

The Switchers Community: from storytelling to digital business development services

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The Switchers Community is a regional community of green entrepreneurs and civil society organizations. These green and circular businesses are implementing eco-innovative solutions that contribute to sustainable and fair consumption and production models. The main objective of the Switchers Community is to **promote sustainable business models and viable production and consumption activities which have a beneficial impact on the people, the planet and the economy.**

The Switchers Community has risen to the challenge of offering financial and non-financial services to its members. Thanks to the establishment of the Switchers Support Programme, an eco-innovation and circular economy-oriented initiative led by the UNEP/MAP Regional Activity Centre for Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP/RAC), with the financial support of the EU (DG NEAR, DG MARE, ENI-CBC MED, H2020) the Catalan Government and the Mediterranean Trust Fund.

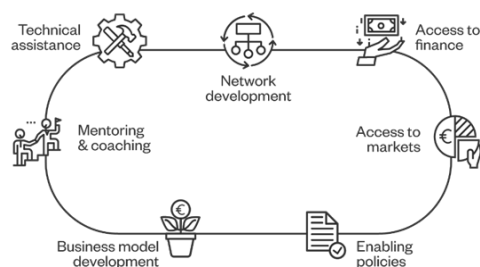
The Switchers Support Programme: The Community's eco-innovative business development tool

Achieving this objective requires the creation of enabling ecosystems allowing entrepreneurs to develop eco-innovative ideas and launch their sustainable start-ups. To this end, multiple stakeholders should align their actions with the common goal of supporting sustainable business development, from business support organizations, experts, financial actors, to policy actors. A complex mix of support services and policies are needed to encourage innovative sustainable business ideas. This is precisely the approach of The Switchers Support Programme which tries **to mobilize and strengthen a great diversity of stakeholders and support services**

around the common goal of enhancing green and circular business development.

The emergence of a new kind of entrepreneurs, not only oriented to economic value creation, but as well towards environmental and social value creation, addressing ecological and social challenges and needs, also requires new tools and methodologies.

That's why **the first step of the programme has been to develop innovative green business development methodologies, embedding eco-design and life cycle thinking into the tools** to be used to develop a business model, draft a business plan or assess the impact of a start-up, among others. These methodologies are transferred to business support organizations and trainers to mainstream sustainability approaches within business development services. One of the main activities of the Switchers Support Programme **to mobilize key stakeholders is to support the establishment of Switchers Support National Partnerships**, gathering public, private and non-profit Business Support Organizations (BSO) to cooperate on sustainable business development.



So far, 97 BSOs have been engaged in 7 Mediterranean countries to establish a **Switchers Support Partnership** to delivery business services in a coordinated fashion, such as:

- Direct business development support to green entrepreneurs is delivered, through business model development, mentoring and coaching, business plan development, technical assistance in collaboration with business support organizations in 10 countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Spain and Tunisia)
- Access to finance services is provided promoting matchmaking between green entrepreneurs and financial actors
- Access to market is supported enabling circular start-ups' solutions to companies and public actors' challenges through open innovation schemes
- Promotion of the adoption of enabling policies for sustainable businesses, liaising with and supporting policy makers

A digital eco-system for a digital community

The Switchers Community and SCP/RAC have, since 2020, accelerated digitalization and virtualization processes as a way to respond to the COVID19-related crisis, to enhance outreach and to improve access to training and support services. This led to the development of the [Switchers.org](https://switchers.org) a community-based digital initiative to establish a regional business ecosystem supporting green and circular entrepreneurs and civil society initiatives.

The [Switchers.org](https://switchers.org) platform offers a single-entry point to *The Switchers Support Programme* initiatives and allows interaction between stakeholders, thanks to a number of innovative digital tools:

The Switchers Toolbox, sustainable business development methodologies and support services

The Switchers Fund, matchmaking between eco-entrepreneurs and financial actors

The Switchers Community, showcasing the stories of the Community's members and offering a networking platform

Focus on The Switchers Toolbox: growing the quality of the Switchers Community's business models

The Switchers Toolbox offers innovative methodologies and tools for sustainable business development. As mentioned above, these are unique and innovative methodologies which have been developed integrating eco-design and life-cycle thinking in all the phases of the business development. The platform allows interaction between various users: green entrepreneurs and companies, business development organizations, experts (trainers, mentors, etc.), and financial actors. Experts supporting entrepreneurs within the platform can review their green business model or plan for example, and support them through comments and suggestions. Entrepreneurs can also use all the online tools autonomously without taking part in a business support programme. **More than 3,500 entrepreneurs are registered in the platform as well as more than 140 trainers and almost 100 BSOs.**

Results achieved so far to support sustainable business development through enabling ecosystems are very promising. The transference of innovative methodologies and tools for sustainable business development has been extensive, reaching 400 experts (47% women) trained in 10 Med Countries. Almost 3 thousand entrepreneurs (45% women) have been supported to develop their sustainable business models, 50 circular start-ups have been incubated and 2.6 million euros have been raised through matchmaking between eco-entrepreneurs and financial actors. Direct support provided to

entrepreneurs has contributed to the creation of 250 new green businesses and 1,000 green jobs.

As for the long-term impact and success of the programme, three major critical **success factors** for its strategy of intervention can be identified.

- The first one is linked with the ownership of the **National Partnerships**. The emergence of green and circular businesses depends heavily on a genuine commitment of public and private business support organizations with sustainable business development and the enhancement of the collaboration among all the active stakeholders in the national ecosystems
- The second factor is linked with the necessity of **gradual implementation of policies and regulations which support the circular businesses** against the competition of traditional “linear businesses” that are not assuming environmental and social costs and can thus provide cheaper unsustainable and unfair products and services
- The third factor is **changes in consumers’ behaviours are needed**, towards more sustainable consumption, in order to increase the demand of fair and sustainable products and services

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