WRI AFRICA

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Closing the loop, shaping the future:

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CIRCULAR FOOD SYSTEMS FOR RWANDA PROJECT'S CLOSING AND LEARNING EVENT

September 3, 2026 | Kigali, Rwanda | Compiled by: Bernadette Muteteri, Eric Ruzigamanzi, Gloria Kantengwa, Shayna Krasnoff, Tina Nyunga, Robert Mbeche, and Ivy Muigai

Introduction

> *"While we are closing the program today, we are not closing the journey."*
>
> – Eric Ruzigamanzi, WRI Rwanda Country Representative

On 3 September, 2026, 64 stakeholders gathered at the Four Points by Sheraton Kigali for the closing and learning event of the Circular Food Systems for Rwanda (CIRF) project. The event brought together small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), technical assistance providers (TAPs), government representatives, academics, development partners, and media representatives, reflecting the actors involved in the project's journey. It was designed not simply as a project close-out, but as an opportunity to look back, reflect on the experience, and look ahead to what comes next.

This event was structured around the theme: Reflect, Celebrate, Transition: Sustaining Impact Beyond the Project. It provided an opportunity to recognize the achievements and contributions of SMEs, partners, policymakers, and other actors involved in the program, while also creating space to reflect on what worked, what did not, and what the five-year experience revealed about advancing circular food systems in Rwanda.

Over those five years, CIRF was implemented by WRI with consortium partners Resonance, the African Circular Economy Network (ACEN), the African Circular Economy Alliance (ACEA) and the Cleaner Production and Climate Innovation Centre (CPCIC), with funding from the IKEA Foundation. The project's work rested on three pillars. The first was technical assistance to help agri-food SMEs adopt and scale circular business models. The second was policy and institutional support to create an enabling environment, anchored by the Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP). The third was market and finance linkages for circular businesses. Through this approach, CIRF upskilled 370 SMEs on circular economy principles and provided tailored technical assistance to 20, including women- and youth-led enterprises. These enterprises developed 21 new circular food products and created 73 green jobs, supported by 125 market and finance linkages. CIRF's policy work also helped integrate circular economy principles into three national policy documents.

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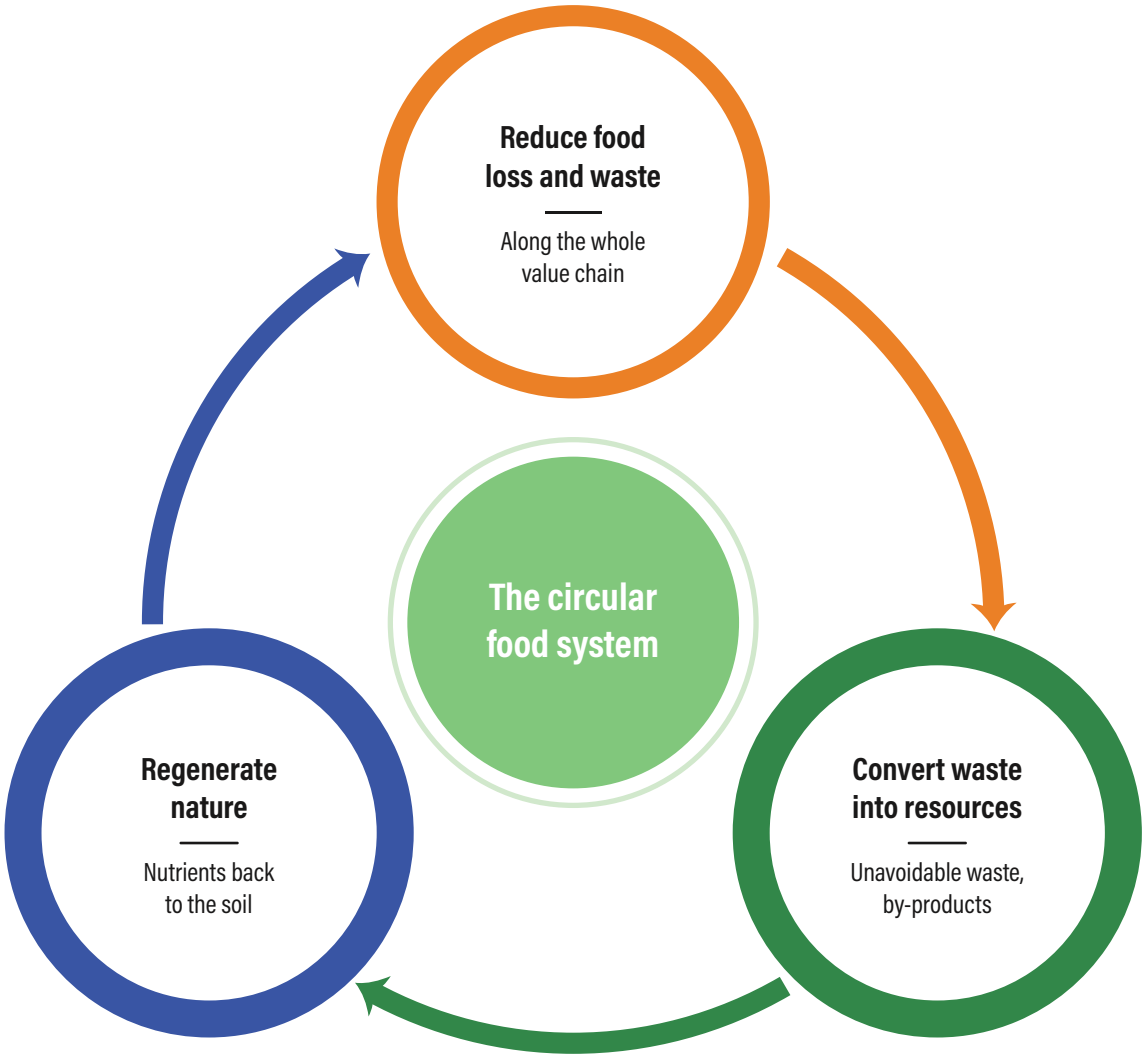
These conference proceedings reflect the presentations and discussions of participants and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Resources Institute or other participating institutions.

Beyond the close of CIRF, the discussions also focused on how the work could continue through existing and emerging platforms. In particular, the CIRF Knowledge Hub, termed the "Circular Agri-Food Hub," and the Food Cluster of the National Circular Economy Forum (NCEF) were highlighted as mechanisms for continued knowledge sharing, collaboration, and action. Alongside program results, speakers reflected on the relationships, knowledge, business models, and institutional mechanisms developed through CIRF, and how these could support continued progress beyond the project period.

Circular food systems: The context

Food systems sit at the center of some of today's most pressing development and climate challenges. Globally, they account for roughly a third of greenhouse gas emissions, while a large share of the food produced is lost or wasted before it is eaten. A circular food system responds to these challenges by keeping resources in use for as long as possible. It rests on three principles: regenerative agriculture that restores soil and ecosystems; reducing food loss and waste along the value chain; and converting unavoidable waste and by-products into usable resources.

FIGURE 1 | Circular food systems

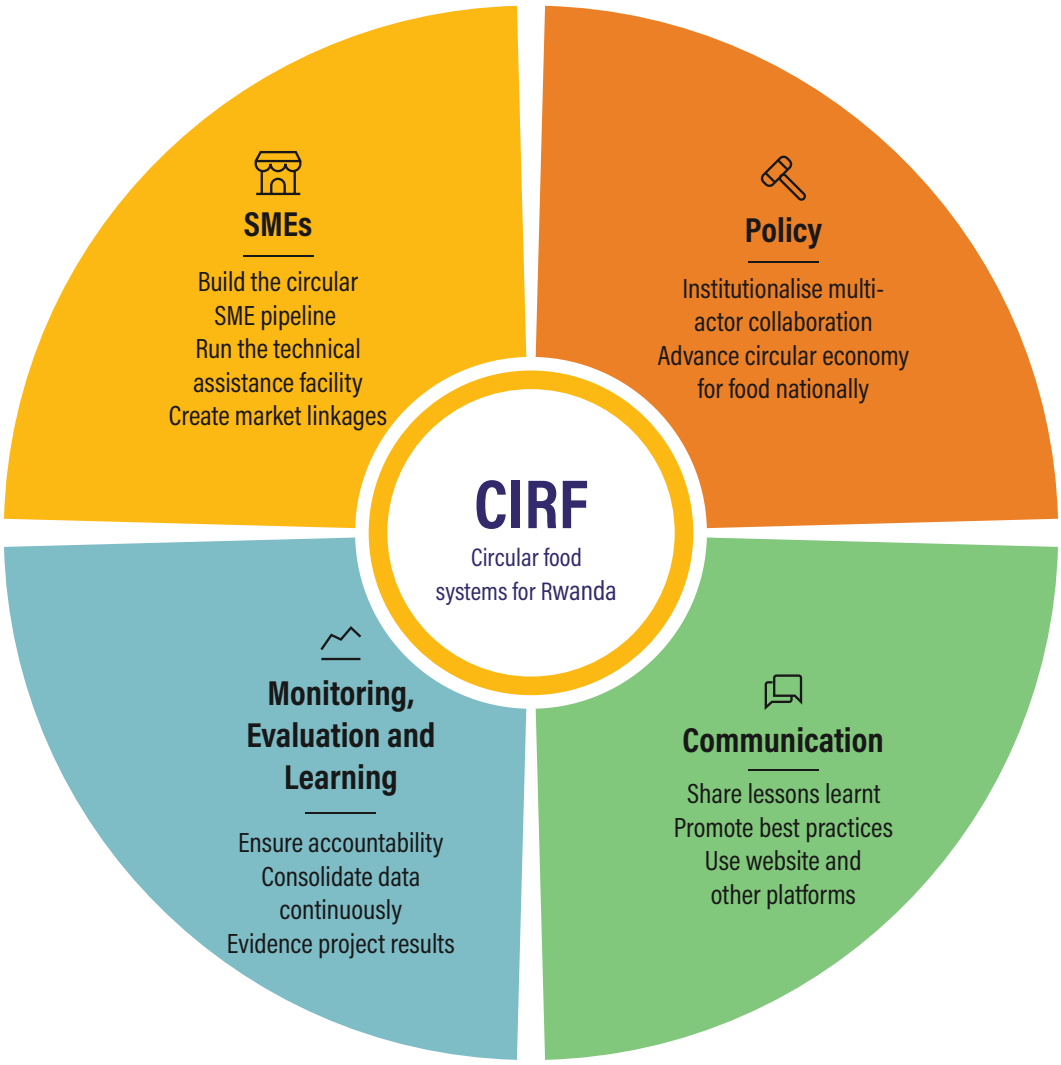


In Rwanda, where agriculture underpins the economy and livelihoods, these principles offer a pathway to stronger food security, new green jobs, and greater climate resilience. Rwanda is also recognized internationally for its leadership on the circular economy, as the first country in the world to ban single-use plastics and as a key actor in the formation of the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE). Yet when CIRF began, the opportunities and challenges of building circular food businesses were barely known. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) had limited access to technical support; there were few standards or certification pathways for circular products; financing terms rarely valued environmental benefits; and policies were not yet adapted to circular models.

About CIRF

Circular Food Systems for Rwanda program supported the adoption of circular economy principles across Rwanda's agri-food sector, with a focus on reducing waste, improving resource efficiency, and creating economic opportunities. This included working with SMEs and TAPs, strengthening value chain linkages, supporting access to finance, and contributing to the policy and institutional environment for circularity.

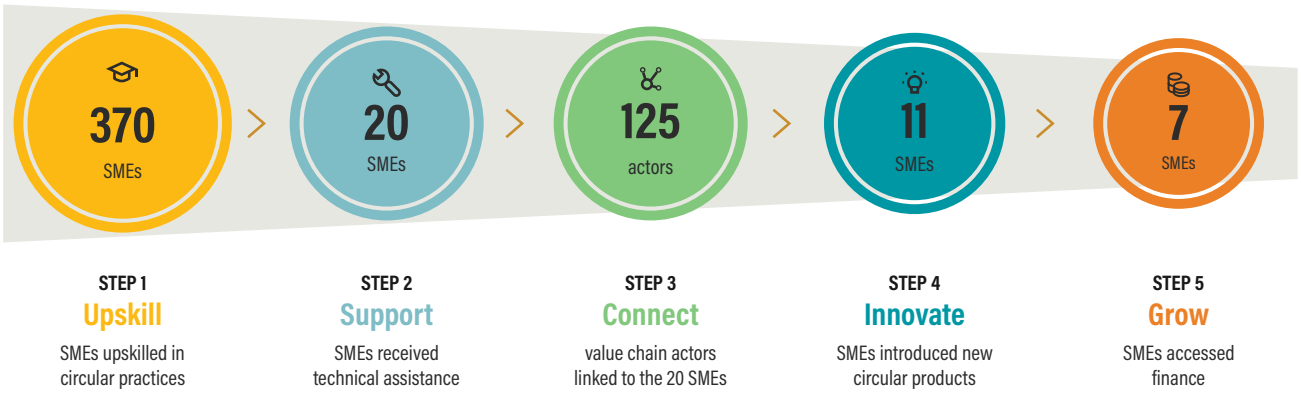
FIGURE 2 | About CIRF



Key highlights of the project

The CIRF project provided tailored, one-to-one technical assistance to 20 SMEs. 11 participating SMEs have introduced new circular products into their business offerings, and 7 have accessed finance through loans, grants, and other financial instruments because of the program's support. At least 125 value chain actors were engaged to strengthen market access and infrastructure, and by the close of the project, 370 SMEs had engaged with CIRF's community through circular economy networking and knowledge-sharing events.

FIGURE 3 | Key highlights of the project



At the system level, the project established a Multi-Stakeholder Platform that brought together different actors in the agri-food sector. Jointly, the platform contributed to the integration of circular economy principles into national strategic documents, including the Fifth Strategic Plan for Agriculture Transformation in Rwanda (PSTA 5) and the Private Sector Development and Youth Employment Sector Strategic Plan (PSDYE) 2024–2029, and Rwanda adopted ISO 59004 and ISO 59020 circularity standards through the Rwanda Standards Board and other national quality institutions.

CIRF learning in a wider context

This document brings together the evidence and experiences shared during the closing event with a wider body of knowledge developed throughout the program. It captures the experiences and learning generated through five years of CIRF implementation, including the approaches tested with SMEs, the development of circular business models, market and finance linkages, policy engagement, and the lessons emerging from the project's MSP.

The documentation also introduces the CIRF Knowledge Hub (termed the "Circular Agri-Food Hub"), where project resources, case studies, research, and tools will remain available beyond the program period. This allows businesses, policymakers, practitioners, and other ecosystem actors to access the experience generated through the CIRF project and draw on it in future work.

Learnings from CIRF also sit within a broader shift in WRI's approach to circular food systems. CIRF began by working with SMEs and supporting the development and testing of circular business models in Rwanda. More recent learning from the project has informed the move towards a wider systems approach, including greater attention to policies, markets, value chains, and the institutions that enable circular solutions to scale.

This is reflected in the Accelerating the Circular Economy for Food (ACE4Food) initiative, which WRI describes as being powered by the experience of CIRF and similar projects across the region. ACE4Food is intended to establish a more coordinated approach to food circularity in East Africa, bringing together experience and action in areas including food loss and waste, productive use of waste, regenerative agriculture, and the food-energy-water nexus.

CIRF is therefore one part of a growing body of work on circular food systems in the region. Documenting what was tested and learned in Rwanda provides a basis for understanding what can be adapted, strengthened, or taken forward as this wider work develops.

Building an enabling environment for circular food systems

Rwanda's circular economy policy journey

When CIRF began, the circular economy was still a relatively new concept in Rwanda and across the program's wider operating context. The challenge was not only to introduce the idea, but to find ways of explaining what circularity meant in terms relevant to farmers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and financial institutions.

For businesses, the questions were practical: What constitutes a circular business? Where is the business model? Who will buy the product? What are the risks? And why should a financial institution finance it? For policymakers and other stakeholders, there was a similar need to move from a broad concept towards concrete applications within Rwanda's economic and agricultural context.

> *"At the beginning, we were not simply implementing a program. We were helping to build the foundations of a circular economy narrative in Rwanda."*
>
> – Eric Ruzigamanzi, WRI Rwanda Country Representative

CIRF responded to this challenge by treating learning and practical applications as part of the work itself. The program worked to develop more accessible language around the circular economy, test business models, generate evidence, and demonstrate how circular approaches could create both environmental and economic value.

This community-building process took place at the same time as Rwanda's broader efforts to establish a policy foundation for the circular economy. The National Circular Economy Action Plan and Roadmap, developed in December 2022, provided an important national framework for advancing circular economy approaches across sectors. CIRF's subsequent policy analysis identified a specific gap within the agri-food sector: a need for stronger coordination among the institutions and actors involved in translating circular economy principles into practical solutions.

In response, the MSP for Circular Economy for Food was established by CIRF in March 2023. Co-chaired by the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources and the Ministry of Environment, the platform brought together government institutions, SMEs, private sector representatives, academics, development partners, and other stakeholders.

The platform provided a space to address issues that could not be resolved by individual enterprises or institutions working alone. Discussions included certification and conformity assessment; standards for circular products; access to finance, research, and evidence; market access; policy development; and the practical application of circular economy principles.

Over time, this helped shift the conversation from defining a circular economy towards considering how it could be implemented in Rwanda. That shift was reflected in both enterprise-level and policy-level developments. Rwanda incorporated circular economy principles into national strategic documents, including PSTA 5, while also adopting ISO 59004 and ISO 59020 circularity standards through the national standards system. At the same time, the MSP provided an institutional mechanism through which emerging enterprise challenges could inform broader discussions on policy, standards, finance, and markets.

The evolution of the platform therefore formed an important link between the national policy agenda and the practical experiences of SMEs. It created a space where the concept could be tested against real business challenges and where lessons from those businesses could feed back into the wider ecosystem.

The SME experiences presented during the event illustrate this transition in practice. They showed how a concept that initially required explanation and translation was progressively applied through new products, resource recovery, alternative production practices, technology, market relationships, and new approaches to financing.

Reflecting on five years of CIRF

From dialogue to policy: Rwanda's circular economy platform journey

In his opening remarks, Eric Ruzigamanzi, WRI Rwanda Country Representative, reflected on the CIRF partnership and how the strength of the program had depended on different institutions playing different roles while working towards a common objective. He acknowledged the contributions of the consortium partners, government institutions, SMEs, financial actors, and other stakeholders, noting that the program had involved continuous learning and adaptation rather than a perfectly linear implementation process.

One of the important shifts during the project was the movement from a circular economy as a relatively new or technical concept towards a language that businesses and institutions could apply to practical decisions. Financial institutions, for example, needed to understand what a circular business model looked like, whether there was a market for it, and how its risks could be assessed. CIRF therefore worked not only to introduce circular models but also to build evidence and relationships around them.

Anne Bordier, WRI Director of Food Initiatives, situated the work within WRI's broader food systems agenda. She reflected on the need to make food systems more productive, inclusive, and resource-efficient, and connected circularity to the wider challenge of reducing food loss and waste while creating greater economic and social value from resources within the food system.

For Michael Nkonu, representing the IKEA Foundation, the experience demonstrated why circular approaches matter in a context where resources are limited and food loss remains significant. He reflected on the potential of agricultural by-products to become inputs for new businesses, and the opportunity for circular economy approaches to contribute simultaneously to food security, environmental outcomes, and employment.

The opening remarks were followed by a project highlight video and a presentation of the CIRF journey and results, bringing together the work undertaken across the five years.

Case studies: SMEs adopting circular business models

The experiences of participating SMEs provided some of the clearest evidence of how circular economy principles were being applied in practice. During the closing event, entrepreneurs reflected on the challenges they faced before and during their engagement with CIRF, the support they received, and the changes that followed.

The testimonies also demonstrated that there was no single pathway to adopting a circular business model. For some enterprises, the priority was meeting certification requirements and accessing formal markets for the developed circular products. For others, circularity was connected to employment and community benefits, creating value from production by-products, strengthening market relationships, or overcoming barriers to finance.

The testimonials were presented in six parts, with each SME highlighting a different element of its circular journey. The businesses spoke about how they are adopting circular approaches within their own operations, with individual testimonials focusing on the path toward certification, community impact, circular product development, and Internet of Things (IoT)-enabled services. Together, these accounts offered a closer look at the practical realities behind the project's wider results.

Certification as a pathway to market access: Golden Insect Ltd.

Dominique Xavio Imbabazi, Founder and Managing Director of Golden Insect Ltd., shared a journey in which certification became an important step towards opening opportunities for the business. The company's business model is built around converting materials that would otherwise be discarded into products that can be used in agriculture. It works with organic waste to produce useful agricultural inputs, including compost and organic soil inputs.

However, developing a circular product was only one part of the challenge. Before its engagement with CIRF, the company faced difficulties in demonstrating that its products met the standards required to access and grow within formal markets. For a business working with waste-derived agricultural products, the lack of clarity around standards and certification presented a significant barrier.

FIGURE 4 | Golden Insect Ltd



Photo by: BIG-SOUNDS AV Solutions Ltd/WRI.

Through CIRF, Golden Insect received technical assistance in business development and was supported to engage with institutions responsible for standards, product registration, and consumer protection. The company also benefited from market-linkage opportunities and trade shows, including the National Agriculture Show, where it could demonstrate its products and engage directly with potential customers.

The certification process helped the company better understand the requirements attached to its products and strengthened its ability to position them in the market. It also demonstrated the importance of institutional support in helping circular enterprises move from developing an innovative product to establishing it as a recognized commercial product.

For Dominique, the change was significant. Reflecting on the company's position before receiving this support, he described a period during which the lack of standards and market recognition made the business's future uncertain.

> *"There was no hope. We felt that we were out of the market because we did not have the standards. But because of CIRF, there is hope."*
>
> – Xavio Imbabazi, Golden Insect Ltd.

The Golden Insect experience illustrates one of the central challenges facing circular enterprises: a business may have a viable solution for recovering or reusing resources, but without appropriate standards, certification, and market recognition, that solution can struggle to reach customers at scale.

Community impact: Glory Poultry Farm

Grace Kayitesi, Assistant to the CEO of Glory Poultry Farm, shared how the company's engagement with CIRF extended beyond changes within the farm to include knowledge sharing and benefits for farmers in the surrounding community.

Glory Poultry Farm operates an integrated agricultural system involving crops and livestock production. Established in 2008 and formally registered in 2015, the farm has expanded its operations over time and currently employs both permanent and casual employees.

The company had sought to reduce its reliance on chemical inputs and strengthen more sustainable approaches to farming. CIRF provided business development support and practical certification training supporting this transition, including training in black soldier fly farming, organic fertilizer production, vermicomposting, and bookkeeping.

The training in bookkeeping also had a practical business benefit. Improved financial records and business management helped the enterprise to engage with financial institutions and pursue financing opportunities.

Another important part of the experience was exposure to practices being used by other businesses. Through a CIRF-supported learning visit, the farm was introduced to vermicomposting and subsequently began producing its own vermicompost. This created an opportunity to make better use of organic resources while reducing the need to purchase external agricultural inputs. The knowledge was also shared with neighboring farmers, extending the benefits beyond the supported enterprise.

The experience of Glory Poultry Farm therefore demonstrates the community dimension of circularity. The value of the intervention was not limited to a new production technique; it also included skills, employment, knowledge exchange, and the ability to demonstrate alternative farming practices to others in the local community.

FIGURE 5 | Glory Poultry Farm



Photo by: BIG-SOUNDS AV Solutions Ltd/WRI.

Circular product development: ZEAN

For ZEAN, represented by Production Manager Emmanuel Niyonsenga, circularity centered on developing additional value from materials that would otherwise have been lost during production.

The enterprise processes bananas into products including banana chips. A proportion of the bananas did not meet the required specifications for chips, creating a material loss. Through CIRF technical assistance, the business explored how this rejected material could be redirected into another product rather than discarded.

This resulted in the development of banana bread using the rejected bananas, creating a second use and a potential additional revenue stream. The enterprise also explored further opportunities to use production by-products, including the development of animal feed.

> *"We learned that loss can be turned into something useful if you have the right knowledge. We are now producing sustainably and introducing new products."*
>
> – Emmanuel Niyonsenga, ZEAN

ZEAN's experience demonstrated that circular product development can emerge from looking differently at an existing production process. What had previously been regarded as a rejected material became a potential input for another product.

IoT assessment and services: NjordFrey

Florence Uwinema, NjordFrey's Country Lead, shared the company's experience of applying technology to improve its services and strengthen its understanding of circular business models.

Through its engagement with CIRF, the company explored the use of IoT-based assessment and monitoring, moving from more manual approaches towards greater use of digital technology. The support also helped the team better understand circular economy principles and consider how these could be incorporated into the company's longer-term business development.

The experience highlighted another dimension of circular business model adoption: it is not limited to physical products or waste recovery. Technology and data can also support businesses in assessing resource use, improving efficiency, and developing more sustainable services.

Florence also highlighted the importance of partnerships in enabling the company to strengthen its operations and explore opportunities for further development. This testimony shifts the focus from adoption within the enterprise to the relationships and enabling conditions around it.

Market linkages and supply chain symbiosis: Elim Plus

Deogene Kimenyi of Elim Plus presented another dimension of the SME journey: the use of circular practices to improve resource efficiency while creating opportunities for stronger market relationships.

Before it engaged with CIRF, Elim Plus relied heavily on inorganic fertilizers, which represented a significant cost for its farming activities. Through technical assistance provided within the project, the business explored the production and use of organic fertilizer from available resources.

The company has produced between 25 and 27 metric tonnes of organic fertilizer, using the product within its own agricultural operations. This has helped reduce its reliance on inorganic purchased inputs while also supporting soil health and crop production.

Although the fertilizer has not yet become a fully commercialized product for Elim Plus, the business has already received interest from potential customers. The experience demonstrated the potential for what is currently an internal resource-efficiency measure to develop into an additional commercial opportunity.

The company also used CIRF-supported trade shows and market engagement opportunities to connect with potential customers. Through these engagements, Elim Plus reported gaining 20 new customers and generating approximately 3 million Rwandan Francs (RWF) in sales.

For Elim Plus, circularity therefore created value at more than one point in the business, including through reduced dependence on external inputs, improved use of available resources, and the potential to develop new market opportunities.

Access to finance: Ineza Mushroom

For Leah Mutamuliza of Ineza Mushroom, access to finance was one of the most important challenges in moving the business forward.

Ineza Mushroom produces mushroom growing tubes for farmers. Following the mushroom production cycle, the used tubes created a waste challenge. Through CIRF technical assistance, the company explored how these used materials could be transformed into organic compost rather than being treated solely as waste.

The support also opened opportunities for market exposure. Through exhibitions and agricultural shows, Ineza Mushroom reached new customers. The company's customer base grew from 183 individual customers and 4 cooperatives to 334 customers and 7 cooperatives.

A CIRF-supported learning visit also helped the business address challenges around access to raw materials. The company connected with a cooperative that could provide materials more consistently, allowing production to increase from approximately 3,000 tubes per month to 5,000.

This growth created additional employment. Ineza Mushroom reported hiring eight new employees: five women and three men. However, growth also brought a need for additional capital. Leah explained that the company had faced challenges around collateral and preparing the documentation required by financial institutions. Through CIRF, the business received support in business planning and gained a better understanding of financing requirements.

CIRF also helped connect the company with BK Urumuri, through which it was able to pursue financing and eventually obtain a loan that supported the purchase of a machine for seed production.

For Ineza Mushroom, therefore, access to finance was connected to several other elements of the circular business journey. Technical assistance helped the company strengthen its business plan, market linkages helped expand its customer base, and the resulting growth increased the need for investment in production capacity.

> *"The Circular Food Systems for Rwanda program not only helped us access funds; it also helped us access markets and increase productivity."*
>
> – Leah Mutamuliza, Ineza Mushroom

The testimonies presented during the event demonstrated the wide range of ways in which circular business models can develop within SMEs.

Key takeaways from the case studies include:

- Circularity is not an isolated business intervention. The ability of an enterprise to adopt and sustain a circular model can depend on the wider ecosystem around it, including standards, financial institutions, markets, suppliers, government institutions, and other businesses within the value chain.
- Tailored technical assistance adds value by responding to each enterprise's needs, whether that means building data models for decision-making, developing products that reduce waste, connecting firms to finance and markets, or producing inputs that cut operating costs. Paired with input and output market linkages, this approach has proven effective in strengthening enterprise performance.

SME exhibition and circular products

In addition to the SME testimonials, the event provided an opportunity for other enterprises supported through the CIRF program to exhibit their circular products and solutions. The exhibition brought together a range of practical applications of circular economy principles, allowing participants to engage directly with the businesses and learn about their products, processes, and approaches. Participating enterprises included MNB Ltd., Kigasali Coffee Company, and Tech Adopter, among others. Their presence complemented the testimonies shared during the session by demonstrating the diversity of circular business models supported through the program, from the productive use of agricultural and food-processing by-products to the development of technologies and solutions that improve resource efficiency.

FIGURE 6 | SME exhibition and circular products



Photo by: WRI/Yobrand.

Journey towards the institutionalization of the platform

The enterprise testimonies were followed by a return to the institutional level, focusing on the evolution of the MSP for Circular Economy for Food.

The platform had been established to bring together actors who would not ordinarily sit around the same table to address circular food systems. Over approximately three years, this created a space for stakeholder representatives from government, academia, the private sector, development partners, and others to discuss common challenges and identify areas where coordination could make a difference.

Representing the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources, Emmanuel Twagirayezu reflected on the significance of this collaboration. He described the platform as a mechanism through which stakeholders could jointly address those challenges.

> *"The platform created a unique space for dialogue and collaboration. Through this mechanism, stakeholders jointly addressed challenges related to finance, certification, research, dissemination, policy development, and market access."*
>
> – Emmanuel Twagirayezu, Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources

The platform also helped connect enterprise-level experiences to policy discussions. Issues that emerged from SMEs, including certification barriers, standards, and access to finance, could be brought into a multi-stakeholder forum rather than being treated as isolated business problems.

Philippe Kwitonda, Director General of Land, Water and Forestry at the Ministry of Environment, provided a complementary government perspective on the evolution of the circular economy agenda and the importance of sustaining collaboration across institutions.

The discussion highlighted an important shift: circular economy was no longer being treated solely as a project theme. It was increasingly being integrated into national conversations on agriculture, environment, resource efficiency, and economic development.

What institutionalization means

For CIRF, institutionalization means the platform's work is carried forward by a permanent national mechanism rather than ending with the project. The MSP gave Rwanda a tested model for stakeholder coordination, dialogue, and joint action. Through institutionalization, that model moves into the NCEF, where it continues with its own leadership, secretariat, and resources. The project closes; the institutional mechanism continues.

Progress in institutionalizing the Multi-Stakeholder Platform

The MSP is moving into the NCEF as the Agrifood Systems Platform, one of seven thematic platforms. The other six are water, waste management, construction, manufacturing, digital innovation and ICT, and transport. The Forum is co-chaired by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Environment, guided by a steering committee, with the Cleaner Production and Climate Innovation Centre (CPCIC) serving as the secretariat. The two ministries co-developed the Forum's Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines.

Within the Agrifood Systems Platform, co-chairs lead, convene, and represent the platform within the NCEF. Champions drive specific circular agrifood priorities. Members include the public and private sector, farmers, SMEs, academics, and other partners. CPCIC handles coordination, tracking, and reporting, and holds CIRF's institutional memory.

At the regional level, the ACE4Food Country Platform has been launched and linked to the NCEF, with the African Circular Economy Alliance (ACEA) as a strategic partner.

Institutionalization secures ownership and continuity beyond the project. The coordination, relationships, and knowledge built through CIRF stay within Rwanda's circular economy ecosystem, held by national institutions, instead of dissolving at project close.

Key takeaways for institutionalizing a platform:

- Anchor it in a national structure: The platform moves into a forum with government co-chairs (the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Environment) and a steering committee.
- Secure a permanent secretariat: CPCIC provides coordination, tracking, and reporting, and holds the project's institutional memory.
- Formalize how it operates: The two co-chairing ministries co-developed the Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines.
- Define roles at every level: Co-chairs, champions, members, and the secretariat each have a clear function.
- Diversify financing: Public, development, private, and innovative finance form a loop where results feed new investment.
- Keep the knowledge accessible: The Knowledge Hub is hosted by NIRDA through CPCIC, and the NCEF website will be its long-term home.

This institutionalization provides the bridge to the next stage of the event: the launch of mechanisms intended to retain the knowledge, relationships, and coordination of structures developed through CIRF.

Launching sustainability initiatives

> *"Sustainable transformation cannot rest on individual projects. It rests on institutions, policies, standards, businesses, and networks. The knowledge generated, the partnerships formed, the tools developed and the networks built through CIRF must remain active and accessible, and that responsibility now sits with the institutions and the individuals in this room."*
>
> – Christopher Mugongori, NIRDA

The closing event also marked the introduction of several mechanisms intended to carry CIRF's learning, relationships, and practical tools beyond the formal project period. These initiatives respond to a central question arising from the five-year experience: how can the knowledge, networks, and solutions developed through CIRF continue to be used after implementation ends?

The Knowledge Hub or Circular Agri-Food Hub

Shayna Krasnoff, Manager of Impact Advisory at Resonance, introduced the CIRF Knowledge Hub, now known as the Circular Agri-Food Hub, a central resource for preserving and sharing the knowledge generated throughout the project. Over the five-year implementation period, CIRF produced research, SME case studies, tools, manuals, and other learning materials, including resources developed to support the project's own implementation and learning.

Rather than leaving these materials within project files or individual organizations, the team brought them together and adapted them for wider public use. The Hub includes case studies from participating enterprises, research and learning from the project's work, tools and manuals, as well as materials documenting approaches used through the MSP.

Shayna explained that the intention was not simply to preserve what had already been produced, but to make it useful for future actors working on similar challenges:

> *"So future projects can now not reinvent the wheel but build off the learnings from the past five years."*
>
> – Shayna Krasnoff, Resonance

The Hub is therefore positioned as a living resource rather than a static repository. Shayna noted that the platform would be updated as new resources become available, while stakeholders would also be able to contribute relevant materials. Participants were encouraged to join the associated Circular Community of Practice, which will provide a channel for updates, resource sharing, and continued exchange among those working on circular food systems.

By making the resources accessible and creating a community around them, the Knowledge Hub provides a practical foundation for continued learning and for future initiatives to build on CIRF's experience.

The CIRF Alumni Community

The CIRF Alumni Community, termed a "Community of Practice," was introduced as the relationship-based complement to the Knowledge Hub. While the Hub is designed to retain and share knowledge, the Alumni Community is intended to maintain the relationships established among SMEs, project partners, and other stakeholders throughout the CIRF journey.

The two are designed to work together. The Community of Practice is one of the four reasons the Knowledge Hub was built, alongside preserving the learning, opening it for public use, and securing long-term stewardship. Its role is to engage with the circular food systems ecosystem as contributors, not only as users. This is what makes the Hub a living resource rather than a static archive. As the ecosystem grows and new knowledge is generated, CPCIC, as the Hub's long-term custodian, welcomes additions, updates, and feedback from members.

The community creates an opportunity for participating SMEs and ecosystem actors to remain connected after the formal project period, exchange experiences, identify opportunities for collaboration, and continue learning from one another. This is particularly relevant for enterprises that are still developing their circular business models and may continue to face similar challenges around markets, certification, finance, technology, and business growth.

Discussions around the Alumni Community emphasized the importance of keeping it active and practical, rather than allowing it to become simply a database of former participants. Continued knowledge exchange, opportunities to meet, and sharing business experiences and information about relevant opportunities can help maintain the value of the network.

The initiative also reflects a broader lesson from CIRF: some of the project's most important assets are not physical outputs, but the relationships and connections created between businesses and institutions. Maintaining these relationships can help preserve a channel through which enterprises continue to access knowledge, identify partnerships, and remain connected to the wider circular economy ecosystem.

Certification Roadmap

The Certification Roadmap, presented by Elke Nijman, ACEN Rwanda Country Representative, responded directly to one of the practical barriers raised by SMEs during the project: the difficulty of understanding and navigating the certification process.

Elke explained that discussions with SMEs had made the challenge clear:

> *"It is very difficult to understand what to do and at what stage to start the certification process."*
>
> – Elke Nijman, ACEN

The project started the journey of working with the national quality institutions—mainly RICA, RDB, and RSB—along with the private sector to understand the existing gaps when it comes to standards and conformity assessments. A policy paper was developed, which informed some of the changes, such as the adoption of two International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards on circularity. The project followed up on implementation to ensure SMEs acquire certification. The project worked with RICA, RDB, and RAB to map the process into 15 steps, taking an enterprise from business registration through the relevant certification requirements. The roadmap sets out the responsibilities of the

FIGURE 7 | Elke Nijman, ACEN



Photo by: Yobrand/WRI.

different actors involved, the documents businesses need to prepare, the authorities and platforms they need to engage with, and the fees associated with the different stages.

The exercise provides SMEs with greater clarity on what is required and when, rather than leaving businesses to navigate the process through multiple institutions without a clear overview. This is particularly relevant for circular businesses whose products may involve recovered, recycled, or transformed materials and therefore require enterprises to understand specific standards and compliance requirements before entering formal markets.

The discussions also highlighted that clarity alone is not enough if the cost of compliance remains beyond the reach of smaller businesses. Elke noted that certification could cost approximately US$2,200, with additional costs for audits, testing, and measurements, depending on the product and certification requirements. For micro and small businesses developing new circular products at the prototype stage, these costs, combined with the infrastructure improvements needed, make it difficult to quickly make all the changes required for certification.

The roadmap therefore represents both a navigation tool and a way of making the wider certification challenge more visible. It responds to an issue encountered directly by SMEs such as Golden Insect, and provides a clearer basis for enterprises and supporting institutions to understand where costs, responsibilities, and potential bottlenecks arise within the process.

Elke also acknowledged the contribution of RICA to the development of the roadmap, noting that its participation provided important insight into the certification and labelling requirements that SMEs need to navigate. The process demonstrates the value of bringing government and regulatory institutions into the design of practical solutions to enterprise-level barriers.

NCEF Food Cluster and ACE4Food Rwanda

Daniel Nkubito introduced the Food Cluster of the NCEF as an important institutional mechanism for continuing circular food systems work after CIRF.

The Food Cluster provides a national home for continued coordination and policy dialogue around circularity in food and agriculture. It also creates an opportunity to retain the multi-stakeholder approach developed through CIRF within a broader national circular economy structure.

Alongside this national transition, the CIRF experience connects to the emerging ACE4Food Rwanda agenda and wider regional efforts. ACE4Food is designed to build a coordinated systems approach to circular food systems across Africa and explicitly draws on the experience of CIRF and related initiatives.

The relationship is therefore complementary: the NCEF Food Cluster provides a national institutional home, while ACE4Food creates a wider regional space through which Rwanda's experience can inform and connect with circular food systems work elsewhere.

Key themes emerging from the discussions

Across the sessions—the MSP reflections, the SME testimonials, the panel discussion, and the sustainability presentations—participants shared what had changed, what had worked, and what remains unresolved.

1. **From waste to value: Circularity in practice at the enterprise level**

> *"I used to see waste as a problem, but now it's my main source of income and soil health."*
>
> – Grace Kayitesi, Glory Poultry Farm

The SMEs who shared their stories described changes in how they understood and applied circularity. They moved from identifying waste or inefficient resource use to testing ways of turning those materials into products, inputs, or services. As a result, they developed new products, integrated regenerative farming practices, and reviewed their business models to integrate circularity. Technical assistance matched to their specific needs helped them move beyond general awareness towards concrete changes in products, production systems, and business planning.

2. **Market access requires more than a circular product**

> *"I got the chance to connect with the ministries, funding institutions, and national quality institutions who were key to my journey to certification."*
>
> – Dominique Xavio Imbabazi, Golden Insect Ltd.

Market access was not an automatic outcome of developing a circular product. It required relationships, standards, customer confidence, and opportunities to test demand. Speakers stressed the value of connecting circular businesses to customers, suppliers, exhibitions and trade fairs, and other value chain actors. Circularity is strengthened when businesses are linked to actors who can supply inputs, purchase outputs, or create new uses for by-products.

3. **The Multi-Stakeholder Platform as a bridge between enterprises and policy**

> *"Three years ago, the Platform began its journey. It brought together stakeholders from across the system: the public sector, the private sector, academia, and civil society."*
>
> – Philippe Kwitonda, Ministry of Environment

The platform created a regular space for actors with different responsibilities to address common problems together. Through it, enterprise challenges could enter wider institutional discussions. Government involvement and co-chairing connected project learning to national policy and gave the platform institutional relevance. The inclusion of circular economy principles in national strategies and the adoption of ISO circularity standards were cited as evidence that the conversation had moved beyond the project itself.

4. **Certification and standards are both a barrier and a lever**

> *"We developed a Certification Roadmap based on inputs from government authorities to help SMEs navigate through the certification process for (organic) farming inputs."*
>
> – Elke Nijman, ACEN

Certification remained both a technical and financial challenge. SMEs needed to understand the process, but also faced costs for certification, testing, audits, and compliance. Standards and conformity assessment were especially difficult for new products made from waste streams, where established standards or market precedents may not yet exist. Certification support was effective because it responded to a concrete market barrier rather than treating standards as a separate policy issue.

5. **Finance remains the hardest constraint**

Access to finance was raised across the sessions as the hardest barrier faced by SMEs. Their business models are still developing, their assets and revenue histories rarely meet conventional lending requirements, and circular investments often have long payback periods. Through the MSP, SMEs and lenders discussed these constraints together. That work produced eight policy recommendations on blended finance, guarantees, value chain financing, and climate finance. Until finance is designed around how circular businesses grow, many will remain stuck between technical demonstration and commercial scale.

6. **The pathway to scale is iterative, not linear**

Not every circular business model can move immediately from technical demonstration to commercial scale. Some businesses face difficulties accessing finance; others have developed products but are still working through certification or market acceptance. Some products need further customer development and investment before becoming commercially viable. The learning points come from a simple "support, product, scale" model. Micro-level enterprises may need several forms of support over time, and the enabling environment must evolve alongside them.

7. **Coordination is essential and needs sustained financing**

> *"The project closes, but its legacy continues through the National Circular Economy Forum that is still engaging different institutions to ensure there is a budget for all platforms."*
>
> – Daniel Nkubito, CPCIC

Circular food systems cut across agriculture, environment, standards, finance, research, private enterprise, and markets. No single institution can address all of these dimensions alone. Financing for the NCEF is still being developed, and the co-chairs of the existing thematic platforms are working on it together. Securing it is not a one-time step: each institution has to plan for it in its own budget and mobilize resources over time. Building a sustainable financing base for the Forum will therefore take both time and resources.

The challenge now is to ensure that these mechanisms remain active and connected to real needs. Sustainability will ultimately depend on whether businesses can build viable models, whether markets reward circular products and services, whether finance becomes more accessible, and whether institutions continue to coordinate around the barriers that individual enterprises cannot solve alone.

Recommendations for scaling agri-food circularity in Rwanda

The discussions throughout the event point to a set of priorities for sustaining and scaling circular food systems work in Rwanda.

Institutionalize the MSP approach through the NCEF Food Cluster

The collaborative model established through CIRF will continue within the NCEF Food Cluster, ensuring that circular food systems retain a standing space for coordination, policy dialogue, and problem-solving.

Priority actions:

- Maintain regular multi-stakeholder dialogue.
- Link enterprise challenges to policy and institutional discussions.
- Maintain participation from government, private sector, academia, finance, and development partners.
- Use the Food Cluster to track emerging barriers and opportunities.

Make circular product certification more affordable and accessible for SMEs

Certification should be treated as part of the market-access pathway for circular businesses, rather than simply as a compliance requirement.

Priority actions

- Continue using the Certification Roadmap to ensure there is an increase in the number of SMEs acquiring certification.
- Explore ways to reduce the cost of certification preparation for SMEs, particularly the infrastructure and equipment upgrades they need to meet certification requirements.
- Build on experience with the adoption of ISO 59004 and ISO 9020 to ensure there is a favorable environment for circular businesses to thrive.

Strengthen academia's role in generating evidence for circular food systems

The transition requires evidence that can demonstrate not only environmental benefits but also commercial, social, and economic value.

Priority actions:

- Encourage universities and research institutions to work directly with circular enterprises.
- Generate evidence on resource savings, waste reduction, job creation, revenues, and environmental outcomes.
- Document business models that demonstrate potential for replication.
- Use research findings to inform policy and investment decisions.

Close the finance gap for circular enterprises

Finance remains a major constraint, particularly where businesses require investment before circular products or services reach sufficient scale.

Priority actions:

- Develop blended finance and appropriate financial instruments for circular enterprises.
- Strengthen financial institutions' understanding of circular business models.
- Support SMEs to improve business planning and financial documentation.
- Explore de-risking mechanisms for enterprises with viable models but limited collateral.
- Connect finance support more closely to market and technical assistance.

Strengthening market and supply chain linkages

Circularity depends on relationships between businesses. One enterprise's by-product can become another's input, but those relationships need to be identified, tested, and supported.

Priority actions:

- Continue facilitating market linkage opportunities.
- Map potential industrial and agricultural symbiosis opportunities.
- Support SMEs to test customer demand and refine circular products.
- Create opportunities for circular enterprises to participate in exhibitions and procurement and value chain partnerships.

Keep the knowledge infrastructure active and accessible

The Circular Agri-Food Hub should remain a living resource rather than becoming a static project archive.

Priority actions:

- Maintain and update the Hub after project closure.
- Encourage alumni and ecosystem actors to contribute new learning.
- Keep case studies and practical tools accessible to SMEs and other stakeholders.
- Connect the Hub to national and regional circular economy initiatives, including the NCEF Food Cluster and wider ACE4Food learning.

Conclusion and the road ahead

The closing reflections emphasized that the end of CIRF should be understood as a transition rather than an endpoint. Over five years, the project supported businesses to test and apply circular approaches, strengthened collaboration among stakeholders, generated practical knowledge, and contributed to a stronger institutional foundation for circular food systems in Rwanda.

Dr. Robert Mbeche, Food Program Director for WRI Africa, reflected on the progress achieved, highlighting the importance of sustaining the ecosystem and learning created through the project. He noted that the program had brought together a range of stakeholders and created a platform through which their collective experience could continue to support the sector:

> *"This kind of ecosystem is not common, and we are grateful to the ministries that coordinated us and to the many stakeholders who came together. The talent is in the agrifood sector, and it is still there. We need to sustain the learning." – Dr. Robert Mbeche, Food Program Director for WRI Africa*

This momentum will depend on maintaining the relationships, knowledge, and mechanisms established through CIRF. The Knowledge Hub, CIRF Alumni Community, Certification Roadmap, and the continued work of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform provide practical mechanisms for doing so. Together, these initiatives can help ensure that the experience and lessons generated through the project continue to inform businesses, policymakers, and other actors working to advance circular food systems.

The participating enterprises committed to continue championing circularity in their own businesses and across their value chains. This means continuing to develop and improve their circular products, pursuing certification using the Certification Roadmap, and staying active in the Alumni Community, where they can share experience and mentor newer enterprises on the same path.

The ministries co-chairing the NCEF committed to keeping circular food systems on the national agenda. This means leading the Agri-food Systems Platform within the NCEF, advancing the validation and adoption of the finance recommendations, building the Forum's financing into their institutional budgets and resource mobilization over time, and continuing to make standards and certification more accessible and affordable for smaller businesses.

CPCIC, as the NCEF Secretariat, committed to coordinate the Agri-food Systems Platform, track and report on agreed actions, and as the custodian of CIRF's institutional memory, keep the Knowledge Hub and the Alumni Community active.

CIRF leaves behind more than a set of project outputs. It leaves businesses that have tested circular models, institutions that have worked together around shared challenges, tools that can guide future enterprises, and a network of people who have developed a common language around circular food systems.

The closing of CIRF therefore marks a shift from a time-bound program towards continued collective action under the ACE4Food initiative. The foundations have been established; the next phase is to build on them, strengthen coordination, and ensure that circular business practices and food-system solutions continue to develop beyond the project period.

Appendix A. Agenda

TIME	SESSION & KEY ACTIVITIES	LEAD
14:30–14:45	Arrival & registration	CIRF Team
14:45–15:10	Traditional dance troupe performance	MC David Toovey
15:10–15:30	Opening remarks ▪ WRI Rwanda Country Representative: Eric Ruzigamanzi ▪ WRI Director of Food Initiatives: Anne Bordier ▪ IKEA Foundation Representative: Michael Nkonu ▪ NIRDA Head of Department: Christophe Mugongori	MC
15:30–15:40	Group photo	MC
15:40–16:00	Recap of the project's journey ▪ Video highlight (3 minutes) Recap of the project journey and key highlights	Ms. Gloria Kantengwa
16:00–16:20	SME testimonials SMEs share their journey in adopting circular business models ▪ Certification: Golden Insect, Dominique Xavio Imbabazi ▪ Community impact: Glory Poultry Farm, Grace Kayitesi ▪ Circular product development: ZEAN, Emmanuel Niyonsenga ▪ IoT assessment, Services: NjordFrey, Florence Beijing Uwinema	MC
16:20–16:30	Traditional dance troupe performance	
16:30–16:50	Reflecting on the journey and sustaining the Multi-Stakeholder Platform through the National Circular Economy Forum Speakers: ▪ Philippe Kwitonda: Director General of Land, Water and Forestry, Ministry of Environment ▪ Emmanuel Twagirayezu: Irrigation and Mechanization Specialist, Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources ▪ Patrick Karangwa, PhD, Director General of Agriculture Modernization, Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources	Platform co-chairs
16:50–17:00	SMEs share their journey in adopting circular business models ▪ Market linkages (supply chain symbiosis): Elim Plus, Kimenyi Deogene ▪ Access to finance: Ineza Mushroom, Leah Mutamuliza	MC
17:00–17:20	▪ Launch of the Knowledge Hub (10 min): Shayna Krasnoff Showcasing a lasting resource to support continued learning and action ▪ Spotlight on the Certification Roadmap (5 min): Elke Nijman Showcasing the pathway towards recognized circularity practices ▪ National Circular Economy Forum Food Cluster (5 min): Daniel Nkubito Highlighting how the MSP will sustain collaboration and action beyond CIRF	MC
17:20–17:30	Award and Recognition ▪ Recognizing the co-chairs of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform: Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources ▪ SMEs: 20 companies that adopted circular business models through this program ▪ TAPs: 7 technical assistance providers to the 20 SMEs providing tailored assistance and business development ▪ IKEA Foundation: for funding this work and creating a foundation for other projects	Eric & Dr. Robert
17:30–17:40	Closing remarks & commitments ▪ Director of Food Program	Dr. Robert Mbeche

Participants

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Abbreviations

ACE4Food	Accelerating the Circular Economy for Food
ACEA	African Circular Economy Alliance
ACEN	African Circular Economy Network
BK	Bank of Kigali
CIRF	Circular Food Systems for Rwanda
CPCIC	Rwanda Cleaner Production and Climate Innovation Centre
GACERE	Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency
IoT	Internet of Things
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Platform
NCEF	National Circular Economy Forum
NIRDA	National Industrial Research and Development Agency
PSDYE	Private Sector Development and Youth Employment Strategy
PSTA 5	Fifth Strategic Plan for Agriculture Transformation in Rwanda
RAB	Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board
RDB	Rwanda Development Board
RICA	Rwanda Institute for Conservation Agriculture
RSB	Rwanda Standards Board
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
TAP	Technical Assistance Provider

Further reading

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