

Circular Food Systems for Rwanda (CIRF) project is helping small businesses grow, creating jobs, and influencing national policy but experts say tracking whether the country's food system is truly becoming circular remains a challenge.

The project held its annual learning event in Kigali from Oct. 21 to Oct. 23, 2025, bringing together government officials, development partners, researchers, and entrepreneurs. CIRF is scheduled to conclude in December 2026, making this year's meeting a chance to reflect on progress and plan next steps.

SMEs See Real Gains

CIRF has supported 11 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to develop circular products such as animal feed pellets, compost, and bakery items made from recovered food materials. Ten businesses generated new income streams, while nine reduced operational costs. In total, 73 direct jobs have been created through circular business models.

"Rwanda's transition toward a circular food system is not just about reducing waste ,it's about creating new income streams, jobs and sustainable practices that benefit businesses and communities alike," said a representative of the World Resources Institute (WRI), a key CIRF partner.

Rwanda's agricultural sector is central to this effort: more than 70% of the population relies on farming, which contributes roughly 33% of the country's GDP. At the same time, around 164 kilograms of food per person is wasted annually, highlighting the need for circular food strategies.

Policy Impact and Strategic Alignment

CIRF's multi-stakeholder policy platform helped Rwanda adopt two ISO standards on circularity and integrate circular economy principles into three major government strategies, including the Fifth Strategic Plan for Agriculture Transformation (STA5).

As CIRF nears its final year, partners are preparing to scale the model across Africa through Accelerating the Circular Economy for Food (ACE4Food). Unlike CIRF's Rwanda-focused pilot, ACE4Food will focus on governments, markets, and value chains to drive broader systemic change.

"That shift makes measuring systems-level impact more important, but also more complex," said a CIRF representative at the Kigali event.

Measuring System-Wide Impact

Experts noted that tracking circularity at the enterprise level, revenue, jobs, and product innovation is straightforward. But measuring system-wide impacts, such as reduced waste, lower emissions, improved nutrition, or community resilience, is far more complex.

A dedicated Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) session explored solutions. Specialists from the IKEA Foundation, Resonance, WRI, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), and SNV discussed methods such as outcomes harvesting, which verifies stories of change across stakeholders, and contribution analysis, which maps results against expected pathways while accounting for external factors. A market systems framework was also suggested to track shifts in relationships, incentives, and resource flows across value chains.

Early Signals of Circularity

Panelists highlighted several early indicators that circular practices are beginning to take root in Rwanda's food system, including growing consumer interest in circular products, farmers adopting waste-to-value practices, and incremental alignment in policies and governance. "No single metric can confirm systemic transformation," the panelists noted, "but combined indicators can guide interventions and highlight where additional support is needed."

The Kigali learning event concluded that Rwanda has made measurable progress at the SME and policy levels, but tools to track system-wide transformation are still developing.

"Understanding whether food systems are becoming more circular will require collaboration, shared learning, and a shift from measuring isolated outcomes to tracking long-term change," the MEL panel said.

As Rwanda prepares to expand circular food practices beyond its borders, experts emphasize the importance of ensuring enterprise-level successes translate into lasting systemic change.