ANNUAL REPORT · ECOSYSTEM OF CHANGE

EDITION VIII 2026

2026

Positive Impact Startups

ECOSYSTEM OF CHANGE REPORT

725	94	12	8
STARTUPS	PAGES	CASE STUDIES	YEARS OF RESEARCH

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Warsaw, June 2026

EDITION VIII · ANNUAL REPORT · ECOSYSTEM OF CHANGE

THIS YEAR'S EDITION WAS MADE POSSIBLE THANKS TO THE SUPPORT OF:

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written by our experts

PART I · INTRO

The business world finally discovers impact

Bolesław Rok

Kozminski University

Impact is a term that over the past two years has become essential at the foundation of strategy-building in the largest companies. Or at least that is how it looks at the level of ESG reporting. The plural form is usually used, emphasising different kinds of impact. When we published the first Report on Positive Impact Startups in 2019 and, in various ways and thanks to various people, tried to define precisely what impact means — particularly positive impact — we did not anticipate that this term would so quickly become the foundation of management in large corporations.

It is difficult to say of large companies — particularly the very largest, and especially those from industries with the heaviest environmental and climate burden — that they can have a net positive impact. When the scale of negative impact is compared with the positive, the result is usually a very large minus. This is why ESG above all comes down to reducing that "minus", or at least monitoring the scale and key areas of negative impact.

We are trying to do a little less harm — that is what corporate reports "tell" us. One might conclude that even this is already a lot, because before double materiality analysis became widespread, the narrative around environmental and social responsibility was primarily declaratory in character — apart from a few dozen companies genuinely active on this path.

Doing less harm is not enough

But it is not only about reducing the harmfulness of business activity — which is of course valuable, desirable and even economically justified in itself. Significant changes are needed that take account of the expectations of various stakeholder groups, all of us. We must reconcile the needs of the planet, social expectations and economic benefits. We are already crossing scientifically defined planetary boundaries that determine the stability of our home, planet Earth. We are beginning to lose our balance. If we continue to over-exploit the planet, we will bring about irreversible change.

It must therefore be said clearly: positive impact startups are not organisations that simply try to do a little less harm. They are organisations that enable people acting with passion in the name of the common good to increase their positive impact on the environment and society, contributing to the resolution of the most important challenges we face as a civilisation. By implementing innovative and responsible solutions across different areas of our lives, they drive growth in company value while simultaneously improving the quality of life for people and the environment within their sphere of influence.

> *Positive impact startups are not organisations that simply try to do a little less harm. They are organisations that enable people acting with passion in the name of the common good to increase their positive impact on the environment and society.*

Responsible innovations at the intersection of two worlds

We need innovations for sustainable development; we need the transition to a regenerative and circular economy that will allow for the maximum closing of material loops, particularly for critical raw materials. We need social wellbeing and planetary well-being. Increasing the level of innovation is not only a key challenge from the perspective of economic competitiveness, but also from the perspective of addressing social challenges.

We need responsible innovations that emerge at the intersection of two worlds we perceive as separate — the world of profit and the world of the common good. That is precisely where positive impact startups are today — although this remains a far too poorly recognised area of sustainable development. Sadly, that is not where the largest streams of funding flow, whether public or private.

> *We need responsible innovations that emerge at the intersection of two worlds we perceive as separate — the world of profit and the world of the common good. That is precisely where positive impact startups are today.*

Funding positive impact

One need only look at the latest Digital Poland report, which presents the highest-value startups in Poland and our region. The combined capitalisation of the 100 largest technology companies from the Central and Eastern European region reached USD 127.9 billion. We all take pleasure in the fact that Poland has the most of these digitally valuable leaders — as many as 42 — yet among those companies valued above USD 100 million, there is not a single impact-driven one.

Positive impact startups in Poland are still fighting for pre-seed rounds of a few hundred thousand to a few million zlotys. Positive impact grows along with the development of such a startup, so it is hardly surprising that this remains a niche. The only good effect of the fashion for impactfulness that we have managed to generate to some degree is the phenomenon of positive labelling. You can hear during pitches from mainstream startups — even quite large ones — that they care about impact, are increasing their positive influence, are implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, and so on.

It is worth recalling that something similar happened in Poland with the term CSR — first the business world ignored social responsibility, then mocked it, then began to fight it, and finally simply adopted the term as a useful narrative. That is when CSR ended in Poland.

Will the same happen with positive impact? We do not know, because fashion takes winding paths. We do know, however, that it is worth continuing to distinguish genuine positive impact startups — even adopting a very broad definition of such an entity.

ECOSYSTEM OF CHANGE IN NUMBERS

8	170+	~150	21
EDITIONS (2018–2026)	recognised startups	active on the market	new in 2026

Positive Impact Startup List 2026

To date, across eight editions beginning in 2018, we have recognised over 170 such organisations. Of these, nearly 150 are doing well on the market today. This year we are adding 21 organisations to this group, of varying legal status and market maturity, but all led with the passion that enables the design and implementation of responsible innovations. We must here thank the Panel of Positive Figures and the students of the postgraduate programme “ESG Perspective” at Kozminski University, whose contribution to this project is most precious.

The organisations included in the Positive Impact Startup List 2026 propose products and services that have — potentially or already in practice — a positive impact on the environment and society, contributing to the resolution of the most important social, environmental and climate challenges.

DeepTech

In the area of **DeepTech** — the most recognised and valued in the mainstream startup world — we have distinguished:

STARTUP	DESCRIPTION
ALVA	delivers advanced energy storage technologies to ensure everyone has constant access to green energy.
BALTIC JUNGLE LAB	this is the start of their journey to develop a system for monitoring microfibre emissions in textile processes, to more effectively manage microplastic pollution.
METERD	effectively addresses building efficiency to reduce carbon footprint and meet EU infrastructure standards.
MYCORENEW	an advanced and scalable proposition — including for cities — for a recycling service using fungi that break down textiles within weeks.
OASIS CITY LAB	uses satellite data to monitor urban threats in the areas of public health, green urban infrastructure management and excessive energy consumption.
PEPTECHLAB	a unique combination of peptides and nanocapsules that makes it possible to eliminate antibiotics and pesticides from the food chain.

WellTech

We do not forget the always much-needed area of **WellTech** — those working for the wellbeing of specific social groups — where we have distinguished:

STARTUP	DESCRIPTION
EDUCAT	thanks to them, studying at the world's best universities is within reach.
ELECHOS	uses adaptive learning so that students can better develop their competencies in mathematics and STEM subjects.
HI BESTIE	creates solutions for the health and comfort of menstruating people — tested, safe and planet-friendly products that truly help.
SURVEILY	raises safety standards in manufacturing plants through the automation of supervision using AI and image analysis.
TOVODA	smart dispensers and IoT modules that not only provide access to clean water but also collect environmentally critical data.

SocialGood

SocialGood is an important area that we previously described as products and services good for the world. This year we have here:

STARTUP	DESCRIPTION
TERRA NOSTRA	a foundation that supports the implementation of regenerative practices in agriculture, caring for the rational use of natural resources.
KOMBINAT KONOPNY	delivers affordable CBD oils and other natural supplements, as well as natural hemp-based materials.
PUBLIC TWIN	helps developers, consultants and local governments engage citizens and stakeholders from the very beginning of projects.
REBENCH	through digital tools, helps organisations extend the lifecycle of furniture, AV/IT equipment and tools at scale.
ME GUSTO	healthy sweets made using unique recipes based on high-quality natural organic ingredients of plant origin.

Tech4Good

The final area we analysed this year is **Tech4Good**, where the following organisations using technology for social good have been distinguished:

STARTUP	DESCRIPTION
BOOMPLASTIC	supports proper plastic management, combining expertise in industrial design, industrial technologies and recycling.
HERMETIA SYSTEMS	builds autonomous bioconversion micro-facilities using black soldier fly larvae to transform organic waste into protein and fertiliser.
LOKALNY SYSTEM OSTRZEGANIA	through a platform for broadcasting emergency communications to residents, eliminates disinformation and reduces service costs.
RAMMED EARTH	an innovative pilot-stage solution enabling the construction of walls and houses from rammed earth, a material with a significantly lower carbon footprint than concrete.
WEARFITS	through virtual fitting rooms, enables customers to better match products, reducing the scale of returns and overproduction.

We congratulate this year's honourees and encourage the use of the full Positive Impact Startup Database — it contains information on over 700 innovative impact-driven entities in the Polish market. All editions of our Ecosystem of Change Reports remain available. Analyses of the best startups can inspire others to follow this path, and for those interested we offer workshop guidance and conversations with inspiring impact founders. All of this can be found on the Startups of Positive Impact portal.

PART I · ARTICLE 1

Resilience, AI and energy: the new logic of positive impact

Przemysław Kulik

Director of the CSR and Sustainable Development Reporting Office / Social Engagement Office, Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego

In the coming years, the significance of positive impact startups will not be determined solely by their 'greenness', social sensitivity or technological appeal. These are important elements, but increasingly insufficient. In a world of overlapping crises — geopolitical, energy, climate, demographic and technological — the more fundamental question becomes critical: does a given solution strengthen the resilience of the state, economy, enterprises and local communities?

Three words therefore seem particularly important today: **resilience**; **technology**, in particular artificial intelligence; and **transformation**, understood above all as energy transformation. These are not three separate trends that can be neatly placed in three chapters of a strategy and then forgotten until the next reporting cycle. They are rather three dimensions of the same change. Resilience without technology often remains an organisational postulate. Technology without resilience can become a costly gadget. Energy transformation without both of these elements risks being ambitious in its declarations but fragile in practice.

Positive impact startups can play a particular role here. Their significance does not lie solely in the innovative products or services they propose. What is more important is that they can operate where traditional institutions, large enterprises and public administration move more slowly: in the area of rapid solution testing, combining data, technology and the practical needs of users, and building new models of cooperation between the public, private and social sectors. In a well-designed ecosystem, a startup is not an ornament at an innovation conference but a tool for solving real systemic problems. That is a subtle difference, yet sometimes — as is well known — the entire history of modernisation fits between a presentation and an implementation.

Resilience as the new logic of positive impact

Resilience today should not be understood solely as an organisation's ability to survive a crisis. In relation to positive impact startups, it means something broader: the ability to

strengthen the systems in which people, companies and institutions operate. **A startup strengthens resilience when it reduces the risk of failure, improves digital security, increases energy efficiency, supports threat anticipation, facilitates resource management or enables faster responses to disruptions.**

In this framing, resilience has an economic, technological, social and infrastructural dimension. It concerns enterprises that must operate despite high energy costs, regulatory pressure and unstable supply chains. It concerns local governments responsible for public services, local infrastructure, education, security and residents' quality of life. It also concerns citizens who increasingly operate in a world of disinformation, cyber threats, information overload and growing social mistrust.

In this sense, positive impact should not be reduced to 'good intentions' or elegantly described ESG goals. Its measure should be the real ability to improve system functioning: greater operational continuity, lower risk, reduced resource consumption, higher security, better access to services, stronger competencies in people and institutions. This shifts the emphasis from narrative to agency. And the latter, as practice shows, is a far scarcer resource in the economy than declarations.

In this framing, ESG ceases to be a collection of reporting categories and becomes a practical system for identifying risks, strengthening adaptive capacity and directing resources where they create the greatest development value. This approach corresponds well with the logic of double materiality: a positive impact startup should be assessed not only through the lens of the impact it declares on its surroundings, but also whether it can respond to material social, environmental, technological and infrastructural risks that shape its business model and value for customers and communities.

For development institutions such as BGK, resilience is a particularly natural category. It is not only about financing selected projects, but more broadly: about co-creating the conditions in which the economy, local governments, enterprises and local communities can better adapt to change. Supporting investment, innovation, energy transformation, digitalisation, local development and the social economy is in practice building the resilience of the country — not in an abstract way, but through concrete instruments, partnerships, competencies and projects.

Technology and AI as the cognitive infrastructure of transformation

The second key word is technology, and artificial intelligence in particular. AI is no longer exclusively the domain of the digital sector. It is becoming a general-purpose technology that influences industry, energy, logistics, healthcare, education, administration, finance and security. For positive impact startups, this means the possibility of scaling social and environmental impact in ways that were significantly more difficult just a few years ago.

AI can support energy demand and supply forecasting, grid management, resource consumption optimisation, predictive infrastructure maintenance, climate risk analysis, anomaly detection, process automation and the personalisation of public and social services. In the energy sector its significance is particular, because the system is becoming increasingly distributed, variable and data-dependent. The more renewable energy sources, storage, prosumers, local generation and flexible demand there are, the greater the need for intelligent management.

In this sense, AI can be treated as the cognitive infrastructure of energy transformation. It does not replace cables, grids, storage or generating capacity, but allows these to be better managed. It enables faster problem identification, more precise forecasting, more efficient resource use and loss reduction. This is especially important in Poland, where energy transformation must simultaneously address the requirements of decarbonisation, security of supply, industrial competitiveness and the social acceptability of costs.

> *In this sense, AI can be treated as the cognitive infrastructure of energy transformation. It does not replace cables, grids, storage or generating capacity, but allows these to be better managed. It enables faster problem identification, more precise forecasting, more efficient resource use and loss reduction.*

At the same time, intellectual honesty must be maintained: AI is not a magic dust that can be sprinkled on any project to make it innovative. The mere presence of an algorithm does not yet create value. Value only arises when technology responds to a real problem, works on good data, is energy-efficient, secure and capable of deployment in a specific organisational environment. Otherwise, we are dealing not with transformation but with technological decoration — impressive, but not very resilient on first contact with reality.

> *The mere presence of an algorithm does not yet create value. Value only arises when technology responds to a real problem, works on good data, is energy-efficient, secure and capable of deployment in a specific organisational environment.*

This is why a mature conversation about AI is needed in the positive impact startup ecosystem. Not only as a growth tool, but also as a tool of responsibility. The key questions should be: what problem does a given solution solve? What improvement does it bring to the user, community or system? Does it reduce costs, risks, emissions or resource consumption? Does it strengthen people's competencies, or merely automate chaos? Can its impact be measured?

Energy transformation as a test of agency

The third pillar is energy transformation. This is one of the most important modernisation processes facing Poland. It is not solely a climate project. It is also an economic, technological, industrial and geostrategic one. Its success will determine the operating costs of enterprises, the country's investment attractiveness, security of energy supply, industrial competitiveness and citizens' quality of life.

For positive impact startups, energy transformation opens a wide field of activity. This is not only about generating energy from renewable sources, but also about energy efficiency, storage, demand management, grid flexibility, digital infrastructure monitoring, building

optimisation, local energy systems, hydrogen technologies, district heating solutions and energy data management.

The most interesting startups will probably operate precisely at the intersection of energy, data and resilience. They will not merely be 'green' in image. They will help reduce energy costs, decrease the risk of failures, increase the predictability of production and consumption, improve infrastructure efficiency and accelerate the deployment of low-emission solutions. Their value will be measured not only by the number of slides about impact, but by the number of MWh saved, emissions avoided, downtime reduced, assets optimised and deployments concluded with a real contract.

> *Their value will be measured not only by the number of slides about impact, but by the number of MWh saved, emissions avoided, downtime reduced, assets optimised and deployments concluded with a real contract.*

This is also important from a social perspective. Energy transformation cannot be a process conducted solely in the language of regulation, large investments and macroeconomic models. It must be understandable, acceptable and useful for people, companies and local governments. Startups can play the role of translators and practitioners of change here: delivering tools that demonstrate benefits, simplify decisions, lower barriers to entry and allow the great transformation to be translated into concrete actions in a company, municipality, school, housing cooperative or local community.

The most valuable solutions will be those that not only sound good in the language of innovation, but respond to the material needs of the economy and society: energy, water, security, competencies, health, local resilience and access to services.

From capital to competencies: conditions for ecosystem development

In the future it will be worth combining several functions that rarely appear together: animating partnerships, education, strengthening competencies, supporting public policies, responsible financing and social engagement. In the context of positive impact startups, this means the need to build an ecosystem in which innovations are connected with real social, environmental and infrastructural needs — not merely presented as promising technological solutions.

Firstly, conditions are needed for moving from idea to implementation. For startups and scaleups operating in the areas of resilience, AI and energy transformation, this means not only access to financing, but also the ability to test solutions with partners, access data, understand real user needs and measure effects.

Secondly, help is needed to connect innovation with real demand. One barrier to startup development is not a lack of ideas, but a lack of the first demanding client. Particularly in infrastructural areas — energy, district heating, public services, buildings, transport, water management, cybersecurity — startups need access to data, partners and test environments. The Positive Impact Startups programme could therefore develop not only as a ranking or map of interesting entities, but as a pathway: from identifying challenges, through scouting solutions, to pilots and deployment financing.

Thirdly, it is worth bringing to the ecosystem a perspective of responsible impact measurement. This is particularly important because 'impact' can be a concept capacious to the limits of semantic endurance. To avoid dilution, it is worth building a common set of metrics: number of startups in the pipeline, number of pilots, percentage of pilots concluded with a contract, private capital mobilised through public support, MWh of

energy saved, emissions avoided, downtime reduced, operational continuity improved, number of end users, data quality, digital security level, energy efficiency of AI solutions.

Fourthly, the social dimension of innovation must be strengthened. This is particularly important because resilience is not solely an infrastructural category. It begins with competencies, trust, cooperation and people's ability to act under conditions of uncertainty. In this context, innovative social engagement — encompassing education, volunteering, activities for digitalisation, cybersecurity, biodiversity, local communities and the social economy — can be treated as a natural complement to development instruments. Financial capital launches projects, but social capital determines whether change will be accepted, understood and consolidated.

> *Financial capital launches projects, but social capital determines whether change will be accepted, understood and consolidated.*

Innovative social engagement as a development advantage

In discussions about startups, technologies and financing, the social element is easily overlooked. Yet it is precisely this that often determines the success of transformation. New solutions do not operate in a vacuum. They are deployed in specific organisations, local communities, schools, offices, companies, cooperatives, hospitals and municipal enterprises. If people do not understand the purpose of change, lack competencies, do not trust institutions or see no benefit, even the best technology remains a solution in search of a problem.

This is why BGK's social engagement functions not as an activity alongside the main development mission, but as its integral component. Educational programmes, activities strengthening digital competencies, employee volunteering, environmental initiatives and support for local communities build the soft infrastructure of resilience. It is this that ensures transformation is not merely a technical process but a social mechanism of adaptation.

In practice, this means that social engagement can play the role of a laboratory of real needs: it allows for better understanding of the competency, social and organisational barriers that determine the success of innovation. Positive impact startups develop not only thanks to technology and capital, but also thanks to the ability to accurately identify a problem, build trust and adapt a solution to users. In this sense, social, educational and environmental activities can strengthen not only an institution's image, but also the quality of the entire innovation ecosystem.

Innovative social engagement can become a bridge between the worlds of technology, financing and real needs. BGK can in this way support the positive impact ecosystem not only through development instruments, but also through access to knowledge, partnerships, communities, competencies and social challenges. This is particularly important for solutions relating to education, digital security, resource saving, combating exclusion, local resilience and public services.

The further developing Positive Impact Startups ecosystem should therefore combine three levels: capital, technology and the social meaning of deployment. Capital without technology is insufficient. Technology without trust and competencies will not work. Social engagement without tools and financing, meanwhile, remains a noble intention. Only the combination of these three elements creates a real capacity for change.

From report to impact pipeline

The most important challenge for future editions of the Positive Impact Startups report is the transition from describing the ecosystem to actively shaping it. The report itself has great cognitive and reputational value: it highlights the most interesting entities, structures debate, creates a language of positive impact and strengthens the visibility of innovators. The next step, however, should be an implementation pathway.

This can be built around a 'research–pilot–scale' model. Kozminski University could play the role of knowledge curator, scouting, selection and impact potential evaluation. Partners could bring implementation, competency, financial, social and organisational perspectives. Startups would deliver solutions. Local governments, enterprises, public institutions and infrastructure operators would bring real problems to solve and test environments.

In practice, this could mean an annual thematic pathway: 'Resilience–AI–Energy'. Within this framework, the most important challenges would be identified, a dozen or so startups with the greatest implementation potential selected, several pilots launched with public or private partners, and effects monitored over time. Results could be presented in the report not only as success and failure stories, but as data: what was deployed, where, with what effect, at what cost and with what scaling potential, as well as what failed, why and what conclusions can be drawn.

Such a model would help avoid the typical weakness of innovation ecosystems: an excess of events and a shortage of deployments. Poland does not need another elegant conversation about innovation after which everyone agrees that 'cooperation is needed'. It needs mechanisms in which good solutions reach the places where they are genuinely needed more quickly. Positive impact startups can be such a mechanism, but only when connected with demand, competencies, partnerships, responsible financing and outcome measures.

> *Poland does not need another elegant conversation about innovation after which everyone agrees that 'cooperation is needed'. It needs mechanisms in which good solutions reach the places where they are genuinely needed more quickly.*

CONCLUSIONS

Positive impact startups today stand before the opportunity to move beyond the traditional narrative of responsible business. Their future will depend on the ability to solve problems of systemic significance: economic resilience, energy security, resource efficiency, digitalisation, social competencies and the quality of public services.

Three words — resilience, AI and energy transformation — describe well the direction of this change. Resilience indicates the goal: systems that work despite pressure. AI provides the tools: data, prediction, optimisation and automation. Energy transformation marks one of the most important fields of practical application of these solutions. Together they create a space in which positive impact ceases to be a declaration and becomes a measurable capacity for modernisation.

> *Together they create a space in which positive impact ceases to be a declaration and becomes a measurable capacity for modernisation.*

For BGK, partnership in the Positive Impact Startups report is something more than presence alongside an important academic initiative. It is an opportunity to demonstrate the role of a development bank as an institution that combines knowledge, partnerships, technology, responsible financing and social engagement. Precisely this combination will in the coming years determine whether innovations remain a promise or become a real tool for building a resilient, competitive and modern economy.

> *The most practical direction is therefore clear: develop an ecosystem that not only describes positive impact startups, but helps them travel the path from idea to pilot, from pilot to deployment, from deployment to scaling, and from scaling to measurable impact. Only then does positive impact cease to be a beautiful label and become something far more valuable: agency.*

PART I · ARTICLE 2

Towards a Regenerative Future. Impact Startups as Catalysts of Sustainable Transformation

Dr Agnieszka Młodzińska-Granek, Dr Magdalena Kubów, Dr Justyna Berniak-Woźny

Researchers specialising in impact innovation, sustainable management and regenerative business models — SWPS University

Sustainable development is not enough — we need the next, more ambitious step in thinking about the future. Science must serve society, so it is time to abandon the language of pure theory in favour of a kind of performative manifesto. We can achieve this only by asking the right questions. For decades, sustainable development has been the horizon of environmental and social ambition. Today we see with increasing clarity that this horizon is too close. It is no longer enough to limit damage — we must actively design systems that co-evolve with the life of the planet. This is the very essence of regenerative thinking. And it is precisely impact startups that are becoming its most courageous catalysts.

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The paradigm of regenerativity. Or rather — the regeneration of the paradigm?

It seems that the conceptual loop sketched in this way points us to a roadmap for action. First — it is not about radical, breakthrough theories, but about grounding ourselves in the conceptual framework of regenerativity. This means replacing the old, exhausted **make-buy-discard** model and updating the insufficient — in our view — sustainable model, which limits itself to *doing less harm*.

> *Sustainable development asks: how to do less harm? In regenerative thinking, we ask: how do we actively restore the health and balance of the systems in which we live?*

All of this adds up to the need to regenerate the very way we think about business. The regeneration of the paradigm means returning to the roots — to the aspiration that business should serve the care of our common good, with respect and concern for the most precious asset: our shared planet. It is an aspiration toward a state in which **to enterprise** (which, after all, means taking matters into one's own hands and acting) would mean taking up the repair of the world we designed together.

The problem is that business cannot become regenerative by using old (and, in our view, worn-out) patterns of thinking. It is therefore worth first regenerating our paradigm, so that we can dream together of implementing a new approach and translate it into business models. This means moving from **treating the symptoms of the system** to healing the very way in which we design that system.

A regenerative future grounded in the wisdom of nature

We are not starting from scratch. When we think about building the future, we often begin with a vision, a model, a strategy tailored to current needs. Yet it is worth returning to fundamental questions. Bill Reed, one of the most important thinkers in the field of regenerative design, reminds us that we live in a world full of systems that have, over millions of years, perfected their mechanisms of adaptation, cooperation and regeneration. These are natural ecosystems. We are not starting from scratch. We are starting from a rich heritage.

Ecosystems — both natural and social — possess built-in mechanisms of resilience and self-renewal. Soil regenerates after fire, communities rebuild bonds after crises, rivers, if given space, return to balance. The question Reed places before us is not: "how do we build something new?" but: "how do we engage with the processes that already work and strengthen their potential?"

> *Regenerative development encourages us to design human systems that co-evolve with ecological systems, generating mutual benefits and increasing the expression of life and resilience. — Bill Reed*

It is worth noting that the same logic may apply to the design of institutions (universities, public organisations and companies) that treat themselves as learning systems. It is possible that it is precisely here, in universities — living ecosystems of collaboration grounded in knowledge exchange — that we will naturally approach the regenerative model. From a humanistic and social university perspective, it is most clearly visible that everything around us remains in relationship and is interdependent. The creation of a kind of manifesto on the regenerative approach in impact innovation is our university response to the challenges of the contemporary world described here — a world in which innovations can and should be an expression of care for the common good, and a manifestation of respect for the interdependence and mutual connections between humans and nature.

Everything begins with an idea. Let us not fear changes in thinking

The paradox of the current management model lies in the fact that pressure for quarterly results and the simultaneous appeal for thinking on a generational scale coexist in the same strategy. They seem impossible to reconcile. And yet it is precisely in this tension that one of the key resources of transformation is hidden.

Thinking "here and now" is mindfulness of context — of what is happening in the community, in the ecosystem, in relationships. It is operational sensitivity, without which no startup will survive its first months. Short-term thinking therefore plays its important role: it mobilises resources and sets priorities. The problem is not its existence, but its dominance over long-term perspective.

The regenerative approach to innovation proposes a **duality of thinking**: act here and now with full mindfulness, while simultaneously asking oneself what trace this decision will leave in a decade. The point is not to paralyse action with overly prolonged reflection on a distant future, but to harness short-term energy in service of long-term vision. In this frame, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework tool requires us to connect current activity with systemic change.

The word "innovation" has become an expansive container concept into which we pile all new solutions: a new functionality in an application, a new product variant, a change in user interface. These are, however, still incremental innovations — refining existing solutions without questioning the foundations of current action. Breakthrough innovation — in the understanding of Clayton Christensen, and in the spirit of Reed — is a change that redefines the question. Not "how to do this better?", but "should we even be doing it this way?"

Sustainable development focuses on minimising harm and using resources more efficiently. This is important and necessary, but insufficient when we face the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity and social crises that require not the maintenance of the status quo, but active restoration. Papanek, a pioneer of ethical design, notes that this is a dead end. Ezio Manzini, theorist of design for social innovation, shifts the weight of discussion from

indicators to the social fabric and our daily practices. Manzini argues that **the ecological crisis is the direct consequence of a crisis of interpersonal bonds**. Sustainability will therefore not happen without the regeneration of relationships.

We seek answers. We only forgot the question

> *Impact startups change our imagination. They show that a different way of doing business is possible, that profit and purpose need not be in conflict; innovation can serve renewal, not just growth.*

Impact startups will not replace public policies, but they can accelerate changes that, without them, would take decades. The mechanism is multidimensional. First, impact startups **demonstrate feasibility**. Proof of concept has enormous agency in the innovation ecosystem. Second, impact startups **create new knowledge**. They operate like distributed laboratories, testing solutions in real conditions, often in unexpected contexts. The knowledge they generate feeds public policy, ESG strategies and academic understanding of transformation. Third, and this is the hardest to measure but perhaps the most important, impact startups **change our imagination**. They show that a different way of doing business is possible, that profit and purpose need not be in conflict; innovation can serve renewal, not just growth.

The proposed regenerative approach is not a utopia. It is an invitation to ask harder questions. Impact startups that accept this invitation cease to be merely problem-solving firms. They become participants in a process in which, as humans, we learn to collaborate with the planet rather than against it. Social problems do not occur in a vacuum — they are entangled and enmeshed in a web of dependencies. Without systemic thinking, startups create linear solutions that, by treating one symptom, produce side effects elsewhere. This is the foundation of systemic thinking.

Moreover, Otl Aicher warned a decade ago that "the understanding of cause and effect, of design and its result, is disappearing from our world. All reasons and goals, all dependencies and relationships, are evaporating." The path to a regenerative future therefore does not begin with new technology, nor with the next funding round. It begins with systemic thinking and asking the right questions. Does what I am building restore or degrade? Does it strengthen healthy relationships, or merely efficiently manage their dysfunction? In exploring, am I over-exploiting? Am I designing for the ecosystem, or against it?

Regenerativity, rooted in Papanek's social responsibility and Manzini's social sensitivity, is in the broader sense a shift from the question "How do we survive?" to the question "How do we enable the biosphere and human communities to flourish anew through the innovative solutions of impact startups?" The question of flourishing simultaneously refers to the well-established concept from positive psychology of care for a state of optimal wellbeing that goes beyond the traditional understanding of happiness (Seligman). In the regenerative paradigm, we therefore clearly emphasise that there is no human wellbeing without the wellbeing of the planet we inhabit. Our mental, physical and social health is inextricably linked to the environment in which we live.

These are questions we ask too rarely today in the context of sustainable development.

The common good is created together

> *Having the intuition that the common good is created together, the ecosystemic perspective may serve for all of us as an invitation to shared reflection and to joint action in favour of a world worth building.*

Transformation means co-creation. Regenerative innovation is not an isolated, one-off action, an intervention. It is the effect of communal action, based on the aspiration to include and integrate different perspectives and to draw on the potential of diversity as a resource and a kind of raw material. The binding element here is mutual social trust. It is therefore about co-creating a movement in which change is treated as a continuous process of learning. The regenerative approach is thus an open space for the exchange of knowledge and experience. It is a current in the light of which we seek tools that open doors to conscious, sustainable, fully participatory and universal design of solutions.

Where will this lead us? We do not yet know, but having the intuition that the common good is created together, this ecosystemic perspective may serve for all of us as an invitation to shared reflection.

PART I · ARTICLE 3

The Niche Strategy — When Less Means More

Joanna M. Fogler

Chief Innovation Strategist, MOST Foundation

In today's world, where the market is saturated with offers and competition is constantly growing, more and more companies entering the market are discovering that a smaller — or more precisely defined — audience segment at the outset does not at all mean fewer opportunities. On the contrary, a niche strategy can become the key to competitive advantage and success. Why is it worth considering?

Let us imagine two roads. One — a wide, noisy motorway, along which everyone rushes without a moment's thought. And another — narrower, quiet, with scenic views, offering more freedom and control over the journey. Both lead to the destination, but the experience is entirely different. The market works in a similar way. Most companies race in the mass space, while others choose a niche — a narrower, less-travelled path that provides more room for growth, building loyalty and establishing an advantage before entering larger markets.

Benefits

A niche strategy means developing within a well-defined segment. Such development delivers several concrete advantages:

Control and focus of activities: in a niche we concentrate on one strictly defined segment expecting a specific solution — that is, we build one version of a product rather than several or more versions simultaneously, each responding to the different expectations of different market segments.

Unique value proposition: we develop the product precisely to the needs of the chosen group and together with the chosen group of customers, which allows us to create solutions that are more socially useful and better matched to the real problems of users — and builds a competitive advantage that is difficult to copy.

Testing and refinement: a small market is the ideal environment for customer testing and the gradual creation of a final product that satisfies the recipient.

Trust and conversion: in a niche it is easier to stand out as an expert, win recommendations and convert customers, rather than competing aggressively in the mass market.

Moderate risk: development in a niche does not require enormous resources from the outset. We grow step by step, building a solid foundation for future expansion. This approach favours more responsible and sustainable company development, because growth is based on real customer needs, gradual increases and the conscious use of resources, which are always limited at the start.

Rather than competing in the so-called "red ocean" full of mature players offering standard, easily substitutable products, we focus on personalisation and innovation in the so-called "blue ocean", where competition is minimal. It is precisely here that a competitive advantage is built that is difficult to copy, because the company responds to the specific needs of a chosen group of recipients and builds a leadership position in its segment.

> *Dominating a niche allows you to enter a growth trajectory resembling a hockey-stick chart: first stable position-building, then acceleration. The niche is the best springboard for scaling.*

Dominating a niche allows you to enter a growth trajectory resembling a *hockey stick* chart: first stable position-building, then acceleration. The niche is the best springboard for scaling. It is in the niche that we build not only the final product, but also the credibility and trust that will be needed to convince the pragmatic and conservative customers of the mass market.

They started in a niche

Examples of companies that started from a niche include Facebook, Airbnb and Apple. Each of them began with precisely defined segments: Facebook — Harvard students; Airbnb — conference attendees in San Francisco; Apple — graphic designers and creative departments in large corporations. Only after dominating these narrow markets did these companies easily expand their activities to broader groups of recipients.

In Poland, a similar path was followed by, among others, CD Projekt RED, Dr Irena Eris and WegeSiostry (a company recognised on the List of Startups of Positive Impact in 2019). WegeSiostry initially operated in the niche market of healthy food, offering innovative cheeses based on cashew nuts. The company's products were available mainly at eco markets, in organic shops and at local points of sale. Over time, thanks to consistent development and the gradual conquest of new segments, WegeSiostry began to reach a wider market. Today their products are available in large retail chains such as Carrefour and Auchan. This is an excellent example of how success in a niche can lead to capturing the mass market, even if the product remains niche.

Many entrepreneurs aim to capture large markets from the start, because small, niche ones seem unattractive and unambitious. But in the mass market it is easy to get lost and very difficult to stand out. Moreover, success does not depend on the size of the market, but on the intensity of the problem we are solving. It is precisely in a niche that these key needs are easier to identify. In the mass market, needs are general and the product must be standard, while a niche allows full personalisation and the creation of a unique offer.

Niche vs. mass market

COMPARISON OF NICHE STRATEGY AND MASS-MARKET STRATEGY

ASPECT	NICHE STRATEGY	MASS-MARKET STRATEGY
SCALE OF OPERATIONS	Small scale — easier testing and product refinement	Large scale — high entry costs
COMPETITION	Minimal competition, easier to stand out as an expert	Intense competition and a fight for customers, difficult to stand out
RESOURCES	Moderate resources to start and grow step by step	Significant resources required from the very beginning
CUSTOMER TRUST	Credibility, trust and customer loyalty built through close relationships, lasting	Building trust and loyalty is more difficult, requires a strong brand
GROWTH RATE	Stable growth with the possibility of step-change acceleration	Rapid growth of only a few players. Growth is risky and costly
CONVERSION	Higher conversion in the narrow segment thanks to direct, engaging relationships	Lower conversion, as the offer is less tailored to the specific needs of different customer groups

It is worth viewing the niche strategy as a starting point for further growth. As Geoffrey Moore, author of the theory “Crossing the Chasm”, says: “If you are a small fish, look for a small pond in which all the fish are of a similar size and know each other”. You will not need marketing. Your first recipients, delighted with your solution, will become your sales representatives — they will themselves boast that they use your solution, encouraging others to purchase it.

> *Going through the niche is therefore a process that opens the path to subsequent segments and allows for later entry into the mass market, but with greater certainty of success. In this way, less (in the form of a small market) means more: greater effectiveness, better alignment with recipient needs and a more conscious long-term development of the company.*

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PART I · ARTICLE 4

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway — But Not Alone. On the Power of Collective Action in Projects for a Higher Purpose

Dr Patrycja Radek

Manager of the Startup Booster for Social Impact accelerator programme at SWPS University, innovation broker, expert in innovation strategy development and innovative leadership.

Forecasts leave no room for illusions. According to the Global Risk Report 2026, permanent uncertainty has become the leitmotif of the contemporary geopolitical and economic landscape. The year 2026 has sealed the arrival of an era of ruthless competition and the collapse of existing mechanisms of international cooperation. The stability we had grown accustomed to is giving way to confrontation, the most dangerous consequence of which is a drastic fall in the value of the most important currency of the modern world — trust.

This is a real threat. Trust and the willingness to collaborate form the foundation for solving the most pressing problems of our time: from disinformation and cyber threats, through poverty, to climate justice and armed conflicts. No single organisation can solve so-called *wicked problems* alone. We need deep, transdisciplinary collaboration linking NGOs, business, science, change leaders, investment funds and the public sector. The key to this change is a radical redefinition of the role of science and business.

A new paradigm: The University as ecosystem orchestrator

In classical models of technology transfer, universities were perceived primarily through the lens of teaching and research. Today, that is no longer enough. True strength lies in the so-called **third mission** — the social and economic impact of the university.

The university of the future becomes a catalyst for systemic change through **ecosystem orchestration**. This is the strategic coordination and connection of dispersed resources, competencies and stakeholders in order to generate synergistic value that exceeds the capabilities of individual entities.

In this innovation relay race, the university acts as a **trust mediator** and neutral ground. For investors, the presence of a university is a guarantee of scientific and ethical integrity; for innovators — a safe environment (*holding environment*) facilitating business transformation. The essence of this process is knowledge valorisation — the transformation of research outcomes into measurable value for society and the economy.

Collective genius and higher-order leadership

Wicked problems are characterised by non-linearity and a high degree of interdependence. Traditional, isolated interventions must give way to **collective social innovation**, as strongly emphasised in reports by the Schwab Foundation and the World Economic Forum.

> *Effective solutions are born at the intersection of sectors, yet such a diverse group generates conflicts arising from conflicting goals and differing organisational cultures. To succeed, we need higher-order leadership. Ken Blanchard defines it as acting for the benefit of others, requiring high social awareness and service to the greater good.*

Solving complex challenges requires unleashing **"collective genius"** (*collective genius*). According to the concept of Linda Hill of Harvard, its key element is **creative abrasion**. Creative abrasion occurs where ideas are generated in the course of open debate. Controlled conflict, disagreement and tension become catalysts for innovation, provided the community adopts a growth mindset and possesses strong social capital of trust.

Feel the fear and do it anyway — the "coalition of the willing"

The absence of clear agreement on methods cannot paralyse leaders. Inaction carries far greater risk for the planet than making an attempt under conditions of uncertainty. As M. G. Bublitz and L. A. Peracchio indicate, the key to systemic change is building a **"coalition of the willing"**.

> *We do not need to convince everyone at once. A small, diverse group of influential stakeholders who begin to achieve their first successes is enough. They are the ones who build authentic human bonds that allow the shift from polarisation to trust.*

We need leaders who know how to connect, who manage the team's energy through empathy and give group processes time to mature before they begin diligently holding people accountable for results in spreadsheets.

Startup Booster for Social Impact: The model in action

In the **Startup Booster for Social Impact** accelerator programme (funded by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development — PARP — within the framework of FENG 2021–2027), we translate these theories into the practice of marketing and business through three support pathways:

ACCELERATION PATHWAYS — STARTUP BOOSTER FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

ACCELERATION PATHWAY	MAIN GOAL AND AREA OF FOCUS
INDUSTRY PATH	Aligning innovation with the specific, real needs of major market partners.
VC PATH	Preparing startups to raise impact capital from professional funds.
SECTOR AGNOSTIC PATH	Optimising business models for diverse social and environmental innovations.

The process is supported by over 40 external experts. Thanks to this transdisciplinarity, projects undergo an evolution from sustainable development (minimising harm) to **regenerative development** (restoring resources). Startups demonstrate to the market that integrating ESG criteria with profitability is possible and worthwhile, thereby inspiring slow-moving corporations.

Our Lessons Learned — insights for the ecosystem

The university as a neutral core: It acts as a trusted connector between science, VC funds and business, guaranteeing impartiality.

Coopetition has power: Combining collaboration and healthy competition accelerates the growth of impact, though it requires organisational maturity.

Surgical support: Instead of mass templates — precisely personalised tools for each team.

Flat structure and Team Spirit: Authentic sharing of leadership builds a unique atmosphere and a strong sense of agency.

Getting outside the bubble: Active listening and seeking common ground with groups that have different motivations.

Strategic approach: Treating acceleration as part of a larger puzzle (research, education, pre-acceleration, internationalisation).

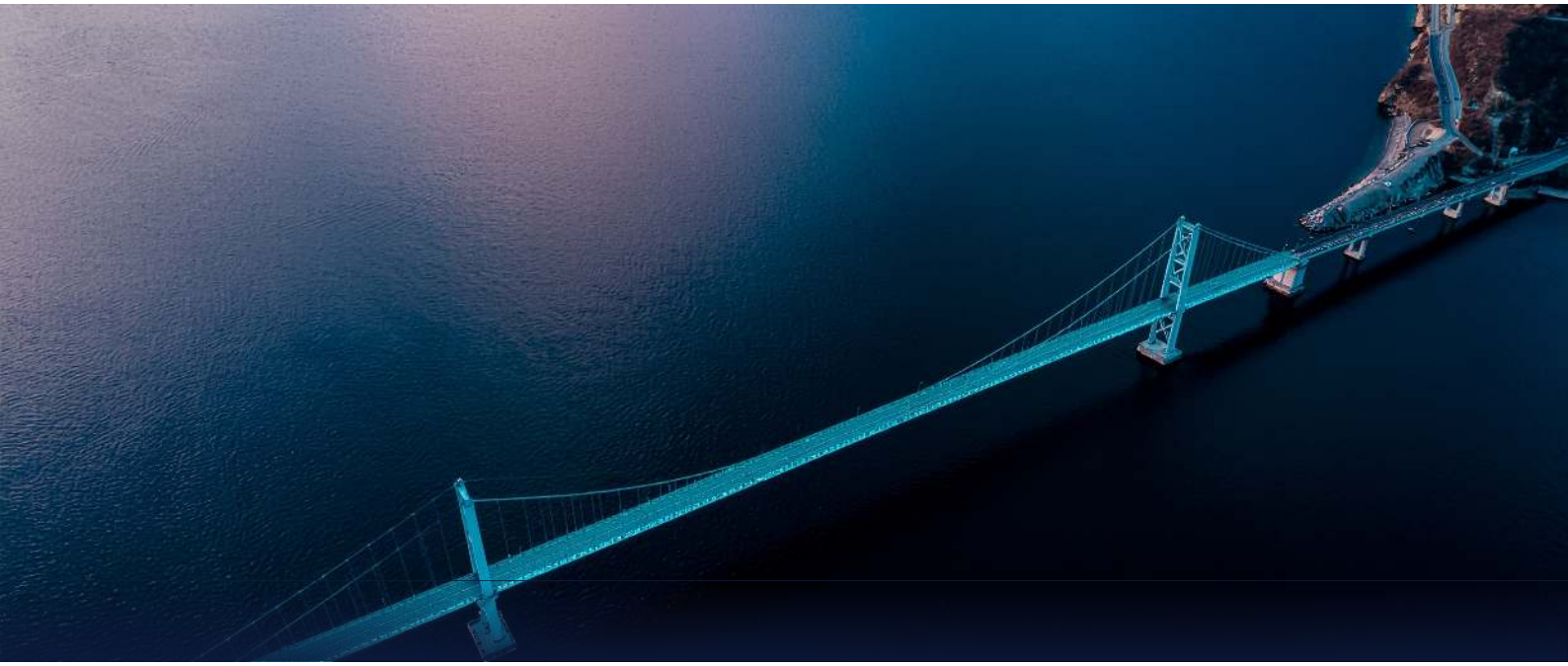
The Impact Triad: Success requires the simultaneous presence of: a breakthrough solution, advanced technology and a stable business model.

Evidence-based approach: Rigorous scientific research and precise impact measurement as the foundation for decision-making.

A new horizon: Regenerative entrepreneurship

Our future depends on the courage to enter the field of **regenerative entrepreneurship**. The leaders of tomorrow cannot merely strive for climate or social “neutrality”. They must actively repair, renew and regenerate what has been destroyed.

Scaling such innovations also requires a revolution in financing — a shift away from short-term, siloed grants towards **trust-based funding**. Measuring impact must encompass not only simple quantitative indicators, but above all the growth of relational resilience across the entire ecosystem. We are in this together. The future of innovation is collective — let us build coalitions of the willing and act together for the greater good.



PART I · ARTICLE 5

Resilience: Your Superpower in Changing the World

Ada Stępień

Founder of Slappa

Building an impact startup is one of the most rewarding adventures you can embark on. You have a rare privilege. Your daily work genuinely improves reality. However, for this mission to last years rather than months, you need a foundation stronger than technology or capital. That foundation is your resilience — your inner capacity for regeneration and adaptation.

> *In 2026 we already know that taking care of your own energy is not selfishness — it is a responsible business model. As a founder, you are the heart and brain of your project. When you are in good shape, your company is flexible, creative and ready for challenges.*

How to build stability with a smile?

Psychological resilience does not mean the ability to grit your teeth; it is, rather, the art of managing yourself wisely. How to do this in practice? For everyone it may mean something different, but it might look something like this:

Life beyond impact. Your identity is richer than just the role of founder. Time spent with loved ones, a passion or sport are your recharge points. They allow you to gain perspective and step back from the whiteboard, so that the Monday morning problems in the office become simply interesting challenges to solve.

Manage your energy, not just your time. The calendar can be relentless, but you decide when you need a break. A short walk in the middle of the day often brings better solutions

than a third hour of analysing reports in a state of exhaustion. Listen to your body — it knows best when it needs rest.

Build an ecosystem, not walls. Loneliness can be the price of being a leader, but it doesn't have to be. Surround yourself with people who understand your path. A support group or a mentor is not only help in business — it is above all the feeling that on this beautiful journey you are not alone.

Authenticity is your superpower!

In communication we often feel pressure to be perfect. Yet the greatest strength lies in honesty. Talking about challenges and what you are learning builds an extraordinary bond with your team and investors. People don't want to work with robots — they want to support passionate people who are human and authentic.

When you celebrate small steps and take joy in minor successes, you build a culture of gratitude and understanding. That is the best fuel for a startup, because it makes the work of improving the world a source of joy rather than a burden.

Be a good boss to yourself

Your project has a chance to become the lasting change the world needs. For that to happen, you need to be your own best boss — understanding, caring about rest and investing in your own development.

> *Saving the world is a marathon full of beautiful views, so pace yourself to enjoy every kilometre of the route. Your joy and peace of mind are the best guarantee of your startup's success. Let's go — with a clear head and a heart full of energy.*

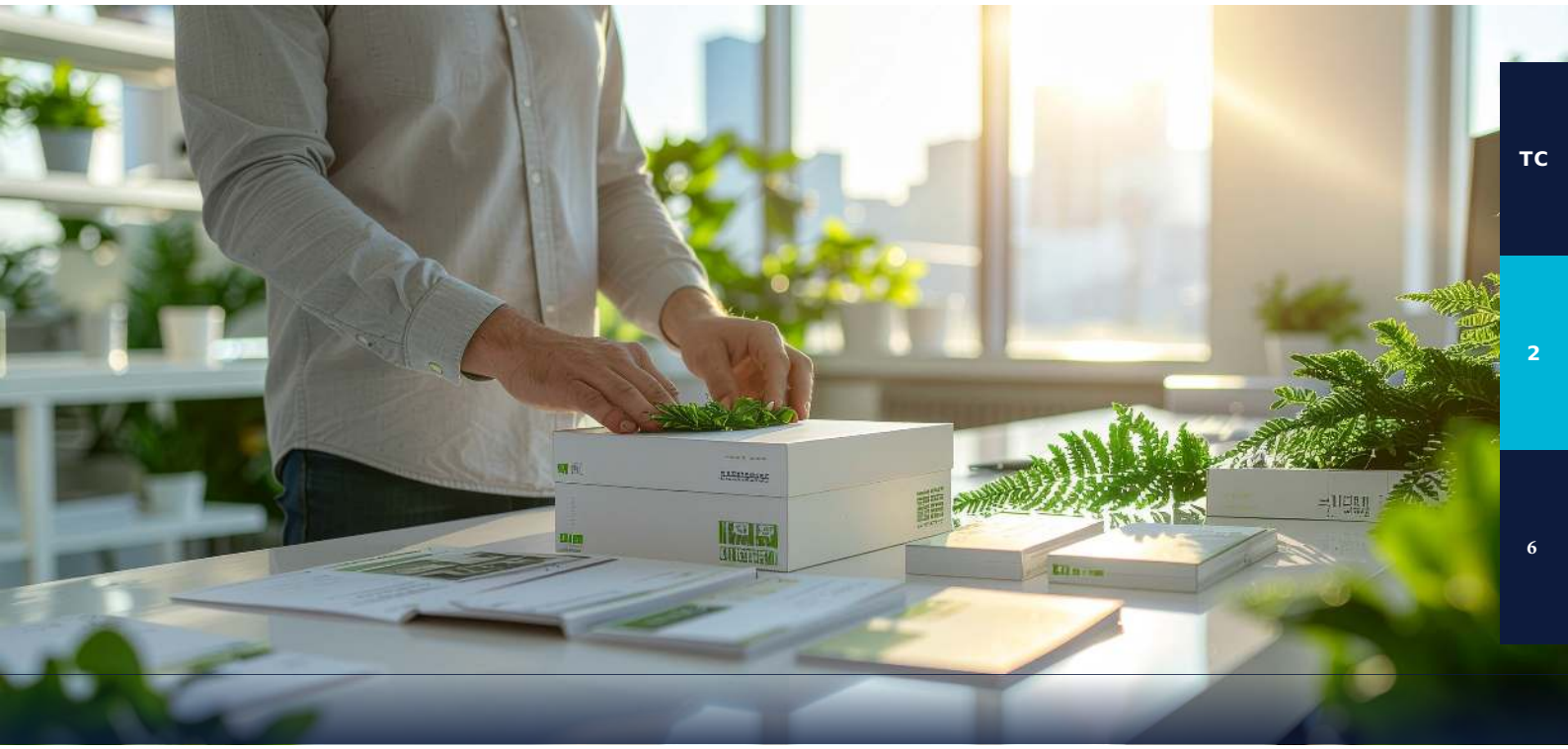
PART II · ARTICLE 6

New Anti-Greenwashing Regulations: What Do They Mean for Impact Startups?

Berenika Pel

ESG and Sustainability Expert, DANONE Group.

In recent years, impact startups have built their market position largely on their ability to communicate environmental and social value. The impact narrative — often grounded in aspirational goals, the language of change and a vision of a better world — was not only a marketing tool, but also a key instrument for building trust and attracting customers, investors and business partners.



Today this model is undergoing a fundamental transformation. With the entry into force of new EU regulations — namely the *Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition* Directive (ECGT, also known as "EmpCo") and its national implementations, such as the draft transposition act (UC111) in Poland, being prepared by the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) — from 27 September 2026 ESG communication becomes a formally regulated area. This means a transition from a relatively unrestricted marketing narrative to a system in which every claim relating to environmental impact is subject to verification and may be the subject of legal liability.

EXAMPLES OF CLAIMS THAT MAY BE CALLED INTO QUESTION

CATEGORY OF CLAIM	EXAMPLES OF CLAIMS
VAGUE CLAIMS	eco, green, sustainable, environmentally friendly, climate-friendly, nature- friendly
PSEUDO-SPECIFIC BUT OVERLY BROAD STATEMENTS	“biodegradable”, “natural”, “low-impact”, “environmentally conscious”
CLIMATE CLAIMS BASED ON OFFSETTING RATHER THAN EMISSION REDUCTION	“climate neutral”, “net zero product”, “carbon neutral”, “zero carbon footprint”
CLAIMS ABOUT THE ENTIRE PRODUCT BASED ON A SINGLE ASPECT	“sustainable product” — because the packaging is recyclable (care must also be taken here — will the packaging actually be recycled in the local context?)
FORWARD-LOOKING CLAIMS WITHOUT AN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN	“100% sustainable by 2030”, “we will achieve net zero emissions by 2040”
SELF-CREATED LABELS WITHOUT EXTERNAL VERIFICATION	Green badges, certification symbols, if not awarded by public bodies or verified by a third party

The new regulations set a clear direction — environmental claims must be specific, data-based and demonstrable. In practice, this means the end of the era of general declarations and the beginning of the age of evidence-based impact management. Importantly, the legislator has not provided for a transitional period, so communication must comply with the law from the date of the act’s entry into force.

An impact startup under the new regulatory regime

The ECGT Directive was designed as a response to the growing scale of greenwashing and the low credibility of environmental communication in the market. This regulation changes the existing logic of marketing communication, introducing a real burden of proof on the part of the company. It is no longer sufficient to declare pro-environmental actions — they must be documented and it must be demonstrated that the communication is precise and does not mislead the recipient.

Particularly significant is the broad definition of “environmental claim” — it covers not only classic advertising messages, but also product names, graphic elements, symbols and packaging colouring, if such can suggest a positive impact on the environment. This radically expands the scope of accountability and means that almost every element of a brand’s communication can be deemed an environmental claim requiring substantiation.

For startups, this means a shift in emphasis from creativity and storytelling towards credibility and the ability to prove the message. As a result, ESG communication ceases to be merely a marketing tool and becomes an element of compliance, similar to areas such as product safety or data protection.

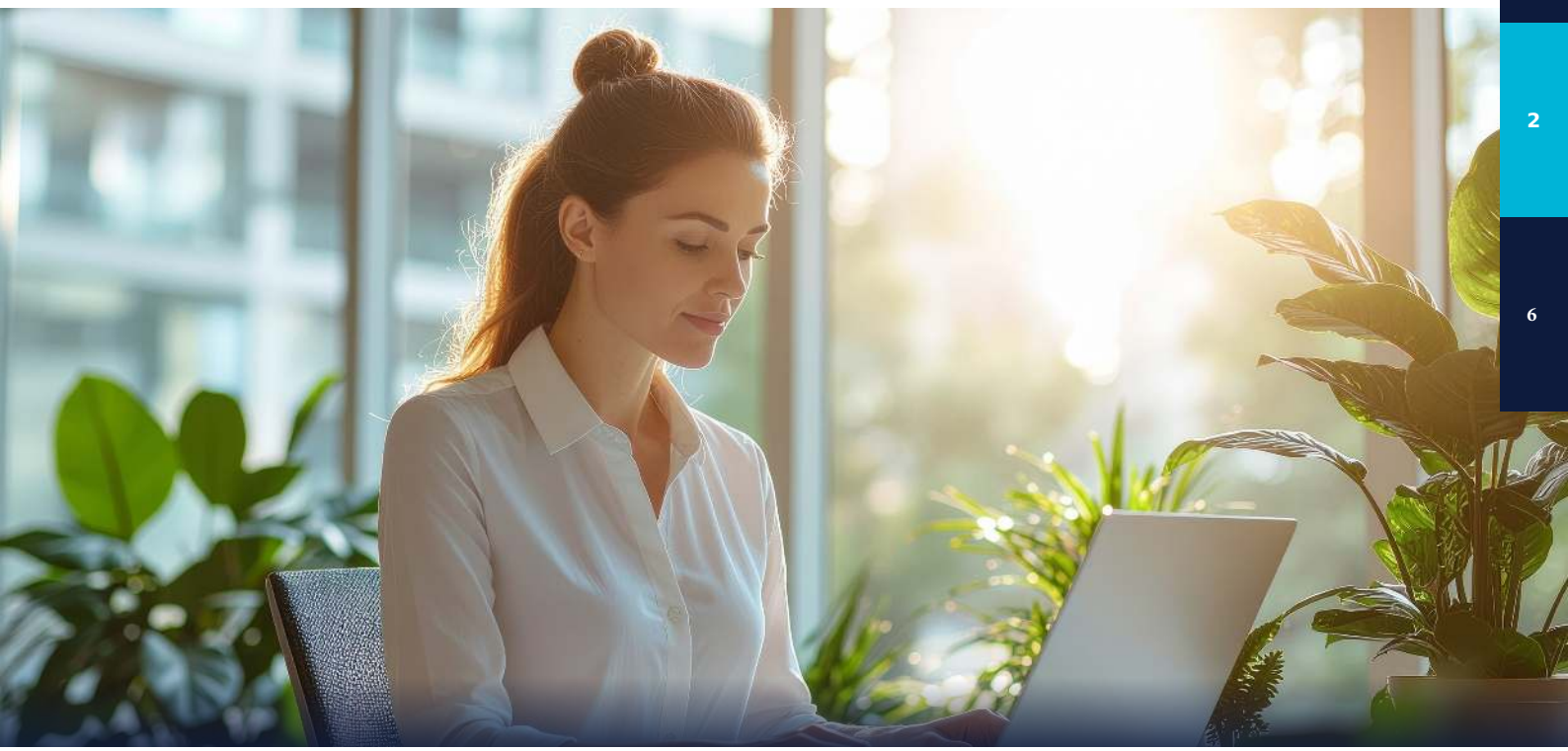
The “Proof Gap” — the greatest challenge for startups

In the new regulatory reality, a gap characteristic of young companies becomes particularly visible — the so-called “proof gap”. Startups often genuinely create solutions with a positive environmental impact, yet their ability to document this impact is limited. This stems from the absence of developed measurement systems, limited resources and the need to operate under conditions of significant uncertainty and rapid growth.

This creates a tension between actual action and its formal confirmation. A startup may have a product that is genuinely more sustainable than market alternatives, yet if it cannot prove this in a manner consistent with the legislator’s requirements, its communication becomes risky. This fundamentally changes the dynamics of competition.

> *“Positive impact ceases to be a sufficient competitive advantage if it is not measured and documented. The competitive edge is no longer built only by those who act better, but above all by those who can prove it.*

The role of environmental labels: standards and limitations of certification



In response to growing regulatory requirements, the importance of standards and certifications is naturally increasing — these are also the subject of the anti-greenwashing directive. Such systems introduce an organised approach to impact management, enable its measurement and strengthen the credibility of organisations in the eyes of business partners; however, in their new form they will also require external confirmation by an independent certification body.

By way of example: a certification that has been gaining popularity in recent years, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, is B Corp. In order to comply with the requirements of the Directive, B Lab — the non-profit organisation behind the entire certification — is implementing a new approach to certification this year. B Lab sets not only new certification standards but also baseline requirements for each company entering the process, with the assumption of continuous improvement in years 3 and 5. It is also seeking partners for the audit process — in accordance with the Directive, in order to ensure transparency and independence, the certifying body may not be involved in both setting the standards and the verification of conforming with them.

This change represents a major challenge for the standard-setter, but above all for B Corps in Europe — all companies wishing to continue using the B Corp designation must re-apply for certification under the new standard this year — otherwise they should remove the logotype from all products, websites and communications.

At the same time, the new regulations also clearly show the limits of such an approach. B Corp certification concerns the organisation as a whole, whereas the regulations focus on specific messages directed at consumers — this means that certification does not protect against regulatory risk related to marketing communication; it may constitute an important element of building credibility, but does not replace the evidence required at the level of a specific message.

> *Certification does not protect against regulatory risk related to marketing communication. It may constitute an important element of building credibility, but does not replace the evidence required at the level of a specific consumer-facing message.*

New dynamics in B2B relationships

Regulatory changes affect not only the relationship between a company and the consumer, but also the entire value chain. Large organisations — including retail networks, global brands and investors — are becoming increasingly sensitive to the risk of greenwashing, as they themselves are subject to growing regulatory and reputational pressure.

This approach may lead to significant changes in B2B relations as well. Business partners will require from startups not only innovative products, but also hard data confirming the declared environmental impact. The absence of such evidence can result in claims being challenged, the need to modify them, and in extreme cases — exclusion of the product from distribution.

> *ESG compliance is ceasing to be a differentiating factor and is becoming a condition of market access.*

Greenhushing — an unintended effect of regulation

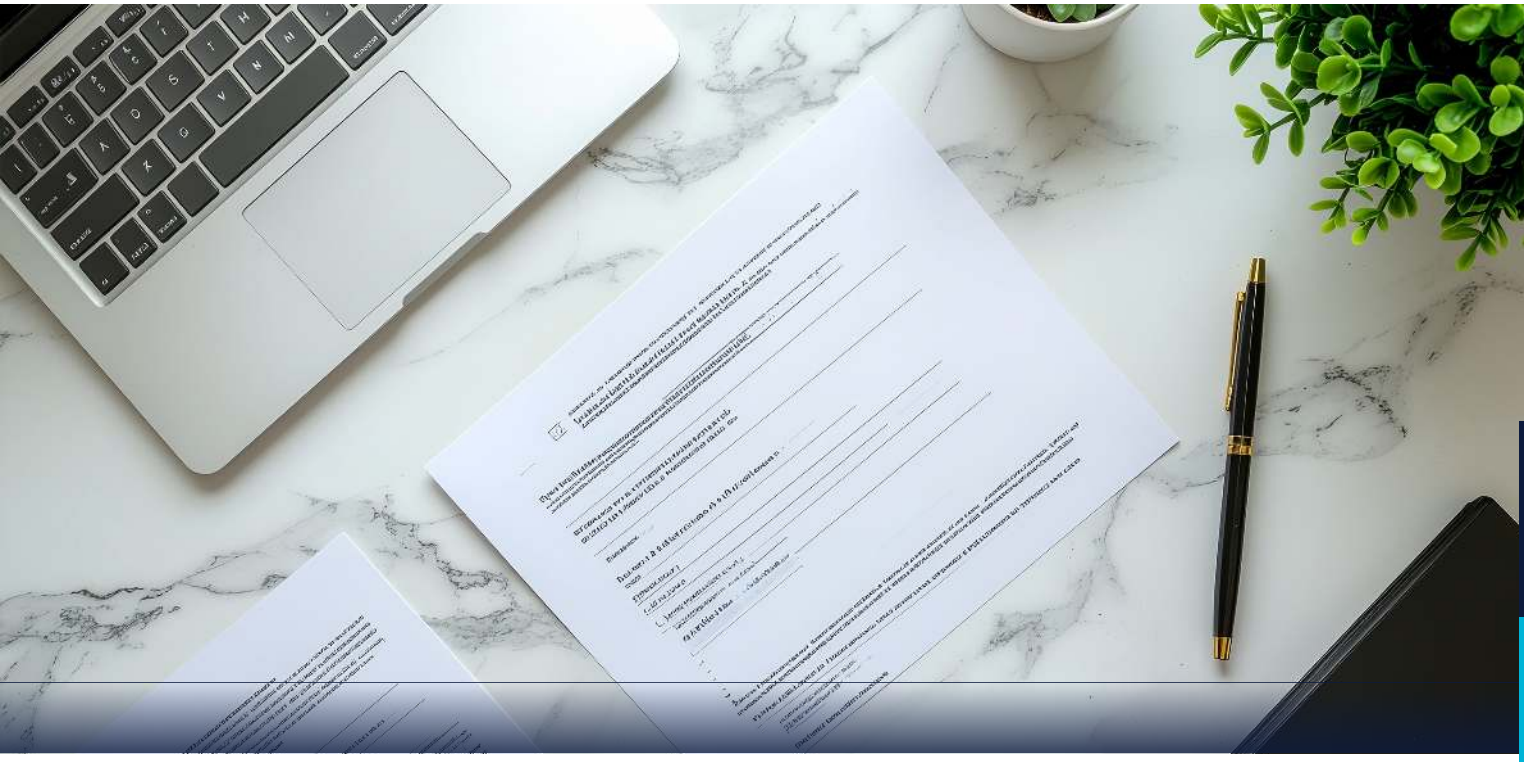
The tightening of regulations and the growing activity of regulators are leading to a phenomenon known as *greenhushing* — the deliberate reduction of communication regarding environmental actions. Companies, fearing legal and reputational risk, are beginning to limit environmental messaging, abandon ambitious declarations or completely withdraw from ESG communication.

This phenomenon creates a significant tension. On one hand, consumers expect transparency and information about the environmental impact of products; on the other,

companies fear that any declaration may be called into question, particularly in the initial phase of the Directive's application.

As a result, there is a real risk that some positive actions will remain invisible, which may slow the pace of market transformation and limit the availability of information needed to make informed consumer decisions.

Greenwashing in practice — regulatory activity



An important signal for the market is the growing activity of regulators, showing that greenwashing is no longer an abstract concept but a real operational risk, materialising even on the eve of the Directive's entry into force. The Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) is already conducting at least a dozen investigatory and verification proceedings related to greenwashing.

Analysis of these cases shows that the problem is not always the absence of pro-environmental actions, but rather the manner in which they are communicated; slogans such as "zero-emission" or "environmentally neutral" were challenged when they were based on incomplete data or referred only to a fragment of the company's activities.
UOKiK analyses all communications in great detail — at the level of semantics, and even the potential understanding of a given communication by an "average" consumer. This is an important warning — the risk does not arise solely from the nature of the actions taken, but to a large extent from how clearly they are presented.

> *"Companies must balance within a particular triangle: the attractiveness, precision and comprehensibility of their environmental communication.*

Communication as an evidence system

In response to the new requirements, a new model of ESG communication is taking shape, in which short, precise messages serve merely as the "front-end" for an extensive body of evidence.

Behind a simple environmental statement there should stand full documentation, a measurement methodology and data enabling audit and verification when the authority calls a given communication into question. Increasingly, this means the need to build claim validation processes and data systems that are integrated with marketing communication and accessible to stakeholders — for example, through websites or additional product information via QR codes, footnotes and explanations. **Communication is thus becoming part of the company's governance infrastructure.**

Case study: Żywiec-Zdrój — communicating the tree-planting programme

The example of Żywiec-Zdrój illustrates how communication of environmental actions can be anchored in a brand's DNA whilst simultaneously meeting the requirements of the new regulations. Water retention and the protection of water resources are one of the company's key areas of impact, which is why the tree-planting programme is presented not as a one-off initiative, but as a long-term, strategic action supporting natural water-retention processes in the environment. The tree-planting programme, carried out in cooperation with a public partner — the State Forests (Lasy Państwowe) — within the framework of the "On the Side of Nature" ("Po stronie natury") programme, has been running since 2009.

The programme's extensive communication has been placed on a dedicated website — www.postronienatury.pl — where detailed information is presented on the scale of the activities, the locations of plantings, the species of trees planted and their role in improving water retention, supported by educational activities. An extension of this approach was an immersive exhibition at the Melt Museum in 2026, which, in the form of a multisensory experience, demonstrated the role of trees in retaining and storing water and in the functioning of the entire ecosystem, allowing visitors to "enter" the natural processes that are invisible in everyday life.

In addition, analytical tools are being developed — including an interactive calculator of the benefits trees provide, in cooperation with UNEP/GRID — which strengthens the credibility of the message and its grounding in data. As a result, Żywiec-Zdrój's communication combines environmental actions, evidence and education within a coherent system, rather than relying on a single environmental statement.

Legal and financial risks

From the perspective of startups, the potential sanctions are of key significance. In the event that a practice is deemed misleading, the regulator may impose a penalty of up to **10% of the company's annual turnover** for each challenged practice, as well as penalties on managing persons — up to 2 million zlotys — in which case the penalty may cover not only a member of the management board but also the person responsible for communicating the statement or designation subjected to greenwashing scrutiny.

Importantly, the regulations are horizontal in nature and make no separate provision for smaller entities. This means that startups too may be subject to proceedings, and the risk may accumulate in the event of multiple non-compliant statements. The Office of Competition and Consumer Protection plans to impose penalties related to greenwashing totalling to PLN 50.6 million on companies in the first year of the Directive's application, which over 10 years amounts to PLN 560 million, clarifying that approximately 20% of penalties are expected to apply to micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises.

> *Greenwashing is becoming — alongside reputational risk — a financial risk that can directly affect the business stability of any B2C company, regardless of sector or size.*

Conclusion

The new anti-greenwashing regulations do not undermine the idea of positive-impact businesses, but redefine the way in which they operate. For startups, this means the necessity of building the capacity to measure, document and prove impact at every stage of their activities. ESG communication ceases to be an area of free interpretation — it becomes an element of a formal system, subject to the same rigours as other key business processes.

> *The most important change is the shift from a model based on storytelling to one based on evidence. This requires greater operational maturity, but at the same time creates a new competitive space — one in which the winners are not only those with the most ambitious visions, but above all those with the most credible and proven actions.*

KEY ACTIONS TO TAKE BEFORE THE ECGT DIRECTIVE COMES INTO FORCE

ACTION	WHAT TO DO
1. AUDIT ALL CLAIMS	Review all your communication: website, packaging, social media, product names, graphics, blog, LinkedIn. Remember — a "claim" can be not only text, but also a symbol, colour or label design.
2. REMOVE OR CLARIFY VAGUE SLOGANS	Move from general declarations to precise, fact-based messages (e.g. numbers, scope, methodology) — communication should be clear, specific and easy to defend.
3. BUILD AN EVIDENCE DOCUMENTATION SYSTEM	Organise the data and evidence supporting each claim (e.g. analyses, certificates, calculations), so that they are ready in the event of an audit, consumer query or proceeding.
4. VERIFY STATEMENTS AND LABELS	Check that the labels and designations used are based on recognised standards or certifications — avoid creating your own unverified "green" labels.
5. BUILD A PROCESS FOR THE FUTURE	Introduce a permanent validation process within the company (when creating new products and campaigns), ensuring that every claim is checked for compliance — before publication, not after the fact. Train the relevant teams on the principles of responsible communication in accordance with current legal requirements.

Note

[1] Full name of the ECGT Directive: "Directive on empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and better information".

PART I · ARTICLE 7

The Golden Vulture on the Trail of Eco-Deception: How Consumers in Germany Expose Green Lies

Katarzyna Wojnicka

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Deutsche Umwelthilfe (DUH) — an environmental protection organisation — has been awarding the anti-prize of the Golden Vulture (Goldener Geier) since 2019 for the most glaring examples of greenwashing on the German market. Voting takes place online and around 20,000 votes are cast each year. In 2026, the ignominious statuette was awarded to the Bayer group. Does this mean that the golden age of greenwashing is beginning to come to an end?

In Europe we are observing a clear growth in consumer awareness. More and more people are paying attention to product quality, their origin and their impact on the environment. This is particularly visible in Germany — according to research conducted by NielsenIQ Consumer in 2024, 58% of consumers prefer to buy less but higher-quality products, and 74% are guided by durability and quality in their everyday purchases.

Organisations such as Stiftung Warentest and ÖKO TEST have long played an important role there. The former, operating since 1964, tests a wide spectrum of products and services — from food to financial products — focusing on their functionality. The latter, in existence since 1985, analyses products primarily from an ecological and health perspective. Both institutions represent an independent and critical voice in defence of consumers.

Despite such strong control mechanisms, greenwashing continues to thrive. Companies exploit the growing interest in ecology by using green narratives, images of nature and environmental promises in their marketing campaigns. The problem is that these are often over-stated or even false declarations. As a result, consumers are misled and trust in genuinely ecological solutions diminishes.

In response to the growing scale of greenwashing, public institutions are also beginning to react. The European Union is working on regulations (the Green Claims Directive, ECGT) aimed at limiting misleading "green" declarations — including through an obligation to document them and subject them to independent verification. This means that companies will have to justify their environmental claims more precisely, and vague marketing slogans may in the future result in legal consequences.

That is precisely why DUH established the Golden Vulture. Consumers nominate companies, products or services that they believe engage in "greenwashing", after which a vote takes place. When the results are announced, the organisation publicly calls on the winner to change its practices. In many cases this pressure produces real results. The first laureate in 2019 was Nestlé, for its Vittel mineral water, imported from France and packaged in single-use plastic. As a result, in 2022 the company withdrew the product from the German and Austrian markets.

In 2020, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, no award was given. The years 2021 and 2022 focused on the energy and fossil-fuel sector. In 2021, the Golden Vulture was received by the RWE group, which advertised itself as a producer of "mainly green energy", even though the share of renewables in its production stood at only 20.2% — significantly below the German average (around 46%).

In 2022 the "winner" was Shell, which offered drivers the option of offsetting CO_2 emissions by paying a surcharge of 1 euro cent per litre of petrol or diesel. The company did not explain, however, how exactly full offsetting of those emissions would work. Shell beat five other nominees, obtaining 32% of votes. Subsequent years brought awards for the FMCG and HoReCa sectors. In 2023, McDonald's was "distinguished" for its "I am beautiful" campaign. The company presented waste as an "ecological" innovation, even though in reality only one-third of the chain's cups actually ended up being recycled. In the following places were: Costa Kreuzfahrten, Lidl, Klima Kraftstoffe and Vattenfall.

In 2024, Nestlé was once again "honoured" for its "#UnterwegsNachBesser" (on the road to better) campaign, which suggested a reduction in plastic use, while the company continued to produce enormous quantities of single-use packaging. In the following places were: Avia Heizöl, CapriSun GmbH (the popular juice pouches also well known in Poland) and DHL GoGreen.

In 2025 the spotlight fell on the housing sector — the statuette of shame was awarded to the real-estate company Vonovia SE, which advertised "100% natural gas" as "100% renewable energy" in its app. Although the company attributed this to an error and quickly removed the message, consumers did not remain indifferent. The other finalists in this edition also had "much to answer for" — the list included Nico Europe GmbH, which advertised "ecological fireworks", and Kaufland with a "bag for 1 cent for the environment". The Golden Vulture nomination had its effect — Nico Europe changed its advertisement and signed a commitment to cease using false eco-content.

In 2026, the Golden Vulture was won by the Bayer group, obtaining as many as 74% of votes. The company presents itself as an ecological leader, emphasising its climate ambitions and limited environmental impact. At the same time it sells chemical pesticides worldwide that harm pollinators, degrade the soil and contaminate water. DUH deemed

this communication to be particularly misleading and referred the matter to a court in Cologne. Despite strong competition — including "Primark Cares" labels and plug-in hybrid declarations from Lamborghini — it was Bayer that became the symbol of this year's greenwashing.

> *The more aware and active consumers are, the harder it becomes to hide greenwashing behind attractive slogans.*

Similar phenomena are also observed in Poland, where the number of "eco" declarations without substance is growing. The Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) is the guardian of consumers' rights, but there is no shortage of civic initiatives. An interesting initiative, of a somewhat different character, is the "Climate Nonsense of the Year" plebiscite, organised by the Nauka o Klimacie (Climate Science) portal. The plebiscite aims to catch distortions and fake news that appeared in the public statements of politicians, journalists and various types of experts.

> *Social pressure — alongside legal regulation — is becoming one of the most effective tools in the fight for honest, responsible communication and real action for the protection of the planet.*

The examples of the Golden Vulture show that consumer criticism and the public exposure of dishonest practices can force companies to change their communication, and sometimes even to withdraw products from the market. The more aware and active consumers are, the harder it becomes to hide greenwashing behind attractive slogans. Ultimately, it is social pressure — alongside legal regulation — that is becoming one of the most effective tools in the fight for honest, responsible communication and real action for the protection of the planet.

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PART I · ARTICLE 8

Mission Is Not Enough. Neither Is Product. On Why Falling in Love with Your Own Idea Is Often the Founder's Most Expensive Mistake

Piotr Boulangé

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There is a moment in the life of every founder that I know first-hand, as well as from thousands of conversations on both sides of the table. A moment at which you already know enough about the problem to be absolutely certain that your startup idea is good. In fact, that it is virtually perfect. Only... that the world doesn't know it yet.

This feeling is indispensable. Without it, nobody would build anything for two years on their own savings, "after hours", at weekends, against all the friends who said "drop it and go back to a regular job". But it is also precisely this same feeling that, if not confronted with reality early enough, can destroy a project that could genuinely have changed something — and sometimes leave the founder themselves rather battered.

Two types of infatuation. Similar consequences.

In the Central European startup ecosystem I observe two dominant types of this phenomenon. Although they look different, they end up in a surprisingly similar way.

The first type is the **mission-driven founder** — someone who builds a startup addressing a real social, environmental or health challenge: climate, education, access to medical care, digital exclusion. The motivation is genuine and deserves respect. The problem arises when that authenticity begins to act as a shield against questions that every business must answer. When in response to a question about the business model I hear: "but we're doing something important, so people will want to support us", I know we have a problem. Not with the mission. With the logic.

Impact startups — those in the area of positive impact, dual use, healthcare or environmental technology — are accompanied by an unwritten rule that the weight of the problem they are solving protects them from the laws of the market. Yet the exact opposite happens. Impact investors set founders **higher** requirements than classic startups, because their capital must simultaneously generate a financial return and a measurable social impact. Two conditions, not one — and "we're doing good" alone fulfils only one of them.

> *Impact investors set founders higher requirements than classic startups, because their capital must simultaneously generate a financial return and a measurable social impact. Two conditions, not one.*

The second type is the **technical founder** — someone who spends eighteen months building a product that, in their own assessment, is perfect. Clean architecture, beautiful code, an interface refined down to the last pixel. And genuinely convinced that once they finish it, the market will simply recognise it. That the product will "sell itself". And then it

ends up gathering dust in a forgotten drawer — or, as we would say today, in a forgotten folder on a forgotten backup drive.

I know that drawer. It contains many excellent products. Excellent for the founders who created them. They did not fit anyone else. Not because they were technically poor. Because nobody checked early enough whether there was someone for whom the problem was painful enough to pay for a solution.

“Show me the money” is not cynicism. It is hygiene.

Talent and the ability to generate ideas are distributed widely across the general population. So is the desire to do important things. But execution — the so-called “delivering” — is not.

Through years of working with founders from across the CEE region in accelerator programmes, advising startups and evaluating projects, I have seen one pattern: those who succeed do not have better ideas than those who do not. Sometimes they do not even have a full product — only an MVP or mockups. They have better habits of checking their assumptions. They ask customers early and obsessively. They calculate unit economics before they even have a full product. And they correct their course before the market does it for them — usually more painfully.

> *Those who succeed do not have better ideas than those who do not. They have better habits of checking their assumptions.*

Questions worth asking yourself:

Has anyone actually paid for your product or service? Not “expressed interest” — but paid.

Do you know how much it costs you to acquire one customer and how much that customer generates over the course of a year?

If the answer to the first question is “not yet, but soon”, and to the second “I haven’t calculated it”, you do not have a problem with the idea. You have a problem with execution.

Perseverance is not stubbornness. It is the capacity for correction.

In conversations about founder resilience I often hear: “you have to believe in your project even when everyone says no”. To a large extent that is true. But there is a difference between perseverance and stubbornness. Between “I am changing the model because I care about the goal” and “I am sticking to the model because I like it”.

A founder who changes the revenue model because the market said “no” is executing a “pivot”. That is maturity, not a betrayal of ideals. A pivot is not abandoning the mission. It is proof that you seriously want to reach the goal, rather than merely talk beautifully about it.

A collision between vision and the real world does not destroy good projects. It destroys those that were not verified early enough. And that is a difference that can be overcome without much difficulty, if the founder has the right tools and an environment in which they can ask difficult questions without shame.

The startups on the SPW List for 2026 have made this journey — they have customers and partners — but many others disappeared along the way. If you have an idea for your startup, you have a chance to appear on our list next year!

What to do about it? Concretely, not metaphorically.

The conviction that the problem lies not in the idea but in the execution and validation process was the starting point for MESGA 100 Days — a 100-day online acceleration system for early-stage founders. The programme does not ask whether you have a good mission or whether your product is technically refined. It assumes that you do. It asks something harder: is there a market for it, will someone pay for it and are you as a founder capable of delivering it.

The programme takes the founder through user-need validation, revenue model building, unit economics, operational resilience and investment readiness. It operates across different thematic verticals: from space technology and education, through dual use and defence, to environmental solutions. Because execution problems are not the domain of a single industry — they are the domain of founders who have not had the opportunity to ask themselves difficult questions early enough.

If you are not yet on the SPW list of distinguished startups but are building something important and want to check whether your startup is ready for a collision with the market before the market collides with your startup, apply to MESGA 100 Days: mesga.eu/startupySPWlinkJakis

> *The world needs startups that survive. Not those that had the most beautiful pitch.*

PART I · ARTICLE 9

When you get a new hammer, everything starts to look like a nail

Michał Miszułowicz

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The history of technology is full of such moments. The arrival of a new tool almost always leads us to see it as a universal solution. The internet, the smartphone, blockchain — each of these inventions was supposed to revolutionise the world. Today, the same is happening with artificial intelligence (AI).

On one side, we observe a genuine explosion of enthusiastic applications: generating content, graphics, films, automating marketing and sales. On the other — increasingly ambitious projects in which AI helps optimise energy consumption, manage waste, monitor biodiversity and predict the effects of extreme weather events.

Amid this widespread enthusiasm, however, basic questions are rarely asked: Does every application genuinely require artificial intelligence? Does every case justify the cost?

These questions take on particular weight in the context of climate change. Artificial intelligence can, after all, both help in the fight against the environmental crisis and deepen it.

Where AI really helps

> *The loudest AI applications — those that generate images, text and video — are simultaneously the least relevant from the perspective of climate protection. The real value of the technology lies in less visible areas, but with far greater impact.*

AI models are increasingly effective at predicting floods by analysing hydrological and meteorological data, giving communities precious hours or days to prepare. Algorithms analysing satellite imagery detect methane leaks — a gas with very high greenhouse potential — far faster than traditional methods. Machine learning systems monitor

endangered species populations, illegal deforestation and ecosystem changes at enormous scale. In the energy sector, AI optimises grid operation, forecasts demand and helps integrate unstable renewable energy sources. In these cases, the impact of artificial intelligence is measurable and positive.

The price of progress

At the same time, this technology carries a very material cost. Training and running large models requires enormous amounts of energy, water and raw materials. According to the International Energy Agency, data centres consumed around 415 TWh of electricity in 2024, and by 2030 consumption could rise to 945 TWh — with the development of AI as the main driver of growth.

The water footprint is no less significant. Training a single large language model may require hundreds of thousands of litres of water for cooling. On a global scale, the AI sector's water demand is becoming comparable to the consumption of millions of households.

The better models become, the more we use them. A classic **Jevons Paradox** emerges — an increase in efficiency leads to increased, not decreased, resource consumption.

The Jevons Paradox was formulated in 1865 by the English economist William Stanley Jevons. He observed that increasing the efficiency of coal use in steam engines (better output per unit of fuel) did not reduce overall coal consumption — on the contrary, it caused a dramatic rise.

The key question

> *Artificial intelligence is neither a saviour nor a curse for the climate. It is a tool. Just like a hammer — it can be used to build a house or to smash a window.*

So instead of asking "Does AI help or harm the climate?", we should ask a far more precise question: **Does the social and environmental benefit of a given application justify the amount of resources it consumes?** This changes the entire perspective. Instead of maximising AI use, we should maximise the value generated by every kilowatt-hour and litre of water consumed.

Not every task requires the largest model. Increasingly, smaller, specialised models or locally operating systems will be the better solution. The greatest innovation will not be "more AI", but **smarter AI** — deployed where it is genuinely needed.

When we get a new hammer...

> *True technological maturity is not about using the hammer as often as possible, but about knowing when to put it down.*

The future of responsible artificial intelligence will not depend on how powerful the models we can build are, but on how wisely we choose to use them.

The planet does not need more artificial intelligence. It needs more intelligent decisions.

PART I · ARTICLE 10

It Takes a Village to Raise a Child. It Takes an Ecosystem to Create Impact.

Dr Justyna Berniak-Woźny, Dr Magdalena Kubów, Dr Agnieszka Młodzińska-Granek

SWPS University

There is an African proverb that has entered the global language of reflection on education and community: "it takes a village to raise a child". Raising a child is not a task solely for parents, school or the immediate environment. It is the result of the action of an entire community, a network of relationships, mutual obligations and connections, and informal structures of support, which together create a space for safe experimentation, making mistakes and gradually maturing in the spirit of striving for balance.

Impact startups need exactly the same kind of environment. A single action in the form of a project-based intervention or a grant from a university entrepreneurship accelerator is not enough. What is needed is a living support ecosystem. An entire "village" is needed — one that can support the development of impact innovations at various stages of their maturation.

In the social sciences and in the field of innovation design, just as in the process of upbringing, we understand "learning by failing" as a process in which failure can become a source of knowledge, initiating a change in behaviours, structures or entire social systems. It can become even more than that — the ground for transformation. Whether impact entrepreneurship in Poland will continue to be a driver of lasting social change, or will remain merely a collection of inspiring but isolated innovative stories, depends on the way we understand the role of this ecosystem and on who takes responsibility for its development.

The ecosystem is no longer merely a metaphor

Ecosystem design is today the modus operandi of social change. For years, a narrative dominated according to which a startup's success was often the story of an individual. Accelerator programmes reinforced in their messaging the image of the solitary entrepreneur changing the world from a garage with their own laptop. Meanwhile, research in the field of entrepreneurship consistently shows that the success of startups is determined not only by the individual competencies of the founders, but above all by the quality of their embedding, anchoring, networking and rootedness in the ecosystem.

An innovation ecosystem is a network of interdependent actors, organisations and processes and activities — both formal and informal — that together create an environment of local innovation. Behind this definition lies a fundamental assumption: lasting and responsible solutions are not built in isolation. This applies especially to impact startups, which attempt to respond to complex social and environmental problems that others have hitherto ignored.

In understanding the essence of this ecosystemic perspective, the model created by the Stanford d.school, popularised in the context of social innovation design (*Integrative Design — Design for Social Impact*), may be helpful. These are four pillars that impact

innovation designers should interweave in order to effectively respond to complex, systemic challenges.

The first is systems thinking (*systems thinking*), which from the perspective of the designer we translate into the question: in what ecosystem does this problem exist and what hidden dependencies sustain it? The second is strategic design (*strategic design*) — about creating a theory of change (*theory of change*) and asking: how do we translate ideas into real action, and how do we measure the social impact generated?

The third is co-design that includes people rather than merely designing for them, avoiding the deepening of inequalities (*equity design*), within which we ask: who gains, who loses, whose voice was left out, and how do we address the power asymmetry in the design process? And fourth, human-centred design (previously popularised in the model of *human-centered design* — seen by us in a broader, updated form as *humanity-centered design*, HCD) — encompassing the central d.school approach, within which we ask the fundamental question: for whom and for what purpose are we designing, and how will this change affect the concrete individual?

In our research perspective the HCD concept is insufficient, and we therefore postulate going a step further and incorporating the extended perspective already proposed by Don Norman (from classic *Human-Centered Design* to *Humanity-Centered Design*). This consists in shifting the focus from the single individual (who, after all, does not function in isolation) to designing from the perspective of the entire ecosystem, where the priority becomes the long-term, systemic and lasting consequences for all of humanity, social structures and the planet.

An impact startup is a particularly demanding undertaking

It often operates in areas where the effects of actions are long-term. It sometimes acts even against the exhausted pro-growth logic, understanding that, as a rule, people (and the planet!) no longer need new products and services. They need the value that innovation can deliver. With respect to the social impact generated, it is worth noting that what matters is not just the impact itself, but *sustain_the_ability* — understood as the capacity to

generate and maintain the durability of impact. Therefore, this type of impact entrepreneurship requires an ecosystem more than any other form of economic activity.

> *The question relevant for today is no longer: do you need an ecosystem? The question is: what role do you play in it?*

These are particularly demanding questions for institutions that for years functioned as service providers rather than partners co-creating the innovation environment. This also applies to organisations that communicate their engagement in startup development, yet remain outside the real design processes and relationships that build the ecosystem. Finally — and here we address the educational, research and implementation community in which we operate daily — this same fundamental question should today be asked by the university. So: what role does a university play in the impact innovation ecosystem? It seems to us to be a crucial one.

The university as the Bauhaus of the impact ecosystem, or a word on the architecture of positive-change ecosystems

Until not long ago, the academic community functioned on the periphery of startup ecosystems. Universities conducted research in the field of entrepreneurship, organised conferences on innovation and designed educational programmes devoted to startups — without themselves becoming active participants in creation processes. Today we already understand that the key to the development of impact innovation thinking is co-creation. Walter Gropius, the founder of the famous Bauhaus design school, when asked as a child about his favourite colour, answered without hesitation: “multicoloured”.

The impact entrepreneurship support ecosystems we co-create should be exactly that: multi-coloured, multi-sided and integrating. And it is precisely from a peripheral perspective that one sometimes sees most sharply — which is why the transformation of the university from observer into the centre of critical thinking about sustainable and regenerative development is possible. It allows us to redefine existing paradigms, both scientific and business (for example those connected with the concept of growth-as-god), and to co-design solutions where real social problems exist.

> *Science can and should serve society. That particular and unique resource which — contrary to logic — multiplies when it is shared, is knowledge.*

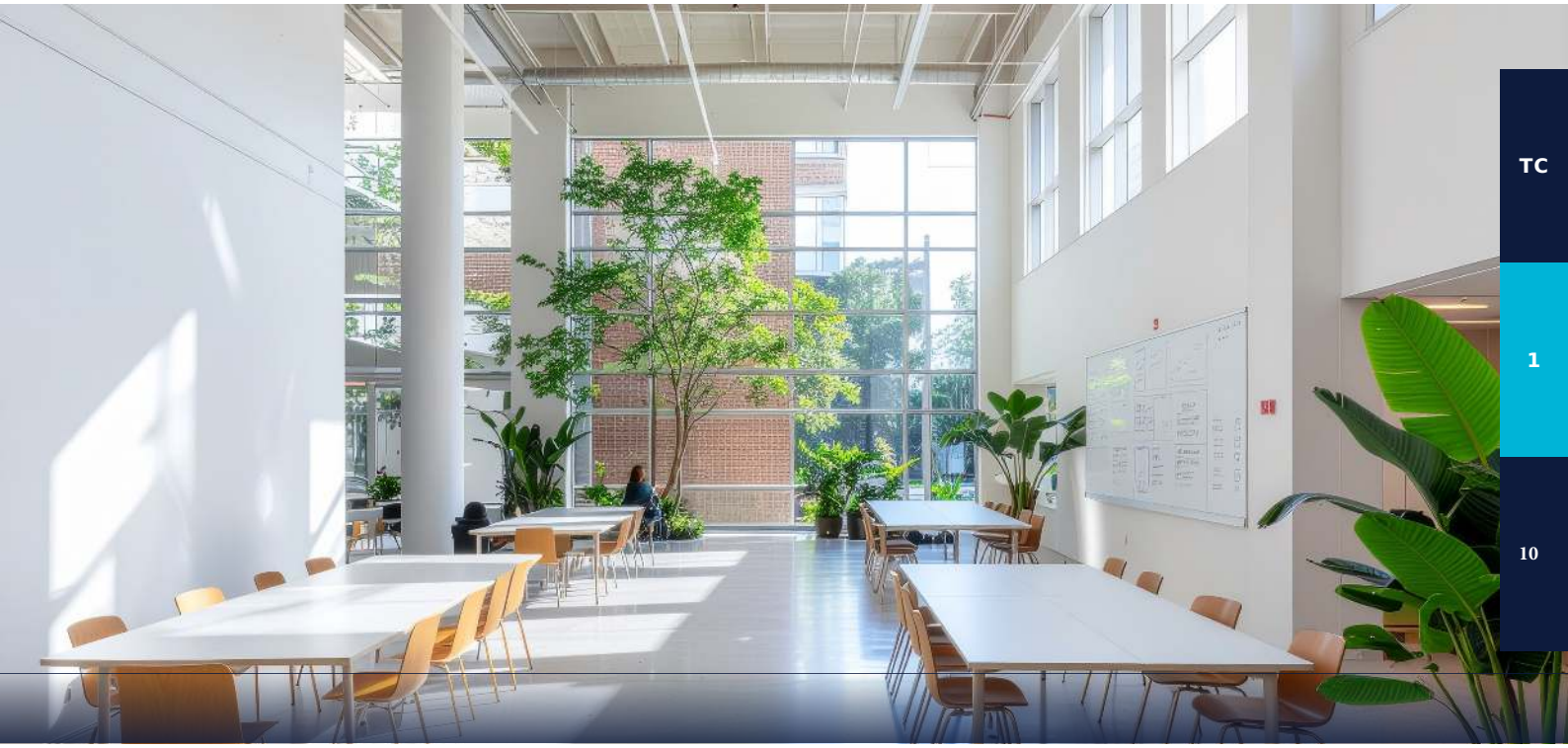
Contemporary concepts of entrepreneurship ecosystems unambiguously designate academic institutions as full participants in the innovation system. They are not merely providers of educational services. They possess strategic resources that influence the quality and resilience of the entire ecosystem. That particular and unique resource which (contrary to logic) multiplies when shared, is knowledge. This approach changes the perspective and the rules of the game.

A mature and progressive academic institution, as a participant in the ecosystem, understands its role and consciously uses its resources — sharing them, thereby multiplying them and maximising positive impact in society. These resources include, among others: expert knowledge, a space for experimentation, a network of collaboration and, finally, an openness to reflection that reaches beyond the here and now.

In the spirit of the old Bauhaus, we believe in universities in which there is still room for wonder, curiosity, experimentation, an orientation towards continuous problematisation and a constant search for a shared sense of purpose. Universities in which the emphasis is on developing above all the capital of social sensitivity. Finally, universities in which an open mind and an attentive approach can lead to new solutions.

Can technology be a lever for this? Of course it can. In our university we notice, however, that the dynamic development of artificial intelligence paradoxically brings us back to what is so profoundly human: empathy, intuition and relationships. When care for the wellbeing of the planet begins with care for the psychological wellbeing of the individual (these are connected, because our wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of the planet we inhabit) — regenerativity ceases to be an abstraction and becomes a new paradigm.

> *The dynamic development of artificial intelligence paradoxically brings us back to what is so profoundly human: empathy, intuition and relationships.*



Another world was recently brought into being

In practice this means designing concrete tools that support impact startups; programmes that combine scholarly rigour with market practice; startup bootcamps that end not with a certificate of participation but with a tested prototype; frameworks and matrices that can be used independently in the process of developing impact activity. It also means building spaces — both physical and mental — in which questions can be asked without fear of losing credibility, and where there is room for dreams. Spaces where the answer *I don't know* becomes a beginning rather than an end; where *I don't know* becomes a starting point for the shared search for a solution, and first for the reflective definition of the appropriate design problem.

It means the necessity of building an ecosystem based not only on growth dynamics, but above all on the quality of relationships, collaboration and long-term thinking about social impact. The ecosystem accelerates the learning process, reduces the cost of mistakes and

increases the startup's credibility through its rootedness in a network of relationships and collaboration. In the light of implementation activities, including those undertaken in university spaces (for example in knowledge-transfer centres), support is needed for designing comprehensive frameworks for the clear description of innovative activity oriented towards impact.

In line with this, we identify a need to design practical tools that support startups in creating (*impact design*), defining (*impact strategy*), measuring (*impact assessment*) and, finally, sustaining impact (*sustain_the_ability*). Solutions of this kind can and should be developed through co-creation and close collaboration among different ecosystem actors.

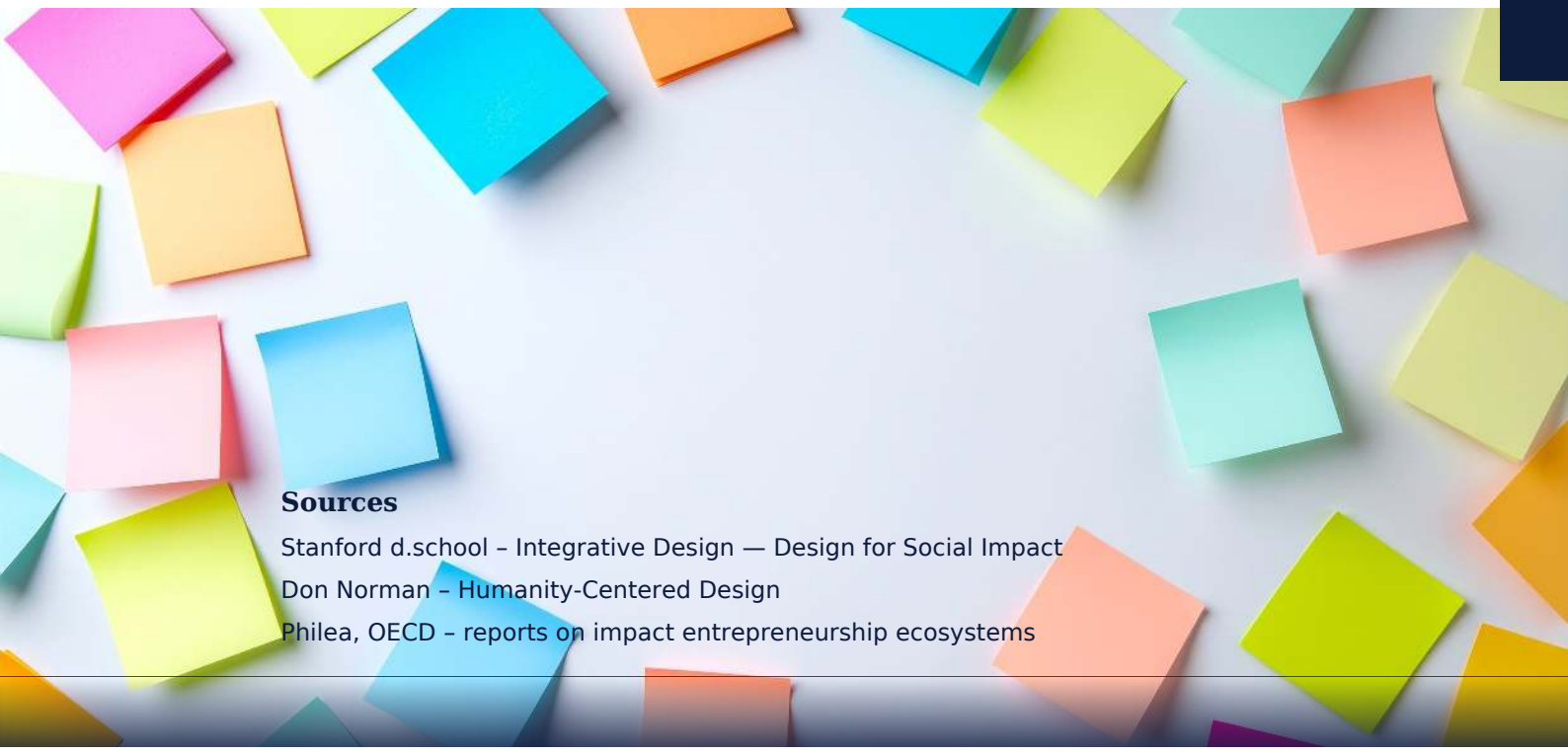
> *A university's idea of its own role in the ecosystem is important, but what determines real impact are the relationships it builds, the spaces it creates and the processes in which it actively participates.*

It is possible to have an extensive innovation strategy and remain a passive participant in the impact ecosystem. It is equally possible to have no formal strategy and yet become its key nodal point and a centre for the creation of progressive ideas and solutions.

Old patterns, new concepts

In a traditional community raising a child, each participant plays a defined role. Some pass on experience, others build a sense of belonging, still others create the space that enables experimentation and learning. The impact entrepreneurship ecosystem operates in a similar way. The question therefore remains open: is the university today already part of this "village", or does it still observe it from the outside, describing it only in academic publications and teaching about it in academic entrepreneurship courses?

> *And just as in the process of maturing, it is precisely at universities that a unique opportunity arises to ask courageous questions that go beyond the well-worn perspective. Not only the question that perpetually accompanies a child: "why", but also, and perhaps above all: "why not" and "what for"?*



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PART I · ARTICLE 11

Venture Philanthropy as a Bridge between Philanthropy and Entrepreneurship

Justyna Markowicz

NESsT

Poland has a strong sector of social organisations, civic initiatives and a growing number of ventures with the ambition of combining a social mission with entrepreneurship. However, the available forms of financing are "full of holes" — short-term project grants and public capital dominate, while investment financing remains out of reach for the majority of early-stage initiatives. Reports by Philea, the OECD and Polish research institutions indicate that many promising ventures "fall out of the system" not for lack of an idea or impact, but due to a lack of capital that would allow them to build organisational and financial stability.

Impact startups, social enterprises, SME companies and organisations operating with a mission often face the same question: where to find capital for development? Potential investors and donors, in turn, often wonder how their money can work longer and more effectively than in the formula of a one-off grant.

In this text I focus on venture philanthropy as one of many approaches to financing impact organisations (including impact startups). An approach to financing that, despite its already considerable history, remains rarely used and little known in Poland.

Venture philanthropy from the perspective of organisations

Regardless of the name of the instrument, in practice the two most important questions are always: what is the **intention of the capital** and **at what stage of development is the**

organisation or company. Only combining these two allows one to navigate sensibly through the maze of available financing forms and choose something that suits our organisation.

For impact-oriented companies and organisations, venture philanthropy is a source of capital that is by design adapted to the realities of an organisation's early stage of development. It appears when a venture already has a meaningful mission and first evidence of activity, but is still too early-stage and too risky to access classical investments. Its aim is to enable the organisation to build its foundations: team, operational model, financial processes and real capacity for further development. This type of financing also does not assume rapid growth or scaling at any cost from the outset.

The value of venture philanthropy for organisations therefore lies not only in the money, but in the way it is used. Additionally, this capital often comes together with strategic support, a partnership relationship and greater flexibility (so-called *patient capital*) than in the case of debt or equity on the commercial market. This approach can take various forms — from *recoverable grants* (zero-interest loans), through flexible loans, to *quasi-equity*, or even equity and grants. Regardless of the instrument, this approach gives the company time and space to mature.

> *For many impact startups, venture philanthropy serves as a bridge: it allows them to move from the stage of "we are operating, but are not yet investable" to the moment at which a conversation with investors becomes a real possibility.*

Venture philanthropy from the perspective of investors and donors

For investors and donors, venture philanthropy means a different view of the role of capital. Instead of one-off financing of specific projects, we are talking about the strategic use of philanthropic resources to build lasting organisations and solutions. Venture philanthropy thus frequently supports where the market has not yet — or no longer — reached (the so-called *missing middle*), and accepts risks that commercial capital cannot or does not wish to accept — in full awareness that the goal is not to maximise financial return, but to create the conditions for real, long-term social and/or environmental change.

A clear advantage for donors and investors is also the possibility of capital "working" over time. Many forms of venture philanthropy envisage the circulation of funds — for example, through loans or other returnable instruments — which means the same capital can support further organisations. Financial return, if it materialises, is not an end in itself, but a tool for increasing the scale and durability of impact.

> *For investors and donors around the world who wish to combine responsibility, discipline and the ambition of systemic change, venture philanthropy is becoming a way of conscious, long-term engagement in the development of the impact ecosystem.*

Venture philanthropy and impact investing

In short: impact investing scales what already works, while venture philanthropy ensures there is something to scale in the first place. In this sense, venture philanthropy does not compete with impact investing — they complement each other. VP plays the role of preparatory capital — the kind that enables solutions to come into being and mature before

they are ready for impact investment financing. Without this support, many initiatives would never reach the stage at which they are investable.

Today, impact investing is spoken of more than venture philanthropy, but this does not mean that the role of venture philanthropy has weakened. On the contrary, as the impact investment market becomes more professional and scales up, the importance of capital that acts earlier, more flexibly and takes on risks that impact investors cannot or do not wish to accept is growing.

Venture philanthropy, offering long-term, flexible support aimed at building capacity, can fill the gap — particularly where non-profit initiatives, impact startups and social enterprises need time and space to make the journey from mission-driven activities to financial maturity and readiness for further investment.

> *Impact investing scales what already works, while venture philanthropy ensures there is something to scale in the first place.*

NESsT is an organisation that operates in the “missing middle” — the gap between an idea and investment readiness. We invest in these enterprises at an early stage of development, providing them with ongoing strategic advice, patient capital and access to a network, until the moment when they are ready to scale.

KOZMINSKI
BUSINESS HUB

PART II

How they do it?

12 positive impact startups

PART II · ARTICLE 1

MyUnds: underwear that cares for your health

Sylwia Kilińska-Łokieć

Lawyer | ESG, Compliance and Responsible Business | Of Counsel at RK Legal

Underwear is one of the most basic elements of our wardrobe, and yet one of the least analysed by consumers. Unlike outerwear, we rarely think about its composition, production process or impact on our health. And yet it is underwear that has direct and prolonged contact with our skin. This is the area on which Polish brand MyUnds focuses, combining user comfort with a sustainable approach and greater material transparency.

Photo: MyUnds brand own images

MyUnds — business model

MyUnds operates in the underwear and base layer segment, building its offer around material quality, skin safety and functionality. The starting point is not seasonality or trends, but a product worn “close to the body” — one that demands greater control over what it is made from and how. The business model is based on limiting overproduction and greater quality control, which sets it apart from the typical fast fashion approach.

Sustainable fashion in practice

MyUnds's sustainability stems from concrete material and production decisions. The fabrics used include organic cotton, materials compliant with the OEKO-TEX standard, and TENCEL™ fibres. These certifications confirm a reduction in the use of chemical substances and greater control over material safety.

Local production is also a key element of the model. Manufacturing in Poland allows for better quality control, shortens the supply chain and reduces transport-related emissions.

It also increases the transparency of the entire process — which remains one of the challenges facing the clothing industry.

Material safety — does underwear matter for health?

For products worn directly against the skin, the composition of the material matters not only for comfort but also for health. As the European Environment Agency report on the textile sector indicates, production processes involve the use of various chemical substances and have an environmental impact. Material certifications are therefore one of the basic tools for assessing product safety.

> *In mass production, the level of control over chemical processes can vary significantly depending on the manufacturer. A lack of transparency means that consumers often have no real way of assessing product quality beyond the manufacturer's own declarations.*

Comfort and everyday use

MyUnds emphasises comfort as part of a broader approach to well-being. Product design focuses on fit, material breathability and reduction of pressure. In practice, this means shifting the emphasis from appearance to function — underwear should be as neutral as possible in everyday use.

It is also worth noting the brand's approach to communication, including the representation of different body types in visual materials. This introduces a broader perspective on the body and comfort, one less reliant on the single dominant standard prevalent in the clothing industry.

Photo: MyUnds brand own images

Slow fashion vs fast fashion

The brand's operating model fits within the concept of slow fashion, which assumes fewer collections, greater product durability and a reduction in overproduction. In contrast to fast fashion, where speed and price are paramount, greater emphasis is placed on quality and product lifecycle.

> *MyUnds can be seen as an example of a positive impact startup that operates by changing standards in its product category. It combines practical function with reducing environmental impact, supports local production and draws attention to user health.*

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Reducing the use of chemicals in production, choosing certified materials and local manufacturing decrease the environmental footprint and impact on ecosystems.
SOCIETY (S)	Supporting local workshops and a transparent supply chain strengthens responsible production models and builds consumer awareness.
HEALTH (HLT)	Safe, certified materials minimise the risk of irritation and contact with harmful substances — particularly significant for underwear worn directly against the skin.

Summary

The MyUnds example shows that even basic products can become an area of change. Underwear ceases to be merely a wardrobe item and begins to function as a conscious choice — connected to both personal comfort and environmental impact.

> *Even basic products can become an area of change. Underwear ceases to be merely a wardrobe item and begins to function as a conscious choice.*

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PART II · ARTICLE 2

Sophia Health fills the women's health gap

Sylwia Kilińska-Łokieć

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For years, companies talked about employee wellbeing in a very safe way. A wellbeing programme, a sports card, a webinar on mental resilience, sometimes psychological consultations. All of this looked good in HR strategies and ESG reports. The problem is that a significant part of employees' real health experiences continued to remain outside organisations' field of vision — particularly those related to women's health.

Photo: Sophia Health press materials

Menopause, endometriosis, hormonal problems, infertility treatment and intimate health for years functioned in business as a topic too personal, too “medical” or simply uncomfortable. Women dealt with them on their own, while simultaneously trying to maintain high work performance in an environment designed as though biological differences simply did not exist.

This is the gap that Sophia Health is trying to fill today. The Polish startup is building a multidimensional health support platform in the B2B model. Although its foundation and unique market value remains women's medicine (FemTech), the ecosystem offers much broader support for employees — from psychological and dietary consultations to areas related to hormonal health, preventive care and healthy ageing. Companies can offer employees access to specialists and education in areas that for years remained invisible both to the healthcare system and to employers.

Many organisations still approach women's health primarily through the lens of pregnancy and maternity leave. Meanwhile, the health challenges women face at different stages of life directly affect their professional functioning, energy levels, absences, burnout and decisions to leave the labour market prematurely.

The end of the “universal employee”

Sophia Health also reveals something much bigger — the wellbeing market is beginning to mature. For years, the majority of health benefits were designed in a universal way. In practice, this meant that experiences related to gender, age or specific bodily needs were

overlooked. Only now are organisations beginning to understand that the neutrality of support systems very often meant their mismatch with people's real needs.

> *A fair benefit is not one that gives everyone exactly the same thing. It is one that responds to the real, diverse needs of the team.*

This is visible in the startup's own communication. Sophia Health does not build its narrative around a luxury lifestyle or trendy selfcare slogans. Its founders clearly emphasise that the platform is grounded in *evidence-based medicine*. They talk about prevention, health safety and access to reliable medical knowledge — not "wellness productivity".

The longevity perspective also appears here — healthy ageing and long life. In a world where societies are ageing rapidly and organisations are trying to keep experienced workers in the labour market longer than ever before, health is becoming not only an individual concern but also a strategic one.

For years, the social dimension of corporate responsibility (the "S" pillar in ESG) was based primarily on declarations about diversity and inclusivity. Far less often did companies analyse whether the work environment actually took account of the physical, biological and health experiences of people over the long term.

According to World Health Organization data, menopausal symptoms can affect concentration, energy levels, sleep quality and mental health. Yet the topic was practically absent from organisations' policies just a few years ago. **Endometriosis, according to the WHO, affects around 10% of women and girls of reproductive age worldwide, and diagnosis often takes many years.** This illustrates the scale of a problem that companies treated as invisible for decades.

> *Endometriosis affects around 10% of women and girls worldwide. Diagnosis often takes many years — during which time women continue to function professionally with no support from their organisations. (Source: WHO)*

Photo: Sophia Health press materials

Hard economics instead of declarations

Employers are beginning to recognise that people's health affects not only their subjective wellbeing, but also retention, engagement and the resilience of the entire organisation. Reports from Deloitte and McKinsey show that women experience burnout more frequently and are far more likely to combine professional work with caregiving responsibilities. This is no longer purely a social or ethical issue. It is a real labour market challenge.

This is why startups like Sophia Health are interesting today not only as wellbeing or medical projects. They reveal a broader shift: the model of work designed for years around constant availability and the "universal employee" simply no longer matches reality. This shift does not stem solely from growing social sensitivity in business. It is driven by hard economics.

The costs of absenteeism, burnout, overload and sudden employee departures are becoming too tangible for organisations to ignore. Companies are also seeing a generational shift. Younger employees expect from employers not only salary, but a genuine understanding of their health and life needs. Older employees, meanwhile, need support tailored to the changes taking place in the body with age. The shift towards longevity shows that caring for health at work is a marathon, not a sprint.

> *"Wellbeing is ceasing to be a pleasant add-on to organisational culture. It is becoming a question of whether the modern labour market was designed for real people at all — with their health, limitations, biological reality and the passage of time.*

Because it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the health of people from the health of organisations.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	No direct environmental impact. The digital-solutions-based business model allows for environmental neutrality. The startup's priority is the reliable and measurable addressing of challenges in the social (S) and governance (G) areas.
SOCIETY (S)	Real fulfilment of a systemic gap in women's healthcare (FemTech). The startup breaks social taboos around menopause, endometriosis and hormonal health in the workplace, replacing superficial wellbeing with evidence-based preventive care. It works to reduce professional burnout and the premature departure of women from the labour market.
GOVERNANCE (G)	Enables employers to implement structural wellbeing policies that respond to the biologically diverse needs of their teams. Translates diversity declarations into measurable, systemic management procedures, building corporate governance based on reliable data (data-driven governance).

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PART II · ARTICLE 3

Fresh Inset Takes on Food Waste

Wioletta Skawska

Expert in quality management and sustainable development in the cosmetics industry

Every year, 1.3 billion tonnes of food are wasted worldwide, with fruit and vegetables accounting for the lion's share of this tragic toll. The primary culprit is ethylene – a natural plant hormone that accelerates ripening but also spoilage. Polish startup Fresh Inset has developed a technology that allows plants to "switch off" their sensitivity to this gas using an ordinary sticker. This seemingly simple solution could revolutionise global supply chains, extending the shelf life of produce by precious days – or even weeks.

The Problem: A Race Against Time and Ethylene Losses

30% of the world's food production is wasted, and 50% of fruit and vegetables spoil before they reach the consumer's table. The fresh food supply chain is a constant race against time. Traditional methods of slowing ripening, such as gas chambers using 1-MCP (1-methylcyclopropene), are expensive, require airtight conditions and complex infrastructure. As a result, smaller farms and suppliers in developing countries are excluded from access to this protection, generating enormous financial and ecological losses.

The Startup's Story

Fresh Inset was founded in 2017 in Toruń, growing out of the research passion of Dr Andrzej Wolak, a chemist and inventor. The inspiration was a desire to democratise access to 1-MCP technology, which had previously been reserved for large corporations with hermetically sealed storage facilities. With the backing of venture fund Infini VC and the business expertise of its co-founders, the company transformed a laboratory concept into a scalable product with global potential.

Stickers containing the active substance (1-MCP), which gradually releases ethylene receptor blockers. Source: www.freshinset.pl

How the Solution Works

At the heart of the company is the patented Vidre+ technology. It is an innovative system for delivering the 1-MCP molecule in the form of stickers, strips or coatings applied directly to packaging. Unlike conventional gassing, Vidre+ releases the active substance gradually and directly inside a carton or plastic container. Producers do not need to change their logistics – they simply add a sticker to the fruit or vegetable packaging. The solution works across a wide range of products: from broccoli and pears to cut flowers.

THE VIDRE+ STICKER IS APPLIED INSIDE THE PACKAGING OR DIRECTLY ONTO THE PRODUCT ➤ **WHEN HUMIDITY EXCEEDS 85%, THE STICKER RELEASES THE ACTIVE SUBSTANCE WITHIN 2–3 HOURS** ➤ **OVER 24 HOURS, THE ACTIVE SUBSTANCE IS GRADUALLY RELEASED** ➤ **AFTER 48 HOURS, NO RESIDUE OF THE ACTIVE SUBSTANCE REMAINS**

Vidre+'s Advantage Over Other Methods

Conventional systems require investment in airtight cold stores and gas dosing equipment. Vidre+ is a *plug-and-play* technology – all it takes is a sticker inside the box or on the product itself. This eliminates fixed costs and makes protection accessible even to small-scale producers. While traditional gas disperses within minutes of a chamber being opened, Vidre+ releases 1-MCP gradually over 30 hours – with a dose precisely tailored to the plant's needs. Vidre+ can be applied at any stage: from the sorting facility and packing house through to final delivery to the customer.

> *Our technology works inside ordinary packaging, which changes the rules of the game. Every grower, regardless of size, can now protect their harvest as effectively as the largest corporations. — Dr Andrzej Wolak, founder of Fresh Inset*

> *Food waste is a trillion-dollar problem. Solutions like Vidre+ don't just save food – they genuinely improve margins across the entire supply chain. — Kevin Frye, Vice President of Sales, Fresh Inset*

Photo: www.freshinset.pl

Stickers containing the active substance (1-MCP), which gradually releases ethylene receptor blockers. Source: www.freshinset.pl

Growth Prospects

Fresh Inset is not limiting itself to the domestic market – the company is already actively testing its solution across the Americas, Europe and Africa. The key to success lies in partnerships with global packaging distributors, enabling rapid scaling. In an era of growing pressure around ESG reporting and waste reduction, the technology from Toruń is becoming an industry standard rather than a mere technological curiosity.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Significant reduction of carbon footprint through decreased food waste and lower demand for energy-intensive refrigeration infrastructure.
SOCIETY (S)	Enhanced food security and improved profitability for small and medium-sized farms.
GOVERNANCE (G)	Building a transparent value chain grounded in scientifically validated effectiveness and an ethical approach to natural resources.

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PART II · ARTICLE 4

From NASA to Łódź: Bacteria Instead of UV Filters

Wioletta Skawska

Expert in quality management and sustainable development in the cosmetics industry

Imagine billions of sunscreen packaging units landing in the average consumer's shopping basket every year. Most of them contain UV filters that — while protecting our skin — kill coral reefs and destabilise marine ecosystems. Łódź-based startup UVera has found the answer in microorganisms that are 2 billion years old.

Photo: UVera press materials

The Problem: The Toxic Price of Sun Protection

Every year, the equivalent of 700 lorries filled with sunscreen reaches the world's oceans. Standard chemical filters such as oxybenzone and octinoxate work effectively on the beach, but underwater they become killers — causing coral bleaching and DNA damage in marine organisms.

For humans, the picture is equally troubling. Some synthetic compounds penetrate the bloodstream, triggering allergies or hormonal disruption. The cosmetics industry has reached a deadlock: consumers demand high SPF protection, while regulators in Hawaii and Thailand have already introduced bans on traditional filters.

The Startup's Story: From NASA to a Łódź Incubator

It all began with the meeting of three vastly different personalities. Dr Magdalena Jander, a biotechnologist with a flair for business, joined forces with Dr Adam Kiciak, a physician with pharmaceutical experience, and Prof. Jacek Wierzchos, a leading extremophile expert collaborating with NASA.

The inspiration came from cyanobacteria — organisms that survived on Earth at a time when there was no atmosphere and UV radiation was lethal. The team spent years in the laboratory "teaching" these ancient life forms to function in a controlled aquatic environment, which enabled the development of an industrial process.

> *We were curious about what this bacterium did to survive in such conditions. — Magdalena Jander, co-founder of UVera*

How the Solution Works: A Factory of Oxygen and Pigment

UVera does not manufacture yet another synthetic compound — they grow it. The startup harnesses a natural pigment produced by cyanobacteria that absorbs the full spectrum of radiation (UVA, UVB and UVC). The technology is built on a zero-waste process.

THE BACTERIA REQUIRE ONLY SUNLIGHT AND CO_2 ➤ **PRODUCING 1 TONNE OF THE SUBSTANCE ABSORBS APPROXIMATELY 90 TONNES OF CO_2** ➤ **THE RESULT IS A NATURAL, PHOTOSTABLE FILTER THAT DOES NOT PENETRATE THE SKIN AND LEAVES NO WHITE RESIDUE** ➤ **THE BY-PRODUCTS ARE PURE OXYGEN AND BIOMASS FOR ORGANIC AGRICULTURE**

Photo: UVera press materials

Growth Prospects

UVera is not merely a promise — it is backed by real funding. The company secured a prestigious €2.5 million grant from the European Innovation Council (EIC Accelerator) under the Green Deal framework. This financing is intended to support the construction of a production facility and full commercialisation.

> *We are now at the stage of scaling up production. Our substance outperforms everything currently on the market in terms of stability and safety. — Magdalena Jander, co-founder of UVera*

The greatest market validation is the fact that the legendary French cosmetics house Sisley Paris has expressed interest in UVera's technology. For the Łódź-based startup, appearing on the radar of such a prestigious player is not only a major business milestone, but the fulfilment of a vision to bring Polish innovation to the world's most exclusive cosmetics segment.

> *Sisley Paris's interest was a dream come true for us. It shows that our technology has the potential to define a new standard in the luxury segment. — Magdalena Jander, co-founder of UVera*

The company's vision extends beyond the cosmetics market into the pharmaceutical and photovoltaic sectors, where efficient UV absorption is of critical importance. An additional revenue stream will come from the commercialisation of biomass produced during cyanobacteria cultivation , a valuable raw material for organic farming and the supplements industry. The outlook for UVera is promising: the global UV filter market is worth over one billion dollars annually and is growing steadily. With investor backing and rising interest from prestigious cosmetics houses, the Łódź startup has a real chance of becoming the world standard in eco-friendly sun protection.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Filter production is carbon-negative, absorbing 90 tonnes of CO_2 per tonne of product, with zero impact on coral reefs.
SOCIETY (S)	Provides safe, hypoallergenic protection against skin cancer with no risk of hormonally active substances entering the body.
GOVERNANCE (G)	The startup is building a transparent supply chain grounded in clean biotechnology, free from GMOs and synthetic substances.

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PART II · ARTICLE 5

Bestie: femtech powered by female energy

Elżbieta Kręt

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Some brands are born from calculation. Others are born from passion and energy. Bestie belongs to the latter — though it is by no means lacking a clear business model. The story of Bestie shows that the most powerful currency of a brand is often not its advertising budget, but the authenticity and energy of its creators. The brand started with the founders' own investment and a DNA-level commitment to education and fighting menstrual poverty. Today it is growing dynamically, attracting external funding that allows it to scale not only the business, but also its mission.

Julia Bloch and Martyna Kaczmarek, founders of Bestie

The power of women!

Bestie (HiBestie.pl) is a brand founded by two energetic, positively spirited women. Julia Bloch — a laughing designer who creates brand identities and promotional strategies — had the idea for the product back in 2022. For the brand to see the light of day, it needed the strength and energy of Martyna Kaczmarek, who in 2024 proposed that they bring the idea to life together. Martyna — bold, curious, and thriving in corporate structures, with a strong social media presence — appeared on Top Model in 2022 to bring topics of body image and body positivity beyond her social bubble. The combined force of these two personalities was unstoppable.

> *When I started designing Bestie in November 2022, I created it with the hope that this brand would one day exist. From the beginning, my intention was to create a brand that is and always will be a friend to every menstruating person. — Julia Bloch, co-founder of Bestie*

Corporations vs the new wave: mainstream vs eco

Bestie entered the menstrual products market, which in Poland was worth USD 420 million in 2025, with its value set to grow to USD 505 million by 2032. The market is dominated by 5 corporations whose products account for 70% of market value, but category growth is driven primarily by rising consumer awareness among those seeking sustainable, environmentally and health-friendly personal hygiene products. Menstrual cups, period pants and discs represent a niche, but one growing fastest in the category, driven by the ecological awareness of Generation Z and Millennials. And that opens up space for local and sustainable brands to operate.

Education as Bestie's strength

Julia's design came first, which the co-founders then consulted with gynaecologists, urogynaecological physiotherapists and 3D designers. They found a manufacturer guaranteeing quality and safety near Szczecin (TMRubber). The disc is made from flexible and safe, certified medical-grade silicone USP Class VI/ISO 10993. Transparency is one of the most important characteristics of the Bestie start-up.

The launch of the new product was preceded by educational activities. The disc is an entirely new category on the Polish market, so it was essential to explain how it works, how to use it, and how it differs from existing products — particularly menstrual cups. From December 2024, Bestie ran an educational and awareness campaign so that on 14 February 2025 it could launch its first online sales.

Bestie menstrual disc made from certified medical-grade silicone

Knockout. The numbers speak for themselves.

RESULT	DATA
PRODUCT LAUNCH	1,000 discs sold in just 5 days
FIRST MILLION	PLN 1 million revenue recorded in November 2025
RECORD MONTH	352% growth in sales value in February 2026

To date, the brand has already collaborated with partners including Eveline, Baskja, Fluff, ProVag, Jan Nowag, Bydgoska Wytwórnia Mydła, Anwen and most recently Naree. The brand also converts its own success into support for menstrual poverty in Poland. In ongoing collaboration with Różowa Skrzyneczka, it organises educational workshops, donates products free of charge to those in need, and has permanently embedded into the business the principle: 1 disc purchased = 1 disc donated to a person experiencing menstrual exclusion.

Unstoppable

Bestie is a scaling-stage startup that has already achieved impressive results. The product is available primarily online (hibestie.pl, with shipping to over 25 European countries), as well as in select Pilates studios, beauty salons and concept stores in Poland. From April 2026, Bestie is available in the Rossmann chain with its disc and a new product — probiotic tampons. International expansion is also planned — starting with Germany. The startup has secured a PLN 400,000 grant from the Concordia Design Accelerator programme.

POSITIVE IMPACT

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	The Bestie menstrual disc is a reusable product replacing single-use hygiene products for up to 10 years. It contains no latex, BPA or fragrances. Production in Poland shortens the supply chain and reduces the carbon footprint of transport.
SOCIETY (S)	Social mission is embedded in the brand's DNA. Bestie runs the Bestie Talks blog, normalising conversations about menstruation. A portion of profits goes to the Endopolki Foundation. The permanent principle applies: 1 disc sold = 1 disc donated to a person experiencing menstrual exclusion.
GOVERNANCE (G)	The company openly names its disc manufacturer (TMRubber Sp. z o.o.) and publicly shares USP Class VI / ISO 10993 quality certificates. Supply chain transparency, production in Poland and open disclosure of material composition build brand credibility.

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PART II · ARTICLE 6

Rebench: circular office relocations at corporate scale

Elżbieta Kręt

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Every year, European companies dispose of office furniture worth billions of euros — not because it is broken, but because they have no system to manage its lifecycle. Rebench, a Warsaw-based startup founded in 2024, set out to change that. Three co-founders identified this costly problem and built a company that combines software, sales portals and physical logistics. The project closes the loop in the area of corporate fixed assets, and the numbers prove how positive an impact this has on both company finances and the environment.

Rebench founders: Mateusz Sikora, Damian Bobrowski, Sebastian Osuch

Corporate furniture graveyards worth billions

Every year across the European Union, more than 10.78 million tonnes of furniture are classified as waste — an amount close to the entire continent's annual furniture production. Rebench estimates European companies' losses at around €7.5 billion per year. The CSRD directive has already obliged the largest companies to report their environmental impact, and upcoming requirements such as the Digital Product Passport (DPP) and the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) will require every desk and chair to be treated as an object with a measured lifecycle. The carbon footprint of office equipment, calculated under Scope 3 in the category “waste generated in operations”, is becoming a visible line item in the ESG reports of major corporations.

REBENCH IN NUMBERS

INDICATOR	RESULT
FIXED ASSETS INVENTORIED IN REBENCH APP (2026)	over 40,000
FURNITURE AND IT EQUIPMENT WASTE DIVERTED FROM DISPOSAL (2025)	over 70,000 kg
RESIDUAL VALUE RECOVERED FOR CLIENTS (2025)	over PLN 500,000

Origins: three founders, one problem

Mateusz Sikora worked at Colliers, one of the largest commercial real estate agencies. Sebastian Osuch spent over 13 years on the manufacturer side — at Nowy Styl. Damian Bobrowski built digital products as a software developer. Each of them saw a different fragment of the same mechanism: valuable furniture and AV/IT equipment ending up in skips at every office relocation — because no one had a system to manage it sensibly.

> *"All three of us saw from different perspectives how enormous quantities of valuable furniture and equipment were being sent for disposal simply because no one had the tools or the process to manage them sensibly. — Sebastian Osuch, co-founder of Rebench*

Three pillars of the offering

Rebench App is software for digital inventory and full lifecycle management of assets in large organisations — every piece of furniture and IT device receives a digital passport in the form of a QR/RFID tag, enabling asset management across multiple locations simultaneously and the running of internal "reuse" programmes. The software is connected to **redistribution channels**: an internal employee sales portal and an external B2B portal for companies, educational institutions, public bodies and foundations. On this basis, the company offers **Circular Relocation** services — a comprehensive process from digital inventory and second-life audit, through dismantling, storage and light refurbishment, market redistribution, free transfer to schools and NGOs, to selective disposal as an absolute last resort. Rebench's advantage lies in its end-to-end approach to asset management and decommissioning, relieving companies of many invisible layers of commercial interior asset management.

First deployments: numbers, not promises

Nokia faced a re-arrangement of an office where the furniture was 15–20 years old. Rebench inventoried all assets, helped select 130 items for relocation to other branches and launched a dedicated employee marketplace. The total financial benefit of the project amounted to nearly PLN 200,000. Shell needed to quickly get rid of surplus furniture — Rebench found a B2B buyer, Shell saved over PLN 100,000 in disposal costs, and a measurable carbon footprint reduction indicator was included in its ESG report. Rebench also carries out international projects, the first of which was SEB Bank in Latvia. SEB Bank Latvija was relocating its headquarters and needed support in redistributing around 2,500 pieces of unwanted furniture and IT equipment. Rebench, together with the client, carried out a digital internal redistribution process using an employee sales portal connected to Rebench App.

Business model and future

Rebench funded its early days from the founders' own savings and revenues from its first corporate projects. After a brief search for investors in 2025, the team decided to bootstrap — and that turned out to be the right decision. The company closed 2025 with revenues of around PLN 1 million, and in 2026 is targeting a doubling of business volume. The revenue model is based on Rebench App subscriptions, commissions from the B2B and employee marketplaces, and fees for comprehensive Circular Relocation projects. The plan for the future includes building a full ecosystem for the second life of corporate assets, expanding into sectors such as hospitals and universities, and international expansion starting from CEE markets. The ambition is clear: Rebench aims to make the second life of corporate equipment the norm, supported by a professional process that makes life easier for office and building administrators, with the secondary B2B market becoming a professional, parallel sector alongside the purchase of new furniture and equipment.

Awards and the future

In 2024, Rebench won the regional stage of the PropTech Innovation Challenge Central & Eastern Europe (Urban Land Institute Europe) and took the main prize at PropTech Festival 2024. In 2025, the PRO Tiger jury awarded the prize in the category of Innovative Business Solution, and Mazovian Startup honoured Rebench with second place and a special distinction. In 2026, Rebench received the Stena Circular Economy Award — GOZ Leader in the startup category and the Startup of the Year distinction at SoDA Conference 2026. The plan for the future includes building a full ecosystem for the second life of corporate assets, expanding into sectors such as hospitals and universities, and international expansion starting from CEE markets.

Three lessons from Rebench's story

1. Find an expensive pain, not a mission to change the world. Although Rebench started with an impact-driven mission, it was founded on a specific, costly problem: chaos and financial losses during office relocations and decommissions. Companies were paying to dispose of furniture that still had market value. That pain — measurable in hard currency — opened corporate doors far more effectively than any environmental argument.

2. Test on real projects, not hypotheses. Projects for Nokia, Shell, SEB Bank and the pilot with PKO BP are not case studies created for a pitch deck. They are projects with measurable financial and environmental results that allowed the company not only to build financial runway, but above all to refine the value proposition, build the product together with clients and develop innovative processes. Every project was simultaneously a source of revenue and a product laboratory.

3. Sales solves all problems in a company. A brief search for external investors motivated Rebench's founders to seek the healthiest source of funding — client money. Real revenue traction, even based on services but with a plan to build a scalable product, is a guarantee of healthy growth and far better arguments for future investors than the most beautifully prepared pitch deck.

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Since 2024, over 10,000 items have been given a second life and kept out of landfill. The company calculates and reports CO_2 emission reductions for every project using LCA methodology — results are included in clients' CSRD reporting under Scope 3.
SOCIETY (S)	The Rebench Social programme supplies schools, foundations and public institutions with high-quality office equipment. Employee sales events engage company communities in the idea of less waste. All of these activities democratise access to good equipment for people and institutions who can acquire it at a fraction of the original price.
GOVERNANCE (G)	Rebench delivers a comprehensive solution with measurable financial and management value: transparent asset records, a structured decommissioning process, quantifiable cost savings and data for CSRD reporting under Scope 3.

Rebench demonstrates that the circular economy does not have to be an abstract slogan in an ESG strategy — it can be a concrete, measurable operational process that simultaneously reduces company costs and genuinely cuts waste. In Poland, which — as Mateusz Sikora puts it — is somewhat behind the curve on circular economy compared to the Netherlands or Scandinavia, the road is long. But Rebench proves it is worth taking.

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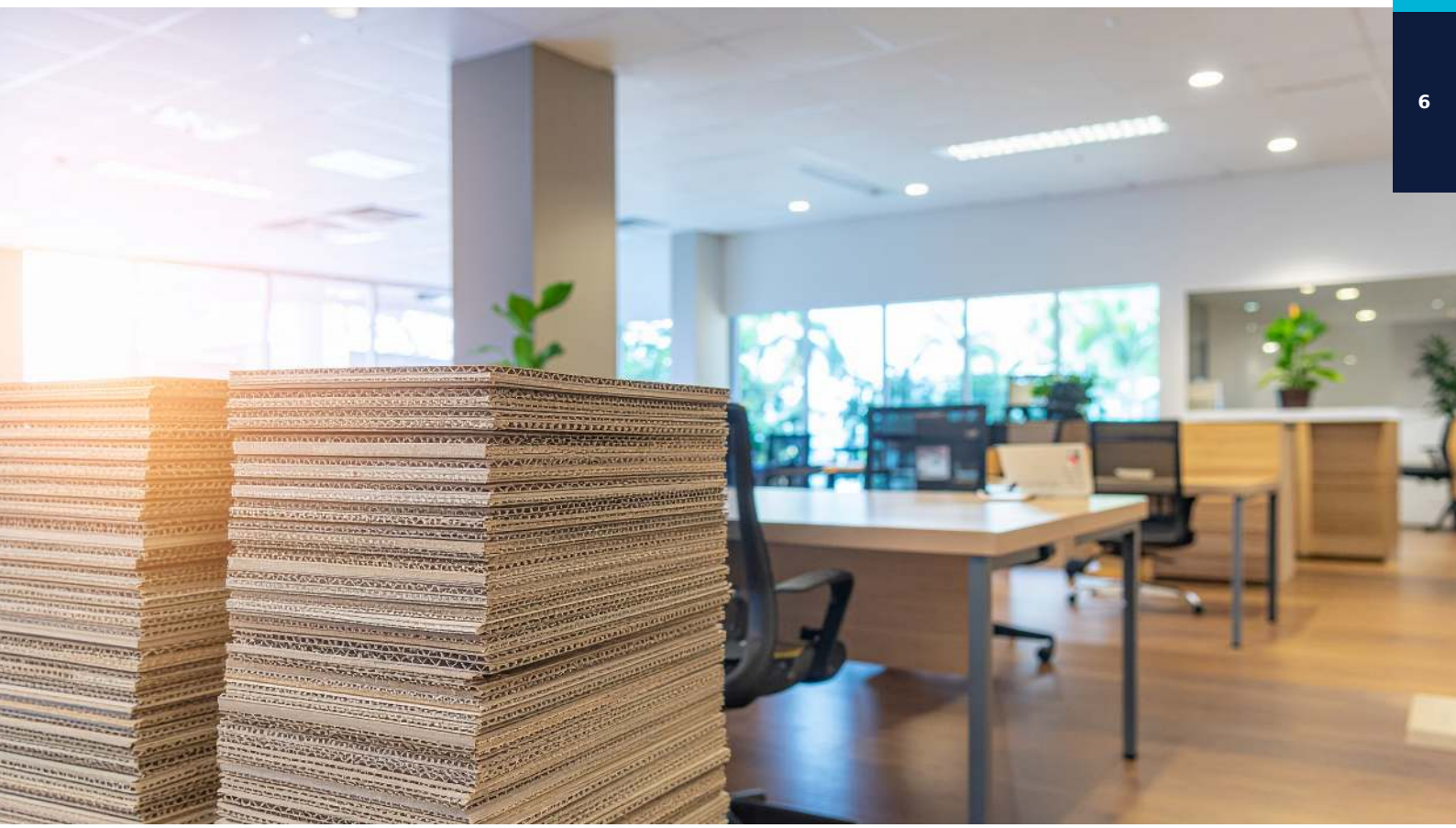


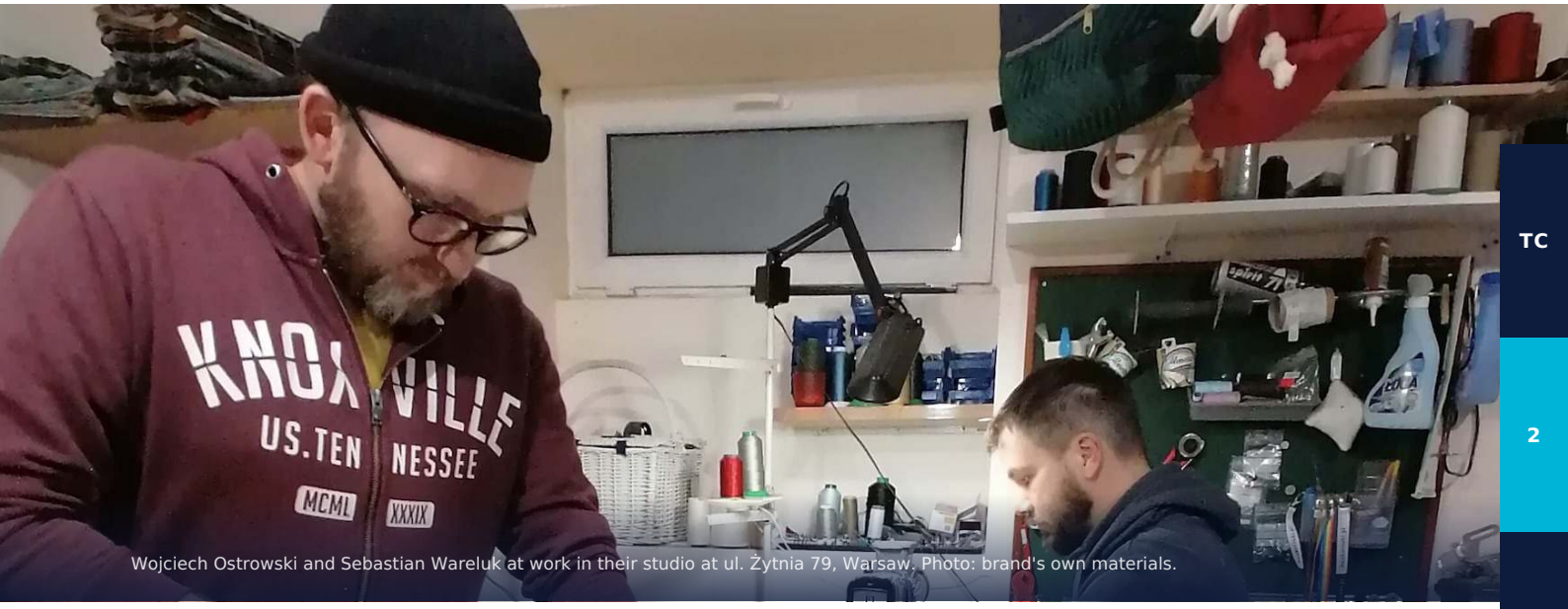
PART II · ARTICLE 7

Dwa Borsuki – Offcuts in the Limelight

Bogna Olech

Expert in operational management with 30 years of experience in the insurance industry. Specialist in sustainable development. ESG leader and activist promoting responsible business.

While more and more brands talk about responsible production, Dwa Borsuki have simply been practising it for years — sewing accessories in Warsaw from reclaimed materials and building a business model around craftsmanship that combines design, durability, and genuine environmental purpose.



Wojciech Ostrowski and Sebastian Wareluk at work in their studio at ul. Żytnia 79, Warsaw. Photo: brand's own materials.

When Waste Becomes a Starting Point

Founded in May 2019 by Wojciech Ostrowski and Sebastian Wareluk, Pracownia Dwa Borsuki operates from Warsaw's Wola district, creating bum bags, totes, drawstring backpacks, cosmetic pouches, and yoga mat covers — made exclusively from fabrics reclaimed from Polish furniture factories. Polish furniture manufacturers generate tonnes of upholstery offcuts and end-of-collection samples destined for disposal. It is precisely in this gap — between a surplus of high-quality material and the cost of its elimination — that Pracownia Dwa Borsuki operates.

> *Dwa Borsuki is a project that did not start with drawings of backpacks. It was the other way around — we asked ourselves what we could do with the offcuts that were available to us. — Wojciech Ostrowski and Sebastian Wareluk*

Five Pillars of the Manufactory

The offer combines retail products (each a one-of-a-kind piece with a two-year warranty), a B2B line for corporations — L'Occitane, Garnier, NYX, the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw — cultural commissions for the Zachęta National Gallery of Art and the Fryderyk Chopin Institute, sewing workshops from 400 PLN, and social engagement: a partnership with the

Szlachetna Paczka foundation and a rainbow label sewn into every product as an open declaration of support for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Accessories made from upcycled upholstery fabrics. Rainbow accents are a permanent feature of the brand. Photo: brand's own materials.

Durability as Technology

Every product carries a two-year warranty — a bold statement in the upcycling segment. Reinforced threads and industrial sewing techniques make reclaimed accessories often more durable than their high-street equivalents made from virgin materials. The founders deliberately avoid fabrics that age poorly: faux leather, used advertising banners, and low-weight textiles.

Scaling, Art and Responsibility

Fulfilling orders of over 600 bespoke pieces for international corporations proved that craftsmanship can scale without sacrificing ethical standards — and this flexibility helped the studio survive the pandemic. A presence at Zachęta and bum bags bearing the logotype of the 19th Chopin Piano Competition show that a reclaimed product can reach the highest cultural stages. The studio embraces slow-life values and, together with other circular brands, builds a community working for the good of the planet and local communities.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Rescuing upholstery fabrics difficult to chemically recycle; sourcing exclusively in Poland shortens the supply chain. Two-year warranty minimises carbon footprint through long-term product use.
SOCIETY (S)	Democratising sewing and upcycling knowledge through workshops. Partnership with Szlachetna Paczka and a rainbow label as open support for the LGBTQIA+ community.
GOVERNANCE (G)	Ethical sourcing exclusively from the Polish furniture industry, full process transparency, no greenwashing. Scalable B2B model maintained alongside artisanal standards.

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PART II · ARTICLE 8

Technology for rent: how Plenti is teaching us to own less

Bogna Olech

Expert in operational management with 30 years of experience in the insurance industry. Specialist in sustainable development. ESG leader and activist promoting responsible business.

A Polish startup is proving that you do not have to buy a games console, a drone or a coffee machine to use one. Plenti has built a platform that combines the access economy, the circular economy and a new way of investing - electronics rental as a subscription service available across Poland.

Plenti founders: Wojciech Rokosz (CEO), Karol Klimas (COO) and Wojciech Wójtowicz (CFO). Source: Sifted / Plenti press materials.

From ownership to access

For years, consumer electronics were a status symbol. We bought new smartphones, consoles and household appliances even if we only used them from time to time. Today that mindset is beginning to shift, particularly among younger consumers, who increasingly ask not “where can I buy it?” but “can I rent it?”.

Plenti grew out of this shift - a Polish startup founded in 2018 by Wojciech Rokosz (CEO), Karol Klimas (COO) and Wojciech Wójtowicz (CFO). The company is developing a platform for flexible, on-demand electronics rental. Instead of investing in expensive equipment, the user selects a product in the app, sets the rental period and orders delivery to a chosen address.

It is a model that fits squarely into the growing access economy trend. Unlike traditional “one-off” equipment rental shops, Plenti offers service-based, subscription access to technology - from a few days to many months.

PLENTI IN NUMBERS

~PLN 20M	PLN 30M+	162	UP TO 60%
RENTAL REVENUE	funding raised	PlentiPartners partners	partner share (Revenue Share)

How it works in practice

From the user's perspective, the process feels like online shopping. You pick a category, a product, a rental period and a delivery method - courier, parcel locker or in-person pickup in Warsaw. Payment is taken automatically from a linked card.

The minimum rental period starts at 7 days, while subscriptions can run for 1, 3, 6 or 12 months with automatic renewal. The offer covers eight main equipment categories: consoles, gaming setups, laptops, smartphones, drones, cameras, as well as home appliances - from air purifiers to coffee machines.

The most popular device categories are gaming and VR (31% of rentals), smartphones and tablets (17%), and cameras (10%). The bestsellers remain the Meta Quest 3 and Oculus Quest 2 VR headsets, the PlayStation 5 console, the Sony PlayStation VR2 headset and the Logitech G923 racing wheel. The average rental period is six months - and, tellingly, 40% of weekly subscriptions get extended.

> *You rent VR goggles for the weekend, a robot vacuum for the duration of a renovation, or a professional camera for a specific project. No purchase, no servicing, no hassle with reselling.*
> *- the editors, based on Plenti customer reviews on Trustpilot*

Plenti's official message: one subscription, thousands of devices. Source: plenti.app.

Scaling with the help of investors

Plenti is not merely a rental platform - it is also the infrastructure for managing a large fleet of devices in constant circulation. A key element of the model are individual investors, who buy equipment and earn money on its rental, while Plenti handles logistics, servicing and insurance, the latter in cooperation with Ergo Hestia.

Since 2018 the company has gone through several funding rounds, raising more than PLN 30 million in total. In a 2023 late seed round it collected PLN 23.5 million from the funds 4growth VC, Montis Capital and NIF, along with a group of business angels - among them Piotr Biało (co-founder of DocPlanner) and Kuba Filipowski (Netguru). In the next round, in 2024, led by RST Ventures for Earth, the startup raised close to PLN 6 million.

According to available data, the company has reached revenues of around PLN 20 million from consumer electronics rental, a clear sign of growing demand for this kind of service. In May 2024 Plenti was recognised by Sifted as one of the 10 fastest-growing startups in Central and Eastern Europe. The platform operates across Poland via courier deliveries and parcel lockers, with in-person pickup also available in Warsaw.

PlentiPartners: when anyone can be an investor

The PlentiPartners programme is the platform's flagship proposition for entrepreneurs. Active VAT payers - sole traders and companies - purchase devices through Plenti, which then join the rental fleet. Plenti leases the equipment from the partner, handles all operations, insurance and servicing, and the partner receives remuneration.

By the end of September 2024, 162 partners had joined the programme, signing 248 contracts and paying in more than PLN 12.2 million. In May 2025 Plenti launched a second variant of the programme - Revenue Share, in which partners are remunerated solely for the actual rentals of the equipment they purchased, but their share of the revenue from each transaction reaches as much as 60%.

Fix model: a fixed lease-based remuneration, with an annual margin of 12-15% of the contract value. The safer option for partners who value predictability.

Revenue Share model: up to 60% of the revenue from each rental, but only for actual rentals. Greater risk, greater profit potential.

Suggested equipment bundles: Plenti selects the models with the highest rental efficiency - VR headsets (Meta Quest 3), consoles (PlayStation 5), laptops (MacBook Pro M3) for long-term rentals.

Post-contract buyback: Plenti can buy the device back from the partner once the cooperation ends, solving the problem of electronics' residual value.

> *A year after launching the PlentiPartners programme, we have brought on 162 partners who see equipment rental as an attractive source of additional income. The Revenue Share model is our answer for those with a bigger appetite for risk.*
> *- Wojciech Rokosz, CEO and co-founder of Plenti, MamStartup, May 2025*

From convenience to the circular economy

Plenti's future taps into two powerful trends: the growing popularity of subscriptions and the pressure to curb e-waste. Reusing the same device many times reduces the need to buy new units, which translates into a lower environmental footprint of electronics production.

The natural direction of growth is new equipment categories, including a B2B offer for entrepreneurs within PlentiPartners. International expansion is also on the table - CEO Rokosz himself has pointed to the US as the target market in interviews. Plenti also works with Packhelp, which supplies reusable packaging - a logical complement to the circular economy strategy in its logistics operations.

If the model holds, Plenti may become an important element of the circular economy in the consumer electronics segment - extending the life of devices and changing the way we use technology.

Competition and market context

The Polish electronics subscription market is becoming increasingly competitive. On the other side of the stage is WeSub - founded in 2021 by a former PKO Leasing manager, focused on B2B from the outset, growing without external shareholders and reaching PLN 54 million in sales in 2025. The

differences, however, are significant: Plenti targets primarily consumers, and in the B2B segment offers a partner-based investor model. WeSub bets on corporations and is currently pursuing European expansion.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

Plenti writes ESG values directly into its business model - not as a communications add-on, but as the foundation of the entire value proposition.

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Reusing equipment many times reduces e-waste and the environmental footprint of production. The cooperation with Packhelp adds a reusable packaging component.
SOCIETY (S)	Greater access to technology without a high cost of entry - from a photographer testing a new camera to parents renting a console for their child for the holidays.
GOVERNANCE (G)	A transparent rental model, automatic payments, insurance and revenue sharing with investors under two clearly defined models (Fix and Revenue Share).

The verdict: “own less, experience more”

Plenti is one of the few Polish startups that has managed to meet three conditions at once: a consumer product with a real user base, a logistics and financial infrastructure for individual investors, and a credible ESG narrative. That is a rare combination in the consumer electronics segment.

The question is no longer whether the access economy makes sense in Poland. The question is how quickly Plenti will prove that the model also works at greater scale - whether in the US or in the B2B segment.

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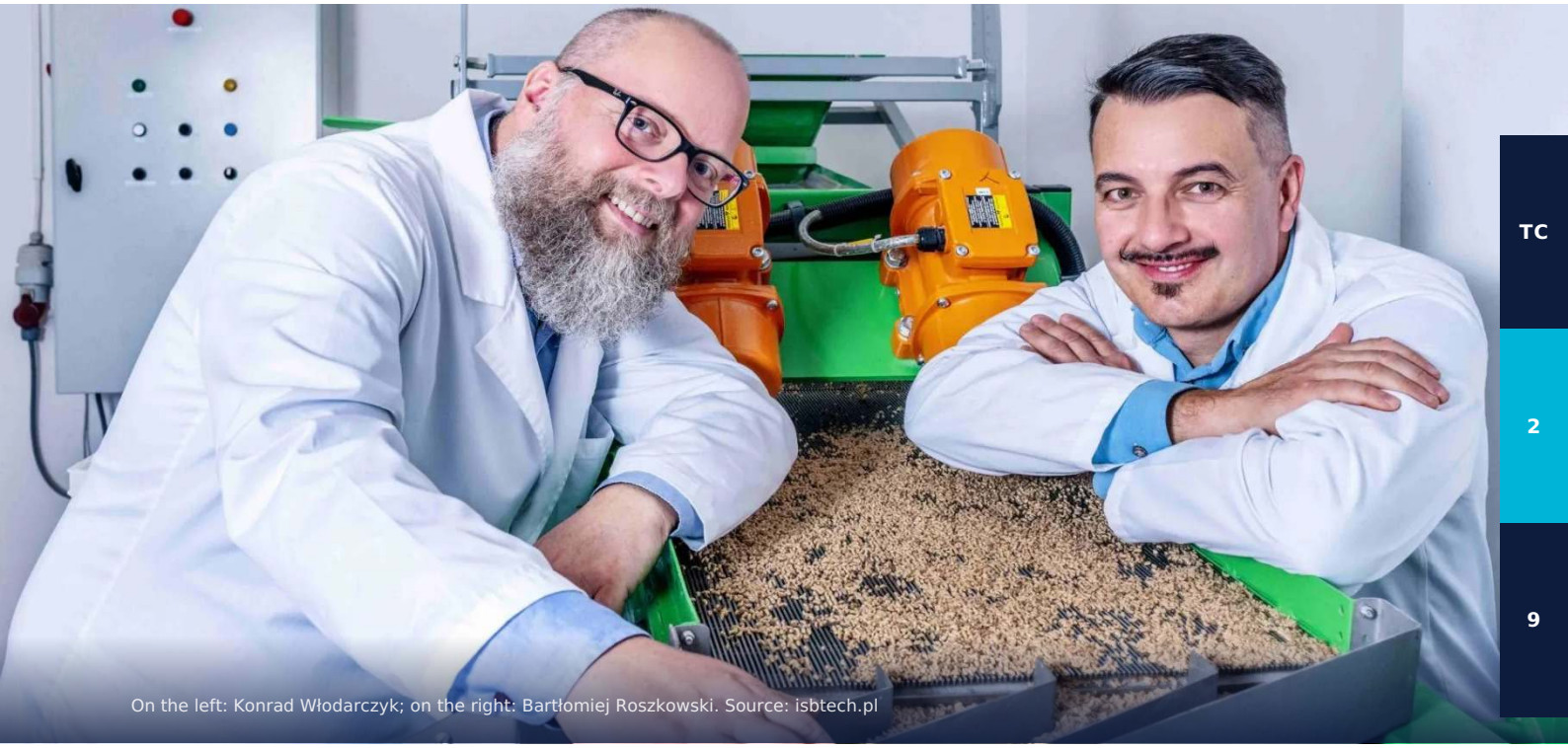
PART II · ARTICLE 9

Proteine Resources: Insects Instead of Beef

Melania Matuszak

Specialist in environmental risk management and sustainable development

Around 34% of dogs suffer from food allergies — most commonly triggered by beef and chicken. At the same time, meat production for pets carries an enormous carbon footprint: 100 grams of beef generates up to 50 kg of CO_2. The pet food industry is desperately seeking an alternative — healthier for animals, cheaper for producers, and lighter on the planet. Proteine Resources has the answer — and it's patented.



On the left: Konrad Włodarczyk; on the right: Bartłomiej Roszkowski. Source: isbtech.pl

> *"The industry has always optimised for "good enough". From day one, we built a system designed for the highest quality, cost efficiency and seamless expansion. — Konrad Włodarczyk, Founder & CEO, Proteine Resources*

The Insect That Will Beat Beef

The hero of this story is the larva of the Buffalo Beetle, known as the Buffalo Mealworm. Proteine Resources breeds it in purpose-built facilities and processes it into products ready for use in pet food. The flagship EntoPro Flakes® are insect flakes with 67% or 75% protein content — a direct substitute for beef. EntoPro Smoothie® (17% protein) is a creamy preparation ideal as a binder in wet food. The range is completed by EntoPro Casting® — an organic fertiliser made from insect frass, closing the circular loop.

The health results speak for themselves. Insect protein achieves over 80% palatability in cats and dogs. It is also hypoallergenic: studies show improvement in up to 60% of dogs with atopic dermatitis. Insect protein contains over 130% more calcium, 300% more

selected essential amino acids (L-tryptophan, taurine) and up to 200% more B vitamins than leading market products, with clinically proven benefits for the digestive system, skin, coat and joints.

Mycelium as the Foundation of the System

The key to Proteine Resources' competitive edge is its patented insect-feeding method. Instead of conventional, resource-intensive feeds, the company feeds its larvae on waste from the mushroom farming industry. Mushroom substrate residues — material the industry discards — become a precise nutritional carrier. The effect is twofold: feed composition remains stable year-round with no seasonal variation, and is fully non-GMO. Thanks to this method, insects mature in 3–4 weeks — 50% faster than in standard farming. The closed-loop system eliminates waste: conventional farming loses up to 40% of feed, whereas at Proteine Resources 100% of inputs go into production.

The Factory of the Future: 5 Employees, Thousands of Tonnes of Protein

Proteine Resources is building the world's first fully autonomous insect protein factory. At its core are robotics, AI and a multispectral vision system — technology that literally "converses with the insects", reading signals about colony health, feed quality and environmental parameters. The entire production process — from feeding and climate control to packaging — runs without human intervention. A maximum of 5 people suffices to operate the facility, reducing operating costs by up to 4–10 times compared with traditional gigafactories. Facilities are powered by 100% renewable energy, with surplus energy stored as hydrogen and methanol.

"Cats are the toughest critics. When they finish the bowl, you know the recipe works!" Source: proteineresources.com

Investors and Business Model

In October 2024 Proteine Resources closed a PLN 6 million funding round led by SMOK Ventures. The deeptech fund Bitspiration Booster — the company's first institutional investor — reinvested in the round. In total, the company has raised PLN 8 million from investors and is at an advanced stage of securing funds from the EIC (European Innovation Council). Alongside founder Konrad Włodarczyk, who has dedicated 15 years to autonomous insect protein production, Bartłomiej Roszkowski — formerly one of the

leading figures behind Vue Storefront (now Alokai), one of Poland's most valuable startups — has taken the role of co-CEO.

Proteine Resources' business model stands out across the entire industry. The company is the only one planning to grow through a franchise model — modular factories will be located wherever agri-food waste is generated to serve as insect feed. Production operates in a distributed system connected into a global network managed by AI algorithms. The first modular factory in Poland is set to reach output capacity of 800 tonnes of product per year. The target for 2030 is PLN 270 million in annual revenue.

> *We expect our first revenues in 2026, with a clear sales surge the following year. We are already contracting orders so that by the time the plant opens, 80% of production capacity will be secured. — Bartłomiej Roszkowski, co-CEO, Proteine Resources*

ESG: When Ecology Becomes a Business Model

The environmental scale is impressive. Insect protein emits 90% less CO_2 than conventional cattle farming and requires 90 times less land and water than beef. A full Proteine Resources production centre saves 13,216 tonnes of CO_2 per year (826 kg CO_2 per tonne of processed mushroom substrate). Annual carbon sequestration amounts to 14 million kg of CO_2 — equivalent to 14,100 trees planted, or 47 hectares of forest. The target emission rate is below 1 kg CO_2e per kilogram of protein produced. Proteine Resources offers verifiable environmental footprints at batch level, making it the only company in the sector capable of CSRD reporting at the level of a single ingredient. The startup is supported by EIT Food — Europe's food innovation network — confirming the credibility of the technology and its alignment with European food policy.

A Market Ready for Change

> *All of this is zero waste, zero emission and in the spirit of the circular economy — because that is precisely how I see modern 21st-century agriculture. — Konrad Włodarczyk, Founder & CEO, Proteine Resources*

The insect protein market is valued at nearly 9 billion dollars. Consumer data supports the trend: 54% of pet owners say they are willing to pay a premium for more sustainable products. The premium pet food and veterinary sectors are seeking functional, hypoallergenic and verifiably eco-friendly ingredients — Proteine Resources addresses all three needs simultaneously. The expansion model is built on a global network of mid-sized factories located near mushroom industry hubs. The "close to the raw material" strategy eliminates transport costs and minimises the logistics footprint. Thanks to the modularity of the facilities, each new factory can be built faster and at lower cost. In the longer term, the company also plans to extract highly specialised insect-derived intermediates with potential applications in medicine, pharmaceuticals and bioelectronics.

THE STARTUP IN NUMBERS

INDICATOR	VALUE
PROTEIN PALATABILITY IN CATS AND DOGS	over 80%
IMPROVEMENT IN DOGS WITH ATOPIC DERMATITIS	60%
MORE SUSTAINABLE THAN BEEF	67×
CO_2 EMISSION REDUCTION VS. ANIMAL MEAT	90%
CO_2 SAVED PER YEAR BY ONE FACILITY	13,216 tonnes
ESTIMATED GLOBAL MARKET VALUE	USD 9 billion

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Closed-loop production based on mycelium waste, 100% renewable energy, 90% less CO_2 than beef, sequestration of 14 million kg CO_2 per year. Target: full carbon negativity.
SOCIETY (S)	Insect protein as a response to the pet allergy epidemic: hypoallergenic, antibiotic-free, with proven benefits for the digestive system, skin and joints. Enables pet food producers to develop safer premium products.
GOVERNANCE (G)	International patents validated by research organisations, EIT Food support, verifiable environmental data for every production batch. Ready for CSRD reporting at ingredient level.

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PART II · ARTICLE 10

WaterSense: Polish Technology That Reads Rivers

Melania Matuszak

Specialist in environmental risk management and sustainable development

When the Oder River began releasing tonnes of dead fish in August 2022, Poland faced an unprecedented ecological crisis. The problem was twofold: not only were there no tools to prevent the disaster, there were no systems capable of detecting it in advance. A major river underpinning the economy of an entire region was virtually unmonitored. It was at that moment that the founder of WaterSense — a doctoral researcher specialising in printed electronics — decided to connect the dots.

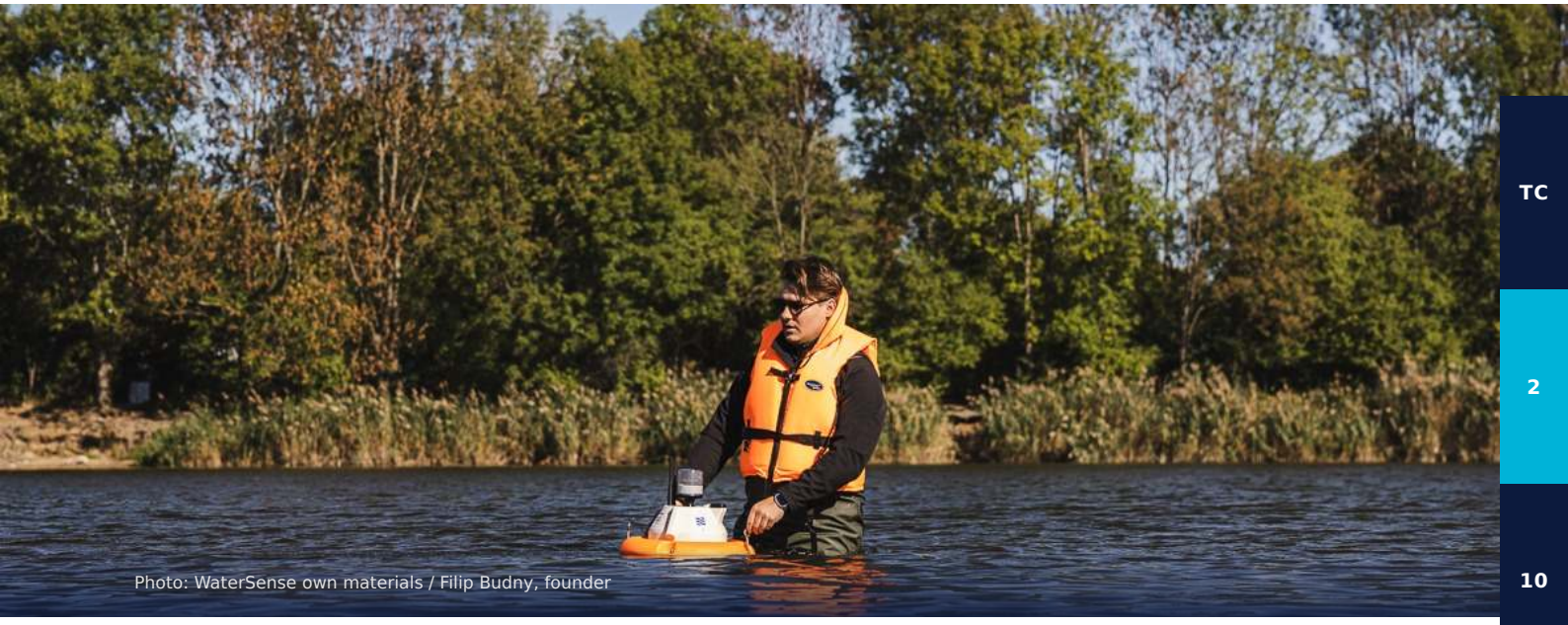

Photo: WaterSense own materials / Filip Budny, founder

The Idea That Changed Direction

The technology behind WaterSense originates in biomedical engineering. Printed electronics allow the creation of miniature, low-cost sensor systems for detecting specific chemical substances — the same technology used in glucose test strips. The founder was working on one layer of such a system as part of his doctoral research, but the idea of applying the technology to environmental monitoring only came after the Oder catastrophe.

> *We would like to become the absolute standard for water quality monitoring in Europe — a company that truly understands the flow of pollutants in the environment. — Filip Budny, founder of WaterSense*

Photo: WaterSense own materials / Filip Budny, founder

> *I realised there was simply no technology enabling truly accessible monitoring of water quality parameters. — Filip Budny, founder of WaterSense*

Technology Without Precedent

At the heart of the WaterSense measuring station is a replaceable cartridge containing around 350 miniature electrochemical sensors. Each sensor operates for one day, after which the system automatically switches to the next — allowing the station to measure water quality continuously, without interruption and without the need for field visits. The only maintenance required is a cartridge replacement every 8–11 months. The key competitive advantage is the ability to directly measure biogenic ions: nitrates, nitrites, ammonium ions, chlorides and — crucially — orthophosphates, a substance essential for assessing water eutrophication. Existing optical sensors rely on approximation and are susceptible to interference. WaterSense measures specific ions directly — a fundamental difference. The startup holds a patent application for its solution. Sensors for detecting heavy metals, sulphur and microbiological parameters — including *E. coli* and Legionella — are already in development.

A Data-Driven Business Model

WaterSense does not sell devices. The company installs stations itself and offers clients data via a monthly subscription — typically on annual contracts. Current clients include public water utilities (among others in Warsaw, Radom, Płock, Wrocław and Poznań), municipalities, NGOs, and industry — mines and manufacturing plants that use inland waterways in their production processes.

> *Just as ISAI has satellites in orbit and sells satellite imagery, we want to sell water quality data. — Filip Budny, founder of WaterSense*

From the Vistula to the Rhine

WaterSense, formally operational since September 2024, already has over 40 installed measuring stations. International expansion is underway: three stations are operating in Switzerland, one in Germany, and another is being installed in Hamburg. The startup is also present in Northern Ireland and plans to enter the US market. The strategic goal is to build a network of stations every 10 km along the Vistula, Oder and Rhine. The public platform WaterMap.pl aims to allow every citizen to check the water quality of a nearby body of water — before swimming, fishing or engaging in recreation.

Water at the Centre of ESG

Data from the WaterSense system has direct applications in ESG reporting. Companies can report both the quantity and quality of water drawn from the environment and the parameters of water discharged back into it. In the United Kingdom, autonomous real-time monitoring has been mandatory for all businesses using waterways for a year. In Europe, the IERP regulation comes into force in 2027. In January 2025, Poland was sued by the EU Court of Justice for failing to implement the drinking water framework directive. To date, the WaterSense project has raised EUR 5 million, including funds from the National Centre for Research and Development.

> *Poland is a remarkable country in which solutions are emerging that have the potential to serve as a model not only for the whole of Europe, but for the entire world in terms of caring for water resources. — Filip Budny, founder of WaterSense*

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Continuous monitoring of biogenic ions and orthophosphates enables early detection of eutrophication and industrial pollution before it reaches drinking water intakes or causes irreversible ecosystem damage.
SOCIETY (S)	The WaterMap.pl platform gives citizens access to surface water quality data. The goal is for anyone to be able to check the safety of a body of water before swimming or fishing.
GOVERNANCE (G)	WaterSense data allows companies to report water management in line with CSRD requirements and prepare for the IERP 2027 regulations. The startup participates in working groups shaping the approach of Polish businesses to the water dimension of ESG.

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PART II · ARTICLE 11

TerraLight: Cemeteries Don't Have to Drown in Waste

Alicja Kozłowska

Editor, Startupy Pozytywnego Wpływu | AI Adoption & Workflow Specialist | ESG & AI Innovation

Polish cementeries generate at least 120,000 tonnes of waste every year. But the real figure could be three times higher. A single grave leaves behind between 3 and 9 kilograms of waste during All Saints' Day — glass, plastic, artificial flowers, metal caps. Poland is the largest producer of grave candles in Europe. One project decided to make use of that.

TerraLight earth candle — a product made from rammed earth. Photo: TerraLight press materials.

A Problem Whose Scale Surprises

With 300 million grave candles purchased annually by Poles, the mass of the candles alone amounts to 120,000–240,000 tonnes per year. Add flowers and holders, and the real mass of cemetery waste falls between 250,000 and 360,000 tonnes — two to three times more than official reports suggest. Poland is the largest producer of grave candles in Europe — the export value in 2023 reached 764 million euros. The industry is booming. The problem grows along with it.

Recycling of grave candles is virtually non-existent: the glass casing is contaminated with paraffin and smelters refuse to accept it, plastic ends up in mixed waste, and paraffin seep s into the soil and contaminates groundwater. Initiatives like TerraLight are a response to a systemic problem whose scale is probably three times larger than the reports indicate.

The Origin of the Earth Candle

Aleksandra Oleksy is a pharmacist. For years she worked in a pharmacy — the world of grave candles was far from her daily life. Everything changed because of a material that appeared in her home: her husband runs a company called Rammed Earth, specialising in building with compacted earth. Watching samples of walls, Aleksandra began to wonder what else could be made from this material. The first association: a candle holder. Then immediately: a grave candle.

The breakthrough came during a trip to Switzerland — to the Ricola herb warehouse in Laufen, the largest rammed earth building in Europe, designed by Herzog & de Meuron. “I imagined some kind of dugout — she says — and instead there stood a beautiful, natural building where herbs were drying. It made a huge impression on me.” She returned convinced that raw earth could be both elegant and functional. Over two years of trial and error — from CNC milling to 3D-printed moulds — led to the right answer. Until August 2025 it was a hobby project. In August she made the decision: she was going all in. She left her job at the pharmacy.

> *“Looking at those first photos on my phone — I think: how ugly that was. If I don't like it myself, I can't sell it. — Aleksandra Oleksy, founder of TerraLight*

How the Earth Candle Is Made

The product is formed from earth compacted in a mould — the body and lid separately — and dries for one to two days without firing in a kiln. This is a deliberate choice and a key advantage: firing ceramics requires 800–1,100°C and enormous energy input. When in use, the TerraLight flame heats the body of the candle and warms the lid so that even raindrops evaporate instantly. The more it is used, the longer it lasts. The absence of firing also made it possible to embed seeds in the material: forget-me-not, poppy and daisy. The seeds are meant to remind users not to throw TerraLight in the bin, but to use its remains to enrich the soil — the candle should be crumbled on the lawn for this purpose.

The Światłoziem Philosophy and Product Lines

The founder calls this concept “Światłoziem” — a coined word combining the transience of a flame with the materiality of earth. TerraLight is deliberately creating its own market category: the earth candle. A Google Trends analysis showed that the phrase “ecological grave candle” is dominated by LED candle producers — the brand has no intention of competing for that phrase. **The Memoryline** is designed for places of remembrance, fitted with a lid that protects the flame from rain. **The Design line** is aimed at interior enthusiasts — lanterns for home use. The brand philosophy: *“remembering the past, we do no harm to the future.”*

Challenges, B2B and Awards

The earth candle has one enemy: the combination of moisture and frost — snow dampens the body, freezing temperatures crack the structure. The second barrier is price: a traditional grave candle costs 5–35 PLN, TerraLight Memory — 89 PLN. Following planned automation, the brand expects to reach a competitive price point. Current production capacity is 1,000–2,000 units per month.

An unexpected direction has been B2B: TerraLight works with a company that engraves logos directly onto the body. The first order — a series of lanterns for a yoga studio — has already been fulfilled. The potential: corporate gifts, event merchandise, eco-themed keepsakes. On 19 March 2026 the brand received the Stena Circular Economy Award in the category of startups implementing circular solutions — selected from nearly 80 entries. This is the first external validation signal for a brand just five months after registration.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Elimination of plastic and glass, no kiln firing (zero production emissions), plant-based wax instead of paraffin, biodegradable starch packaging, flower seeds instead of waste. Future packaging from kraft paper with no black ink.
SOCIETY (S)	Shifting the narrative around commemoration, education about cemetery waste, reference to the philosophy of natural burials. Active communication through social media with audiences interested in conscious consumption.
GOVERNANCE (G)	D2C sales via terralight.eu, industrial design registered across the EU, TerraLight trademark in Poland. Shop operating since December 2025 — target expansion to Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

An earth candle that returns to the earth. In an industry generating an estimated 250,000–360,000 tonnes of waste per year — this is not just a pretty metaphor, but a project only beginning to show its potential. We invite you to read the full article on the Startupy Pozytywnego Wpływu website.

What's Next?

The online shop terralight.eu has been running since 12 December 2025. In the first month, 12 units were sold — a signal for the founder that customers were coming. To date, around 500 unique users have visited the shop — mostly from Warsaw, Poznań, Łódź and Kraków. The customer profile is already taking shape: around 40 years old, environmentally conscious, reads the entire page and browses Instagram before buying. Target markets for expansion are Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden — markets with high environmental awareness, to which Poland already exports grave candles worth hundreds of millions of euros per year.

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PART II · ARTICLE 12

RoślinnieJemy: Hard Data Defended the Mission

Alicja Kozłowska

AI Adoption & Workflow Specialist | ESG & AI Innovation, Startupy Pozytywnego Wpływu

You believe your sector needs to change. You have the data. You have the mission. The problem is that sitting across from a buyer at a national retail chain, nobody listens to the mission — they listen to hard numbers on product turnover and category potential. RoślinnieJemy spent several years learning that lesson. Today it is a strategic adviser to the largest players in Polish retail, with an annual operating budget of PLN 1.1 million for its activities in Poland.

Maciej Otrębski, co-founder of RoślinnieJemy. Source: roslinniejemy.org

Why This Model Matters Right Now

Maciej Otrębski recalls that in 2010 shelves dedicated to plant-based food in Polish supermarkets barely existed. There was a flavourless soya pâté, and plant-based milk — in powder form — was brought over by a friend from an eco-shop in the Czech Republic. Fifteen years have passed. The Polish plant-based industry is now worth PLN 1.08 billion. Plant-based dairy alternatives grew from PLN 519 million in 2021/22 to PLN 657 million in 2023/24. Back in 2019, the European market for plant-based meat alternatives reached EUR 1.2 billion, with double-digit growth across all categories.

And yet Poland still spends just EUR 4.23 per capita per year on plant-based products — compared with EUR 23.39 in the Netherlands and EUR 22.79 in Germany. That almost sixfold gap is not merely a statistic — it is a map of growth potential waiting for the right market infrastructure. Demand is real and comes from an unexpected place: 93% of buyers of plant-based meat alternatives are not vegans, but mainstream consumers reducing their meat intake out of concern about over-processed food. According to Boston Consulting

Group, investment in alternative protein delivers four times the climate return of investment in green cement — making the market a magnet for funds seeking measurable environmental impact.

Four Phases: From Hypothesis to Institution

Phase 1 — starting hypothesis. The campaign launched around 2016–17 within the Open Cages association with a specific premise: it would be enough to persuade restaurant owners to add one vegan dish to their menu. The logic was clear — availability creates habit, habit creates demand. The problem, however, turned out to be structural: many chefs simply did not know how to cook vegetarian or vegan food. It was not a lack of willingness — it was a systemic gap in vocational training that required a different lever than a conversation with the owner of a single restaurant.

Phase 2 — pivot based on reach analysis. Around 2018 a decision was made that can be read as a classic example of a strategic pivot. Instead of working with hundreds of small restaurateurs, RoślinnieJemy shifted its focus to large retail chains, mass producers and national catering networks. The calculation was clear-headed: a single plant-based product in a discount chain generates consumer exposure incomparably greater than years of work with independent venues. Discount retailers account for nearly 50% of the entire Polish plant-based market — and that is where 40% of young Poles, increasingly reaching for plant-based alternatives, shop.

Phase 3 — expertise as the currency of access. The campaign stopped being an entity making demands. It became an analytics centre supplying data that business could translate into concrete assortment decisions. Regular consumer attitude reports, market research, trend analytics — these were the arguments for a conversation with a retail chain's buying department, not materials for a public awareness campaign. The result: partnerships with Biedronka, IKEA and Carrefour, support in building retailers' own-brand ranges, and the annual Plant-Powered Perspectives conference — a platform where buyers, producers and investors discuss strategy, not ideology.

Phase 4 — industry institutionalisation. In 2023 RoślinnieJemy co-founded the Polish Association of Plant-Based Food Producers — an industry organisation representing the sector's interests in dialogue with regulators. At the same time the campaign engaged in regulatory advocacy: the Polish PKD classification still does not include a separate code for plant-based food producers, meaning the entire sector is virtually invisible to grant programmes. Changing that requires work at the legislative level — and RoślinnieJemy is there.

The Flywheel That Spins Itself

Data opened the first doors. Behind them was a seat at the table — not at the PR table, but where assortments are planned and decisions made about which products enter the network. When a plant-based product reached the shelf, an effect appeared that no survey can replicate: hard sales data from a real market. Those data returned to the organisation as fuel for the next report — stronger, because based on facts, not forecasts. The organisation whose hypotheses were confirmed by Biedronka, then IKEA and Carrefour, stopped knocking on doors. It became the entity that gets called. Producers started bringing data themselves. Buyers asked for the next report before the previous one had gone to print.

What Could Go Wrong

Identity conflict: an activist organisation in deep partnerships with large retail faces the question of where compromise ends. **Uneven growth:** meat alternatives recorded a 2.1%

volume decline in H2 2025, while plant-based drinks grew by 8.8%. **Funding concentration:** one grant (Open Philanthropy: PLN 17 million) dominates revenues, while own revenues are just PLN 83,000 per year — the end of a grant cycle is a moment of risk. **Regulatory invisibility:** the absence of a PKD code excludes the entire sector from grant programmes.

> *A food production system based on plant-derived protein is a decades-long endeavour. It requires leadership and perseverance. — Maciej Otrębski, RoślinnieJemy*

3 Lessons for Founders

1. Expertise gains entry where mission cannot. Large organisations open doors to experts with data that solves a specific problem in their category — not to NGOs with demands. Building an analytical base is an investment in the right to speak with entities that have real market leverage.

2. A pivot is justified when it changes the addressee — not the mission. The shift from local hospitality to large retail was not an abandonment of the goal. It was the result of an analysis of where the same effort delivers incomparably greater impact. If you are working with a low-reach entity — ask whether it is the right addressee for your lever.

3. Funding diversity is an architecture of credibility, not just resilience. 1.5% tax contributions from 8,300 people is not just PLN 1.3 million — it is a signal of social mandate that opens different doors than a foundation grant. Each funding source provides a different kind of legitimacy.

IMPACT IN A NUTSHELL

AREA	IMPACT
ENVIRONMENT (E)	Promoting plant-based protein as a lower-footprint alternative. Investment in alternative protein delivers ~4 times the climate return of comparable investment in other green transition sectors.
SOCIETY (S)	The RoślinnieJemy Academy has reached nearly 50 culinary schools. The campaign reaches 40% of Poles reducing meat consumption and builds nutritional awareness beyond the vegan community.
GOVERNANCE (G)	Co-founding the Polish Association of Plant-Based Food Producers as the sector's institutional advocate. Active advocacy for introducing a PKD code for plant-based food producers.

The billion-zloty plant-based market did not grow on its own — it grew where rising consumer awareness, access to reliable data and business willingness to change converged. If you would like to read the full article, we invite you to visit the **Startupy Pozytywnego Wpływu** website.

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Panel of Positive Figures

The people who evaluate and select startups of positive impact each year. Their perspective determines which projects deserve recognition.

01. **Alicja Kozłowska**
02. **Bolesław Rok**
03. **Agnieszka Oleksyn-Wajda**
04. **Piotr Boulangé**
05. **Joanna Fogler**
06. **Mirella Panek-Owsiańska**
07. **Berenika Pel**
08. **Patrycja Radek**
09. **Ada Stępień**
10. **Justyna Markowicz**
11. **Michał Miszułowicz**
12. **Magda Andrejczuk**
13. **Maciej Otrębski**
14. **Dominik Krawczyk**
15. **Monika Kulik**
16. **Adrian Migoń**
17. **Anna Węgrzynowicz**

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