

Impact stories

Meet our social business entrepreneurs and discover their stories!

Interview with Charlotte Piller, Co-founder of Lotta Ludwigson, one of the businesses supported through the CirculaRise Accelerator program in Germany.

LOTTA LUDWIGSON

Lotta Ludwigson is a slow luxury brand that was founded with a deep commitment to sustainability and circular fashion.

Tell us about your background and what lead you to start a social business?

The inspiration stemmed from a desire to create timeless business attire that goes beyond trends and seasons. With a focus on empowering women, each piece is consciously designed and responsibly produced in the EU. Our core mission is to foster more equality for girls and women, aiming to transform the fashion industry into a circular one where people value long-lasting, biodegradable, and ethically made clothing, that never turn into waste as they all safely biodegrade and turn into a resource for nature again.

It all started when we recognized that women fighting for good causes and striving to create sustainable impact faced a dilemma: their professional workwear did not align with their high moral standards – because there was nothing on the market that combined holistic sustainability with aesthetics. This realization drove us to create Lotta Ludwigson, a brand dedicated to providing timeless, fair and even circular produced business attire. Our mission is to empower women by offering fashion that embodies their values, ensuring they can make a positive impact both through their work and their wardrobe choices.

How are you creating social and environmental impact?

We create social and environmental impact through

our dedication to sustainable fashion and responsible production. Our cradle-to-cradle approach ensures our products are fully biodegradable and free from toxic chemicals, using safe, organic, and natural fabrics to prevent wasteful practices and minimise environmental harm. By producing responsibly within the EU, we ensure safe and fair working conditions, valuing and fairly compensating workers. Our timeless business attire empowers women, promoting equality through high moral standards and donating to the Sparsa Project in Nepal for every product sold.

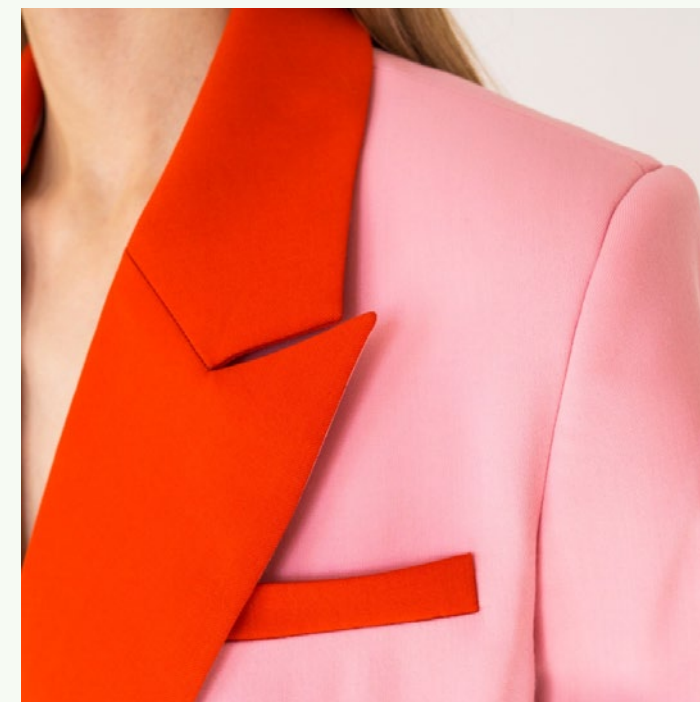
“Our cradle-to-cradle approach ensures our products are fully biodegradable and free from toxic chemicals, using safe, organic, and natural fabrics to prevent wasteful practices and minimise environmental harm.”

What practical learning from the CirculaRise Accelerator program have you implemented in your social business?

We absolutely loved the vibe of the cohort and to exchange ideas and thoughts with the other participants. Learning from their experiences and giving each other feedback was very valuable. Especially helpful were the one-on-one coaching sessions where our coaches helped us to come up with new business model ideas, gave us specific feedback on how to reach new customers, or on how to create a circularity impact theory.



Nhu-Ha Dao and Charlotte Piller, Co-founders of Lotta Ludwigson



Also, through the Circularise Accelerator we became closer to Yunus Environment Hub which helped us to gain exposure after the accelerator ended. For instance, I met them for an event in Davos during the World Economic Forum and I was also able to present Lotta Ludwigson and its mission during a session at Catalysing Change Week thanks to YEH.

What advice would you give to fellow entrepreneurs that want to implement a circular business model?

When creating a physical product, always consider its entire lifecycle. What will happen to it once no one can or will use it? What occurs after multiple lifecycles? By addressing these questions, you begin to build your circular business model.

Additionally, connect with other circular entrepreneurs who understand the challenges of being pioneers. As we are still in the early stages of fostering a circular economy, it can feel isolating. Surround yourself with fellow founders and/or become part of an accelerator like CirculaRise. They can support, help, and cheer you on from the sidelines.

Where do you see Lotta Ludwigson in the next year, and what kind of support do you need to achieve your goals?

In the next year, we aim to extend our customer base by reaching more of our target customers, creating a greater impact as more people choose sustainable clothing alternatives over socially and environmentally harmful options. We plan to expand our product line with more options, enhance our online presence, and increase our physical presence through pop-up events. We also want to boost our brand visibility and reach. To achieve our goals, financial resources such as grants and scholarships would be immensely helpful.

Interview with Aron Handreke, CEO & Co-founder of ContainerGrid, one of the businesses supported through the CirculaRise Accelerator program in Germany.



ContainerGrid is the first impact-driven take-back reverse logistics platform for cost-effective, efficient recycled material procurement between metals- and chemicals-processing industries and their dedicated partners in recycling and raw material supply. ContainerGrid closes the loop on end-of-life resources for a greener planet.

Tell us about your background and what lead you to start a social business?

I grew up in Brussels and pursued my education as an economist. My career has taken me across four continents where I've learned five languages. As a child, I was fortunate enough to grow cacti, operate warm water tanks, or collect stamps. I am enthusiastic about equality and transparency through instrumental technologies. This background fuelled my enthusiasm and curiosity for means to a meritocratic, peaceful society with universal access to nature.

How are you creating social and environmental impact?

I believe corporations have a responsibility to manage the end-of-life of the products they sell. We also collaborate with impact lobbies and policymakers to create a world where economic growth and environmental preservation are interdependent. My approach to leadership prioritizes ethical decision-making, demonstrating that business success and environmental stewardship can coexist. I aim to ensure that collective action positively contributes to our planet and societies.

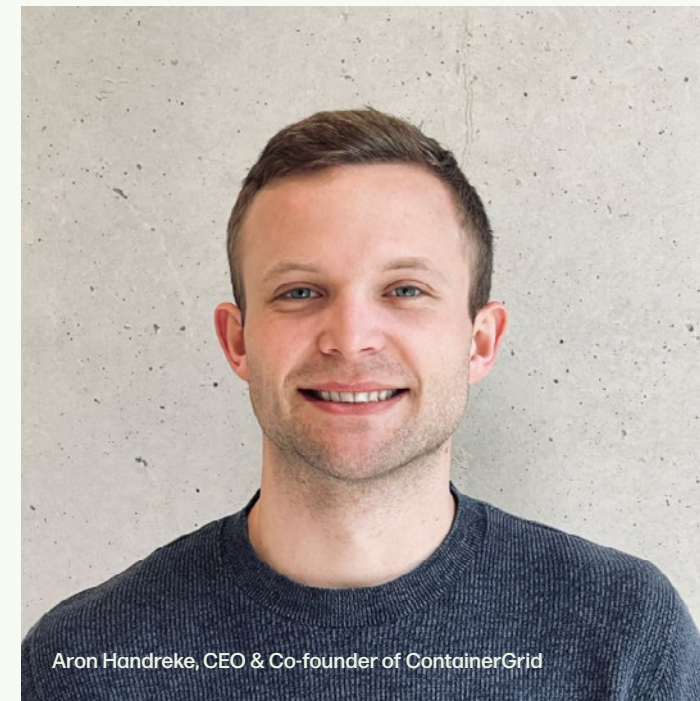
What practical learning from the CirculaRise Accelerator program have you implemented?

The CirculaRise Accelerator program has been instrumental in helping our team to understand the system around the variety of circular economy strategies across sectors, approaches to business and societal levels. Through the program, I met like-minded individuals and experts, which helped me develop the necessary skills to scale ContainerGrid's impact. The program provided the tools and networks for developing ground-up, cross-border impact measures early in our company lifecycle.

“My approach to leadership prioritizes ethical decision-making, demonstrating that business success and environmental stewardship can coexist. I aim to ensure that collective action positively contributes to our planet and societies.”

What advice would you give to fellow entrepreneurs that want to implement a circular business model?

My advice to fellow entrepreneurs is to focus on what you are passionate about rather than what you think will sell. Trust your true passion to inspire others. Ask questions to understand fully and be open to networking opportunities. Stay informed about market trends through newsletters and reflect to ensure you are executing on your mission. Trust your instincts, don't blindly follow mentor advice. Lastly, address workflow frictions early and maintain a zero-inbox policy to keep your workload manageable and scalable.



Aron Handreke, CEO & Co-founder of ContainerGrid



Where do you see ContainerGrid in the next year, and what kind of support do you need to achieve your goals?

In the next year, ContainerGrid aims to expand its SaaS solution for recycling SMEs into a take-back platform for original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and brands, enabling them to operate full-loop take-back services and gain access to recycled materials at industrial scale. We launch our take-back platform into the market with energy systems and automotive OEMs. Additionally, we will align our take-back platform to the needs of social businesses in African and Southeast Asian countries, as well as grassroot movements in German cities.

“Through the program, I met like-minded individuals and experts, which helped me develop the necessary skills to scale ContainerGrid's impact.”

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Meet our program participants and discover their stories!

Interview with Dorus Silwizya, Innovation Associate at BongoHive Technology and Innovation Hub, one of the innovation support organisations from Zambia that participated in the SCIP program.

Tell us about BongoHive and its mission?

BongoHive is the first technology and innovation hub in Zambia that supports corporations, startups and entrepreneurs through various programs and initiatives. Our mission is to co-create sustainable solutions by leveraging innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology to unlock Africa's economic potential. We aim to foster a thriving ecosystem that supports startups and entrepreneurs in creating impactful solutions for the challenges faced by our communities.

What was your motivation to specialise in supporting smart cities startups?

Our motivation stems from our mission to leverage innovation and technology to unlock Africa's economic potential. We recognise that smart city solutions can address critical urban challenges, improve the quality of life for citizens, and drive sustainable economic growth. As urbanisation accelerates across the continent, there is an urgent demand for innovative technologies that can address challenges related to health, education, transportation, energy, and governance. By focusing on smart cities, we aim to create impactful solutions that align with our vision of a prosperous and technologically advanced Africa. We seek to empower entrepreneurs who are developing solutions to make our cities more liveable, resilient, and sustainable, particularly in the crucial areas of health and education.

How does BongoHive integrate within the smart city ecosystem in your region?

BongoHive integrates within the smart city ecosystem in Southern Africa by collaborating with various stakeholders, including government bodies, private sector partners, research institutions and other innovation and entrepreneurship support organisa-

tions. Our mission to co-create sustainable solutions drives us to build global partnerships and networks that enhance our ability to support startups. We provide resources, mentorship, and access to global networks to help smart city startups thrive and create meaningful impact.

“We seek to empower entrepreneurs who are developing solutions to make our cities more liveable, resilient, and sustainable, particularly in the crucial areas of health and education.”

What are the most important learnings you gained from participating in the SCIP program, and how have you incorporated them in your work?

The SCIP program has been instrumental in enhancing our capacity to support smart cities startups. Key learnings include the importance of building strong networks and ecosystems, continuous capacity building, and tailored support for startups. We have incorporated these insights by expanding our network of partners, investing in team development, and creating specialised programs and resources to meet the unique needs of startups. Additionally, we have strengthened our internal capacities by refining our processes, improving mentorship programs, and expanding access to global networks and tools. This holistic approach has enabled us to provide more effective support and foster innovation in the smart cities space.

Instrumental partnerships and collaborations with ISOs and ESOs that were part of SCIP program include securing a Memorandum of Understanding



with Cinolu Impact Hub in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to co-develop and execute programs that foster innovation among ecosystem stakeholders in the DRC and Zambia. Additionally, knowledge sharing with NIA Ventures in Kenya has provided valuable insights into how different programs are run in Kenya, aiding our efforts to improve our incubation and other services for startups.

Where do you see BongoHive in the next year, and what impact would you like to create?

In the next year, we envision BongoHive as a leading hub for smart cities innovation in Africa. We aim to create significant impact by supporting more startups, facilitating successful pilot projects, and influencing policy to create an enabling environment for smart city solutions. Our goal is to contribute to the development of smarter, more sustainable cities that improve the quality of life for all residents. We also plan to strengthen our global connections, bringing more international expertise and opportunities to our local startups and entrepreneurs.

“The SCIP program has been instrumental in enhancing our capacity to support smart cities startups. Key learnings include the importance of building strong networks and ecosystems, continuous capacity building, and tailored support for startups.”





Tshimologong Precinct during the certification day of the SCIP program in Nairobi, Kenya



Interview with Lebo Likhojane, Community and Engagement Manager at Tshimologong Precinct, one of the innovation support organisations from Johannesburg, South Africa, that participated in the SCIP program.

Tell us about Tshimologong Precinct and its mission?

Tshimologong Precinct aims to create world-leading African digital entrepreneurs. Founded by Prof. Barry Dwolatzky, Tshimologong is wholly owned by Wits University and is a Level 1 B-BBEE contributor and an accredited service provider with MICTSETA. Setswana for “new beginnings”, Tshimologong catalyses the transformation of Braamfontein into a premier technology destination to raise the profile of African digital innovation by inspiring new talent and addressing rising youth unemployment. As a university-based incubator, Tshimologong Precinct is a digital hub based where the incubation of startups and SMEs, the commercialisation of research and the development of high-level digital skills for students, working professionals and unemployed youth takes place.

“Tshimologong catalyses the transformation of Braamfontein into a premier technology destination to raise the profile of African digital innovation by inspiring new talent and addressing rising youth unemployment.

What was your motivation to specialise in supporting smart cities startups?

As a hub, our work is purely focused at developing startups that are solving societal problems using technology therefore the smart cities framework aligns with how we would develop our ecosystem. Also, our relationship with the Johannesburg local municipality and the City of Joburg, academia, especially with Wits University, and other partners that form part of our ecosystem puts us at a better position to run smart city projects and programs to see what innovations we can facilitate through startups to support the city's development program of making Johannesburg a world class city.

How does Tshimologong Precinct integrate within the smart city ecosystem in your region?

Our integration is mostly a function of the work we do at Tshimologong and being agnostic with our sector focus, we have managed to work throughout different elements that inform the Smart City Framework e.g., Fintech, e-Commerce, Agri-Tech, IoT, Data, etc.

Through our close relationship with the city, as an implementing partner and an innovation facilitator, our role has been to support the city in implementing its smart city vision through innovation challenges, hackathons, research, and entrepreneurial development programs.

What are the most important learnings you gained from participating in the SCIP program, and how have you incorporated them in your work?

Our participation in the program came with much insight from engaging with other hubs and the workshops. Building sustainable hubs and models that are not necessarily reliant to donor funders is our biggest takeaway, also how Konza City is assembled as a smart city really showed the possibilities of a smart city.

Where do you see Tshimologong Precinct in the next year, and what impact would you like to create?

With our strategic alignment with the City of Joburg, Tshimologong is positioned to create highly impactful work throughout communities through workshops and innovation challenges that encourage community members to participate with their submissions of ideas that might be of assistance to their communities. As a measure of impact, what we'd like to see is a better understanding of smart cities and how this can help make communities efficient through smart technology integrations and entrepreneurs being able to ideate solutions to social problems using smart cities technology frameworks.

“Building sustainable hubs and models that are not necessarily reliant to donor funders is our biggest takeaway [from participating in the SCIP program].



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Interview with Sarangerel Ichinkhorloo, CEO and Ecologist at the Saraana Nature Conservation Foundation, one of the organisations from Mongolia supported through the BIA program.

What is the Saraana Nature Conservation Foundation and what is its purpose?

The Saraana Nature Conservation Foundation (SNCF) is a professional environmental non-government organisation committed to conserving and safeguarding natural ecosystems with a particular focus on biodiversity, sustainable and effective natural resources management, climate change mitigation, and community-based adaptation. Our mission is to preserve the environment and biodiversity for present and future generations while promoting the well-being of local communities and strengthening their economies through sustainable practices and natural resource conservation and management.

How are you benefiting your community and the environment?

Since 2022, we have been operating the Gun Galuut Nature Conservation Centre (GGNCC) in the Gun Galuut Locally Protected Area (GGLPA), a nature reserve in Bayandelger soum in Tuv province in Central Mongolia. The GGNCC serves as training, research and information centre rich in biodiversity and natural resources. It is also a stopover hotspot and breeding area for migratory birds. Through this centre, we monitor local biodiversity, especially birds, and engage local communities and stakeholders in conservation activities. With our project, we are expanding the centre to sustainably conduct the monitoring, conservation and education activities for local communities and the younger generation. Additionally, we are enhancing local livelihoods through ecotourism and sustainable conservation activities.

Tell us about your experience in the BIA program. What key learnings have you gained from participating?

Through the BIA program, our team and I have gained significant experience in developing project proposals with the guidance from mentors. This includes planning the project activities, budgeting, risk assessment, and SWOT analysis. This experience has improved our ability to plan and effectively write the project proposals for our NGO and implement them. Furthermore, we have expanded our international network and built capacity under the mentorship of Yunus Environment Hub.

“Through the BIA program, our team and I have gained significant experience in developing project proposals with the guidance from mentors. This includes planning the project activities, budgeting, risk assessment, and SWOT analysis.”

What would you like to achieve during the acceleration phase?

During the acceleration phase, we are creating the Yurts Tourist Camp Network at the herder families' camps and expanding the centre to run educational and conservation programs. We are also developing ecotourism based on sustainable biodiversity conservation, natural resource management, and the promotion of local heritage. Our project "Livelihoods Improvement and Sustainable Tourism in Central Mongolia" aims to address critical challenges in biodiversity conservation, sustainable natural resource management, climate change mitigation, community-based adaptation, and building sustainable



The Saraana Nature Conservation Foundation team



Sara Ichinkhorloo, CEO and Ecologist at the Saraana Nature Conservation Foundation

eco-tourism within the GGLPA in Central Mongolia. We recognize the urgent need to build a sustainable future for both nature and local communities in this pristine region through the sustainable conservation and management of the nature reserve, supported by the centre's biodiversity monitoring research and well-managed eco-tourism initiatives. Through our activities, we hope that the livelihoods of local herder families and communities will sustainably improve in the coming years through collaboration in conservation based on scientific monitoring and nature-friendly resource use.

We would like to express our special thanks to our supporting organisations, the Mountain Partnership, GEF, the GEF Small Grants Programme, FAO, UNDP, and Yunus Environment Hub.

“Through our activities, we hope that the livelihoods of local herder families and communities will sustainably improve in the coming years through collaboration in conservation based on scientific monitoring and nature-friendly resource use.”





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Interview with Terence Dacles, Member of the Board of Trustees and Technical Adviser of the Negros Island Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Foundation, one of the organisations from the Philippines supported through the BIA program.

What is the Negros Island Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Foundation and what is its purpose?

The Negros Island Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (NISARD) Foundation Inc. is a local NGO based in the City of Bacolod in Negros Occidental in the Philippines. Its main objective is to support the organic agriculture and food production for a healthy Negros Island through sustainable organic production, education and advocacy, and the conservation of natural resources.

NISARD's mission is to make Negros Island the organic food island of Southeast Asia through organic food production for the promotion of sustainable organic agriculture while preserving the rich biodiversity and ecology of the land and sea, and assisting in the conservation of the critically endangered species of flora and fauna that are indigenous to the Island and the Region.

“NISARD's main objective is to support the organic agriculture and food production for a healthy Negros Island through sustainable organic production, education and advocacy, and the conservation of natural resources.

We are guided by our vision of an ecologically balanced, peaceful progressive Negros Island characterized by an empowered, healthy and self-reliant citizenry with a globally competitive agro-industrial, diversified economy anchored on sustainable development under a responsive and accountable governance promoting gender equality and social justice shared by a dynamic civil society. Our core values are integrity and reliability, community service, respect for human dignity, social justice, equality and equity and gender inclusiveness.

We want to produce competitive organic food in terms of quality, price and affordability, and diversity of products, markets and services; educate consumers on the advantages of organic products – health and environmental wise – and encourage behaviour change to buy from and support the organic movement; and conserve and protect the natural ecosystems as part of the organic food production.

How are you benefiting your community and the environment?

With our project “Project VALOR”, we have provided additional skills and knowledge to small farmers in four local government units (LGUs). This has created a lot of awareness among local stakeholders on organic agriculture and rice farming. The project supported the expansion of additional organic certified rice farms. The sites are pilot areas of organic rice farming that can serve as model to other areas within the LGU, this also is a good example of a biodiversity friendly business that can be presented to the protected areas of Mount Kanlaon Natural Park and North Negros Forest Natural Park.

Tell us about your experience in the BIA program. What key learning have you gained from participating?

The project has gathered local stakeholders and small farmers, this has created a good grassroots level base to support the organic agriculture pro-

gram of the province and to support the biodiversity conservation program of the LGU and national government. Innovation and creating new products are key learnings for me, even though it is still in the early stages. This brought several players in developing new products in relation to rice flour. We hope to create new products and learn from other stakeholders aside from farmers, such as school kitchens, bakeries, restaurants, etc.

What would you like to achieve during the acceleration phase?

The creation of new products, the expansion of organic rice farms, and the involvement of women and youth during the second phase of the project.

“[...] we have provided additional skills and knowledge to small farmers in four local government units. This has created a lot of awareness among local stakeholders on organic agriculture and rice farming.

