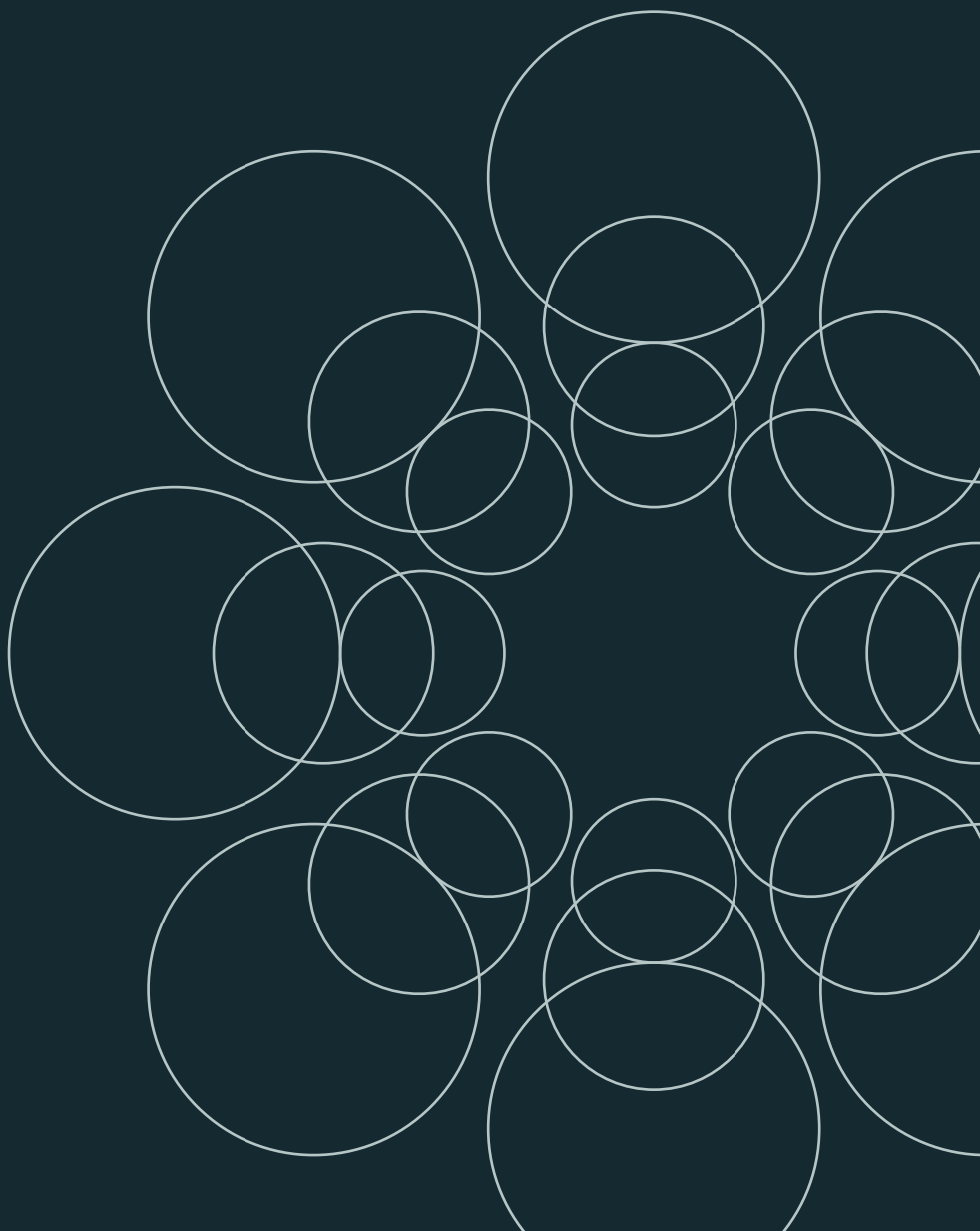
The circular venture blueprint

A guide for Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs)



2025

The circular venture blueprint

Supporting circular economy ventures calls for approaches that differ from traditional entrepreneurship support. These ventures often follow distinct growth paths, need specialised market connections, and create value in ways that mainstream metrics don't capture. Based on our experience supporting circular ventures across different ecosystems, we have seen what works and what doesn't when nurturing circular innovation.

That's why we developed this blueprint consisting of three principles as practical guidance that any ESO can adopt—whether you're just beginning to explore circular economy support or looking to strengthen your existing approach. These aren't theoretical frameworks, but approaches drawn from practice that help ESOs deliver better results for circular ventures while building credibility and expertise in this rapidly growing field.

Who we are:

These principles emerge from the Circular Economy Innovation Clusters (CEIC) programme, funded by IKEA Foundation, connecting entrepreneurship ecosystems in Bengaluru, India and Nairobi, Kenya, to accelerate circular economy innovation, and in exchange with European initiatives. Developed collaboratively with organisations across both regions, these guidelines represent real-world insights from organisations that have directly supported circular economy ventures. This co-creation approach ensures the principles work across different contexts and business models, giving you tried-and-tested approaches rather than theoretical frameworks.

Co-created by:

BuzzOnEarth Accelerator for Climate Entrepreneurship · Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs South Asia · bop inc · Climate KIC · exneco · growthafrica · ICCE International Council For Circular Economy · Kenya Climate Innovation Center · Nairobi Climate Network. · The Kilimani Community Foundation · Second Muse · seedstars · TechnoServe Business Solutions to Poverty · Yunus Environment Hub

The circular venture blueprint

A guide for Entrepreneurship Support Organisations (ESOs)

1 Develop tailored circular economy capacities

Support ventures in communicating their unique value

- Clarify your circular scope
- Help ventures articulate their impact
- Navigate markets designed for linear business

2 Build real ecosystem connections

Create long-term partnerships that work for everyone in the value chain

- Connect ventures across the value chain
- Collaborate with ESOs to strengthen the ecosystem
- Involve and educate investors early

3 Turn monitoring into support

Make milestones work for ventures

- Tailor milestones to venture maturity level
- Use monitoring to support, not just evaluate
- Share learnings to strengthen the ecosystem

Co-created by organisations in Bengaluru and Nairobi under the Circular Economy Innovation Cluster

Funded by IKEA Foundation

Read the full guide

for implementation tools and case studies

Principle 1:
Develop tailored circular economy capacities

Help ventures understand their circular economy impact and tell their story in ways that resonate.

1.1 Help entrepreneurs understand their circular economy scope and how they can create change

Firstly, clarify which part of the circular economy your programme focuses on. Are you targeting **upstream** activities (helping design products that last longer, choosing sustainable bio-based materials, or creating new business models)? Or **downstream** activities (recollecting products, recycling materials, or recovering value from waste)?

Consider which circular strategies your programme want to support from the **10R framework**—a helpful way to categorise circular approaches. Help the businesses bring more clarity to their business model using the 10R framework.

Be specific about how you're helping ventures transition from working on individual products and services to transforming entire value chains and systems. Also consider social inclusion and just transition elements—how your programme addresses informal economies, gender equity and diversity.

Tools and methodologies

- **Foundations of the Circular Economy** (Ellen MacArthur Foundation): An overview of the fundamental principles of the circular economy and its core objectives.
- **The Butterfly Diagram** (Ellen MacArthur Foundation): A visual framework illustrating circular strategies based on biological and technical material flows.
- **10R Framework:** A structured set of strategies showing how ventures can drive circularity through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and other regenerative actions.
- **Circular Economy – Vocabulary, Principles and Guidance for Implementation (CE ISO 59004)**: The international standard defining circular economy principles and providing guidance for implementation.

Why this matters: The circular economy has become a popular buzzword, which means support can sometimes be vague or miss the mark. When you're precise about your focus, everyone—from ventures to partners to funders—understands what you do. This helps you design better programmes and avoids repeating the same inequalities we see in our current linear take-make-waste economy.

- **Upstream vs. Downstream Model:** A conceptual tool to help ventures understand how they can drive circularity by designing out waste and pollution, as well as identifying strategies to apply once waste has been created.
- **The Circular Idea Blender** (O-Farms, Bopinc and Village Capital): A database showcasing circular agribusiness examples that turn food waste into valuable products.

1.2 Enhance entrepreneurs' ability to pitch and measure their specific circular economy value and impact

Circular economy ventures create more than just revenue; they create value across multiple dimensions. Help ventures strengthen and explain what makes their circular solution special – such as how it helps companies meet new sustainability regulations, how it uses circular design, and how it creates measurable environmental, social, and economic benefits. Help ventures identify and enhance the value they create – not just for customers, but also for workers and service providers through socially inclusive business models, for partners through efficient and circular operations, and for society by reducing waste, emissions, and pollution. Finally, help the ventures translate this into a language that customers, funders, and investors can understand.

Why this matters: Circular economy ventures grow differently than typical tech ventures. They often focus on long-term impact over rapid scaling or need partnerships rather than just individual customers. If you only talk about traditional metrics like revenue or jobs created, investors and customers might miss the real value these ventures create.

A successful technical assistance programme is one that provides customised and hands-on support.

Tools and methodologies

Customisable Circular Economy Start-up Pitch Deck: Template pitch deck highlighting key areas circular ventures should focus on to clearly communicate the value and impact of their solutions.

1.3 Strengthen go-to-market readiness

Help ventures develop market strategies that work for circular business models. Many circular ventures struggle to enter markets because they're trying to work within systems designed for traditional linear businesses—think: lack of supportive regulations and policies, customers who don't yet understand the benefits, or supply chains not set up for circularity.

These ventures often need different approaches, such as building long-term partnerships instead of quick sales, working with policy makers to shape regulations, or educating markets about new ways of doing business.

Why this matters: A great circular solution can fail simply because it's ahead of its time or doesn't fit existing market structures. By understanding these unique challenges, you can better prepare your ventures for real-world success.

Tools and methodologies

- **Circular Business Development Canvas**
  - **Handbook**: A collection of canvases for identifying circular business strategies
  - **Miroverse**: A Miro board version of the circular business development canvases..
- **Introduction to an Adaptive Strategy for Circular Design** (Ellen MacArthur Foundation): Overview of design's central role in circular economy.
- **10 Common Pitfalls When Scaling Circular Businesses** (Ellen MacArthur Foundation): A guide outlining frequent challenges and how to avoid them.
- **Future Fit Business Benchmark** (futurefitbusiness.org): A framework for setting regenerative and socially just business ambitions.

Case study: The Circular Economy ClimAccelerator – Validating circular impact

The Circular Economy ClimAccelerator, implemented by GrowthAfrica and SecondMuse in collaboration with Climate KIC, in Nairobi and Bengaluru (2024 and 2025), supports growth-stage circular start-ups driving systemic change. The programme provides targeted services that help entrepreneurs to quantify, validate, and communicate the full value of their circular solutions.

The programme delivers three specialised assessments:

- Circularity Assessment: Expert guidance and a third-party validated report on waste reduction and resource efficiency.
- Emissions Mitigation Impact Assessment: Calculation of avoided CO^2 emissions through simplified Life Cycle Assessment.
- Social Inclusion Module: Support for ventures to embed and communicate inclusive practices involving informal workers and marginalised communities.

Together with workshops, mentoring and ecosystem connections, these services equip ventures with credible data, validation, and narratives that make their circular, environmental, and social impact visible to funders, partners, and customers.

Harcourt Agri-Eco Farm, a Nairobi-based venture farming black soldier flies to recycle organic waste into sustainable agricultural inputs, used all three tools to refine its circular business model and build credibility. The resulting clarity and validation helped attract investors, leading to carbon credit sales, new machinery, and expanded land and operations.

Lesson for ESOs: Providing third-party validated assessments strengthens venture credibility and investment readiness, while helping entrepreneurs clearly articulate their circular, environmental and social value.

Principle 2:
Build real ecosystem connections

Connect ventures with customers, knowledge, and investors to build their understanding of – and interest in – innovative circular economy solutions.

2.1 Engage your whole value chain when designing for ventures

As an ESO, you can help your ventures understand how to create value across their value chain from the very beginning. While many ideas start behind closed doors, engaging and understanding a venture's users, service providers, suppliers and workers (including informal workers) can create multi-dimensional value. Whether they are B2B or B2C, understanding customer needs, identifying gaps in existing services, and creating safe jobs, stable income and specialised skills are key to ensuring the success and long-term sustainability of a venture.

Why this matters? The evidence shows that successful innovation ecosystems consist of multiple complementarities and interconnections across the value chain–creating added value and resilience. By helping companies design business models that are part of an ecosystem from the start, you not only ensure their success but the ecosystem as a whole.

Tools and methodologies

- **The Circular Value Chain Canvas**: A practical canvas that maps eight key steps within circular value chains.
- **Systems Mapping Toolkit**: A toolkit designed to help ventures and organisations map broader systems, relationships, and key actors.

2.2 Leverage existing knowledge and actively share knowledge and resources in your ecosystem

Before designing your programme, look at what other ESOs have already learned from their circular economy initiatives. While the focus is usually on competing for funding and talent, ESOs also need to collaborate and operate as a joint force that can unlock shared challenges and create unique expertise and value for the ecosystem. Connect, listen, share and learn from others. Use these insights to decide whether to focus on underserved areas of the circular economy or create unique learning opportunities that build on (rather than repeat) existing work.

Here's the challenge: many programmes support the same ventures multiple times, without building on existing knowledge of what the venture has already been through. Knowledge gets stuck in silos, creating inefficiencies across the ecosystem. The solution is active collaboration—sharing what works, what doesn't, and what gaps still exist. This means connecting not just with entrepreneurs, but with the wider group of stakeholders like policy makers, investors, and industry players who all share similar end goals.

Why this matters: When ESOs work in isolation, the whole ecosystem becomes less effective. Ventures get confused by mixed messages e.g. about how circular strategies can be implemented and measured, resources get wasted on duplicate efforts, and real innovation gaps don't get addressed.

Tools and methodologies

Graphic: Networking vs. Collaboration: A visual illustrating the distinction between networking and collaboration.

Case studies and examples of collaboration

- Collaboration as an Enabler for the Circular Economy: A case study examining how multi-stakeholder collaboration facilitates circular transformation.
- Smart City-Incubator Sustainability Framework (SCISF): A model aligning incubator activities with city sustainability and circular goals.

Knowledge-sharing platforms and communities

- Hubs4Circularity Knowledge Platform: A European community of practice supporting industrial and urban symbiosis through shared knowledge and collaboration.

Research and frameworks on knowledge sharing in circular ecosystems

- Circular Knowledge Management Model (CKMM): A model for managing knowledge flows in international circular ventures, particularly among SMEs and joint ventures.
- Platform-Based Ecosystems for Circular Knowledge: A study on digital platforms that foster knowledge-intensive networks to accelerate circular innovation.
- SWITCH-Asia Knowledge Hubs Report: An overview of regional hubs facilitating circular transitions through webinars, AI tools, and stakeholder engagement.

2.3 Actively involve investors

Bring investors into your programme as mentors and include them in selecting which ventures to support. This gives them deep understanding of the ventures and their solutions, helping them recognise growth potential that might look different to traditional tech ventures.

Crucially, provide training for investors on circular economy definitions and impact measurement—this connects back to Principle 1's focus on helping people understand the value of circular economy.

Why this matters: Investors typically dismiss circular ventures because they don't understand them, not because they're actually riskier. When investors only see circular businesses at pitch events, they judge them using traditional metrics that don't capture their true value. By involving investors early as mentors and trainers, you give them time to see how these business models actually work and generate returns. This hands-on experience breaks down the assumption that "different equals risky" and leads to funding decisions based on understanding rather than unfamiliarity.

Tools and methodologies

- **Mini Guide – Designing an Investor Pool for your Programme**: A short guide to building a targeted investor pool that matches programme goals.
- **Investing in the Waste and Circularity Sector in India – ANDE**: A landscape guide to outlining investment potential across Indian waste streams.
- **Investing in the Waste and Circularity Sector in Kenya - ANDE:** A landscape guide to outlining investment potential across Kenyan waste streams
- **Create your own Circular Venture Programme** (Impact Hub Amsterdam): A practical guide for developing circular venture programmes and connecting funding to innovation.
- **Circularity Gap Report – Finance (CGR)**: A report tracking capital flows within the circular economy in 2025.
- **Circular Investment Readiness Network** (CircularInvest and DEFINITE-CCRI): A European network offering investment-readiness support for circular economy projects.

Case Study: Circular Innovation Collective (Netherlands – Textiles Accelerator)

The Circular Innovation Collective (CIC), a Netherlands-based initiative led by Metabolic, Impact Hub Amsterdam, and Bankers Without Boundaries, accelerates circular textile innovation across the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region (MRA). Funded and supported by the City of Amsterdam (Amsterdam Impact), Stichting DOEN, and the Goldschmeding Foundation, the programme (2022-2024) aims for 70 per cent circular textiles by 2030.

CIC's integrated model connects start-ups, investors, municipalities, and financiers along the textile value chain through innovation acceleration, value-chain analysis, and blended-finance development. Circular textile ventures receive business development support, training, and mentoring while Impact Hub Amsterdam's network provides investment-readiness coaching and feedback on business models and pitches.

Crucially, investors are engaged throughout the process—reviewing ventures, providing pitch feedback, and helping define impact-based financing criteria aligned with regional sustainability goals.

The programme also experiments with impact-linked finance instruments and priorities measurement through metrics tied to sustainability outcomes. CIC is codifying learnings into open-source educational modules to enable replication across European cities, making the model accessible to other regions pursuing circular economy transitions.

Lesson for ESOs: Engaging investors early – and throughout the programme, not just at the end – helps shape investment criteria, build venture credibility, and create clear pathways to capital aligned with circular economy impact goals.

Principle 3: Turn monitoring into support

Turn funding milestones into structured opportunities for reflection, learning, and adjustment.

3.1 Link grants to support continuous learning

Different venture maturity levels need different approaches—and it's important for ESOs to stay flexible. When you tie funding to clear, measurable milestones, you're not just checking boxes. You're creating structured opportunities for ventures to reflect, learn, and adapt their approach.

This works differently depending on where ventures are in their journey. For early-stage ventures, use clear and simple milestones with more frequent personal check-ins. Build in flexibility at every touchpoint because these ventures are still figuring out their path. The main goal at this stage: get their product to market. For more mature companies, milestone-based funding can be more structured since they have clearer growth trajectories.

Use progress monitoring as a springboard for tailored support, peer exchange, and strategic guidance. Instead of treating progress monitoring as a pure accountability, use these check-ins as opportunities to provide exactly the kind of help ventures need at each moment. When a venture hits or misses a milestone, that's your cue to offer tailored support. This approach helps individual ventures grow more effectively, but it also strengthens the broader innovation ecosystem through shared learning. What one venture learns can benefit others facing similar challenges. The insights you gather from supporting ventures (what works, what doesn't, what unexpected challenges emerge) become valuable knowledge for the entire innovation community.

Why this matters: When you tie funding to thoughtful milestones, you create natural opportunities for ongoing engagement. This isn't about checking compliance—it's about meaningful, stage-appropriate support that helps ventures adapt, spot challenges early, and continuously improve their approach. Traditional monitoring focuses on whether ventures are meeting predetermined targets, but circular economy ventures often need to pivot, experiment, or take unconventional paths. When you use monitoring as a support tool rather than just an evaluation tool, you help them navigate these unique challenges more successfully.

When combined with shared learning mechanisms this approach not only accelerates venture development but also contributes to the resilience and growth of the wider ecosystem.

Tools and methodologies

Circular Economy Milestone Templates: Practical templates for tracking progress in circular economy ventures and encouraging a culture of continuous learning.

Case study: Brisil Technologies – Embedding Learning into Growth through Adaptive Business Support

Brisil Technologies, an Indian company, converts rice husk ash into high-quality bio-silica used in tyres, paints, and footwear. Despite its strong innovation capacity, the company faced working capital constraints and delayed payment cycles, which are common challenges in manufacturing-intensive circular industries.

Technoserve's Greenr Sustainability Accelerator programme provided support focused on continuous learning and adaptive problem-solving. Through regular check-ins and data-driven business diagnostics, the accelerator team worked closely with Brisil to experiment with new financial models and distribution strategies. Together, they designed a distributor-led model, in which distributors made upfront payments in exchange for discounted bio-silica.

This learning-oriented engagement turned operational challenges into actionable insights that shaped Brisil's long-term growth strategy. Within a year, the company achieved 600 per cent revenue growth, secured major contracts with global sportswear and tyre brands, and expanded into European markets through a new strategic partnership.

Lesson for ESOs: Monitoring should act as a tool for adaptive learning rather than simple compliance. Continuous, feedback-based engagement enables circular ventures to test, learn, and refine their business models in real time – turning challenges into growth opportunities.

Circular economy glossary

Circular economy: "An economic system that uses a systemic approach to maintain a circular flow of resources by recovering, retaining or adding to their value, while contributing to sustainable development" (ISO, 2024). In practice, this is a framework that addresses global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, waste and pollution by moving away from consuming finite resources. It is underpinned by a transition to renewable energy and materials, creating a resilient system that is good for business, people and the planet. A circular economy is based on three fundamental principles: (1) Design out waste and pollution, (2) Keep products and materials in use as long as possible at their highest value, (3) Regenerate natural ecosystems (Cradle to Cradle / Ellen MacArthur Foundation).

Linear economy: Our current economic model is based on a linear system: extract raw materials, make products, use them, then throw them away. Only 6.9 per cent of materials globally get cycled back into our economy (Circularity Gap Report 2025) – the rest becomes waste.

Upstream innovation: In a circular economy, preventing waste from being created by rethinking products and services starts at the design stage – before they enter the market. Examples include developing new materials, product designs, or business models. (Source EMAF)

Downstream innovation: In a circular economy, this means recovering value from products and materials after their first use. Examples include developing new collection, sorting and recycling technologies to extend resource life.

Circular business model: A regenerative approach that contrasts with the traditional linear "take-make-waste" model by designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. Key strategies include designing products for durability and recyclability, shifting from selling products to providing services (like leasing), using recovered or bio-based materials, and creating closed-loop systems where resources are collected, reused, repaired, refurbished, remanufactured, or recycled.

10R framework: A set of ten strategies for achieving a circular economy, ranked from most impactful to least impactful. The goal is to design out waste and keep resources in use for as long as possible. The strategies are Refuse (not making new things), Rethink (reconsider ownership and use), Reduce (use less), Reuse (use again), Repair (maintain and repair), Refurbish (restore and improve), Remanufacture (rebuild from parts), Repurpose (use for different function), Recycle (process waste/materials into molecules and atoms for new products), Recover (extract energy or materials).

Circular design: Also called a Cradle-to-Cradle design, this is a systems-based approach that moves away from the linear "take-make-dispose" model to keep products, materials, and resources flowing at their highest value, eliminating waste and pollution and regenerating nature. It involves designing for durability, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, and recycling – creating a regenerative and restorative economy that benefits people, businesses, and the environment.

Just transition / social inclusion: Ensuring the shift from a linear to a circular economy is fair and equitable for everyone. This focuses on decent work, worker retraining, community support, and participatory decision-making to prevent vulnerable groups from bearing the costs of the shift. It integrates principles of social justice by guaranteeing that the benefits of increased resource efficiency and job creation are shared, addressing past injustices from waste and pollution, and supporting affected communities to adapt to new systems. Key elements include creating safe jobs in circular sectors, providing worker retraining, empowering communities in decision-making, ensuring fair distribution of costs and benefits, implementing social safety nets, and investing in infrastructure for underserved areas.

Circular impact assessment: Measuring how effectively an organisation performs across environmental, social, and economic dimensions in its circular economy efforts. The ISO 59020 (2024) standard provides a straightforward methodology by setting clear boundaries for assessment, tracking targets and actions, monitoring resource flows, and evaluating sustainability impacts. While many frameworks exist for larger companies (such as Circular Transition Indicators, GRI Standards, and Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Circulytics), smaller and younger ventures often need simpler approaches. For start-ups, a simpler Circularity Assessment and Validation process can help articulate the impact of their innovations. The Climate KIC circularity impact assessment tool, for example, focuses on minimising waste and maximising resource efficiency, combining well-crafted narratives, precise data points, and key performance indicators (KPIs) to turn quantitative and qualitative data into actionable strategies for the circular transformation of ventures.

The circular venture blueprint was co-created by the following organisations in Bengaluru and Nairobi under the Circular Economy Innovation Cluster:

ACE India
aceindia.in

ANDE South Asia
andeglobal.org/south-asia

Bopinc
bopinc.org

Climate KIC
climate-kic.org

Exneco
exneco.com

GrowthAfrica
growthafrica.com

International Council for Circular Economy · ic-ce.com

Kenya Climate Innovation Center
kenyacic.org

Kilimani Foundation
kilimani.org

Nairobi Climate Network
theclimatenetwork.earth

SecondMuse
secondmuse.com

Seedstars
seedstars.com

TechnoServe India
technoserve.org

Yunus Environment Hub
yunusenvironmenthub.com

Funded by: IKEA Foundation

Contact:
entrepreneurship@climate-kic.org