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# SUB-SECTION II. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PEACE EDUCATION

## *Good practices in partner countries – GERMANY*

### COUNTRY

Germany

### NAME OF GOOD PRACTICE

Circular Valley – Circular Economy Accelerator

### ORGANISATION RESPONSIBLE

Circular Valley Stiftung, together with its operating entity Circular Economy Accelerator GmbH, in cooperation with Bergische Universität Wuppertal, the Wuppertal Institute, Fraunhofer institutes and regional industry partners

### WEBSITE/REFERENCE LINK

https://circular-valley.org

### YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION

2021 – Ongoing

### TYPE OF PRACTICE

- Sustainable Entrepreneurship Initiative
- Green Innovation Programme
- Incubator / Accelerator (Start-up Support)

- Innovation Ecosystem Initiative
- University-Business Collaboration

## BACKGROUND

Circular Valley is a non-profit foundation established in 2021 in Wuppertal, in Germany's Rhine-Ruhr region, to position the area as a global hub for the circular economy, modelled on the way Silicon Valley became synonymous with the digital economy. It was initiated by sustainability consultant Carsten Gerhardt through the Wuppertalbewegung network, growing out of an earlier accelerator project launched in 2020.

The initiative responds to the difficulty circular-economy start-ups face in reaching established industry, research infrastructure and follow-on financing at an early stage. It draws on the Rhine-Ruhr region's density of world-market-leading manufacturers, recycling and waste-management companies, and research institutions such as the Wuppertal Institute and Fraunhofer institutes. Through its Circular Economy Accelerator GmbH, the foundation runs a structured, cohort-based programme that connects international start-ups with corporate partners, scientists and policymakers, while also engaging in policy recommendations and public outreach on circular economy transformation.

## OBJECTIVES

- Accelerate circular-economy start-ups by connecting them with industry, research and investors.
- Establish the Rhine-Ruhr region as an internationally recognized circular economy hub.
- Support the closing of material and product cycles in line with the European Green Deal.
- Build cross-sector collaboration between start-ups, established companies, universities, and governments.
- Contribute to policy development for the transition from a linear to a circular economy.

## TARGET GROUPS

- Start-ups (early-stage circular economy ventures)
- Entrepreneurs and Founding Teams
- SMEs and established industry partners
- Academic Staff and Researchers
- Sustainability Professionals

## MAIN ACTIVITIES

The core offer is the Circular Economy Accelerator programme, run twice a year for cohorts of around 15 start-ups selected internationally. Each cohort works over roughly two months: an initial phase of virtual preparatory sessions is followed by an on-site phase of several weeks in Wuppertal, where start-ups are hosted alongside more than 160 partner organisations from industry, research and government.

During the on-site phase, founders receive coaching and mentoring on business-model development, access to lab space provided by corporate partners, and structured opportunities to pitch to press, investors and potential corporate partners. Start-ups work on themes tied to closing material cycles, such as recycling technologies, product-as-a-service models, digital tracking and tracing, and waste-stream separation. The programme covers a majority of participation costs and takes no equity stake.

Beyond the accelerator itself, Circular Valley organises an annual Circular Valley Forum bringing together politics, science, business and civil society, and a Demo Day where start-ups present to a wider public. The foundation also engages in policy recommendations and cross-border cooperation agreements, such as a 2023 memorandum of understanding between North Rhine-Westphalia and Flanders on circular-economy collaboration.

## INNOVATIVE ELEMENTS

Circular Valley's distinguishing feature is its explicit regional branding strategy: positioning an entire metropolitan area as a dedicated circular-economy hub, in direct analogy to Silicon Valley, rather than running a stand-alone programme. The accelerator's no-equity model lowers the barrier for international founders to participate, while its embedded partner network of over 160 organisations gives start-ups direct access to industrial infrastructure and research expertise rather than mentoring alone.

Particularly innovative elements include:

- A cohort-based, on-site accelerator model with no equity taken.
- Deep integration with established industry, research institutes and universities as active partners.
- A dual mission combining venture acceleration with policy recommendation and public outreach.
- Cross-border cooperation frameworks linking regional circular-economy ecosystems internationally.

## RESULTS AND IMPACT

Since its first cohort in 2021, Circular Valley has supported more than 100 circular-economy start-ups from around the world across successive accelerator batches, drawing applicants from countries including Singapore, Nigeria, Ecuador, the United States and Mexico. Participating start-ups have collectively raised more than €350 million in follow-on funding since the accelerator's launch.

The initiative has built a partner network of more than 160 organisations from industry, research and development, and government, and its annual Circular Valley Forum and Demo Day have become recognised meeting points for the circular-economy sector in Germany. Its policy work contributed to the first cross-border circular-economy cooperation agreement between North Rhine-Westphalia and Flanders, signed in 2023. The initiative received the Wuppertaler Wirtschaftspreis in 2022 in recognition of its regional economic impact.

## RELEVANCE FOR GREENEDGE

Circular Valley offers GREENEDGE a concrete, operating model of how circular-economy entrepreneurship can be supported through structured cohorts, embedded industry partnerships and a no-equity funding logic. Its combination of a virtual preparatory phase followed by an intensive on-site phase provides a transferable blended-delivery format that GREENEDGE's own virtual incubator activities could adapt for challenge-based learning across the four partner universities.

The initiative's focus on closing material cycles, digital tracking technologies and product-as-a-service models aligns closely with GREENEDGE's interest in circular economy education and green competences (GreenComp). Its practice of connecting start-ups directly with corporate mentors and research institutes also models the kind of university-business collaboration GREENEDGE seeks to embed in its learning pathways, while its policy and cross-border cooperation work illustrates how entrepreneurship education can extend into broader systemic and policy impact rather than remaining confined to individual ventures.

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