

Six Youth-Led Sustainability Startups Win Youth Co:Lab National Innovation Challenge 2026

Top innovators in circular economy, sustainable textiles, and food systems honoured at T-Hub, Hyderabad; selected from more than 350 applicants across 28 states

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Six youth-led startups from across India have been recognized as winners of the 8th edition of the Youth Co:Lab National Innovation Challenge 2026 for developing innovative solutions that advance sustainability through circular economy innovations, sustainable textiles and fashion, and sustainable food systems and water conservation.

Co-led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India and Citi Foundation, in partnership with Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), and implemented by T-Hub Foundation, the Youth Co:Lab National Innovation Challenge has emerged as one of India's foremost platforms for empowering youth-led innovation that accelerates progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This year, the challenge received over 350 applications from youth-led startups across 28 states. Following a rigorous selection process, 50 high-potential startups were enrolled in the National Springboard Programme, a three-month virtual capacity-building journey supported by a curated group of 16 industry mentors and domain specialists.

The participating startups worked across three thematic areas:

- Sustainable Textiles and Fashion
- Circular Economy Innovations
- Sustainable Food Systems and Water Conservation

All 50 startups pitched before a distinguished jury during the National Innovation Dialogue held on 4th June 2026. Following the evaluation, the top 20 startups advanced to the Regional Immersion Bootcamp hosted at T-Hub, Hyderabad from 15th to 19th June 2026.

The five-day immersive programme brought together ecosystem leaders, sustainability experts, investors, government stakeholders and entrepreneurs through masterclasses, mentorship sessions, site visits and peer learning opportunities designed to strengthen business models and scale impact.

Following a final jury evaluation on 18 June 2026, six startups were selected for their scalable, high-impact solutions.

The three winning startups received seed grant support of ₹3,50,000 each, along with capacity-building opportunities and ecosystem access. The three runners-up were awarded ₹2,20,000 each in recognition of their promising contributions and potential for scale.



Winners: NavaPrayoga Labs LLP (Grassip), UnBubble and Ecorenowa Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

Runners Up: Eco Cushion, Vasudeva Innovations and WomenasticCO

The awards were presented in the presence of senior representatives from UNDP, AIM, T-Hub, government institutions, investors and innovation ecosystem leaders.

Delivering the special address on *Building India's Green Economy: Youth, Capital and the Next Decade of Innovation*, **Meraj Faheem, CEO, Telangana Innovation Cell (TGIC), Government of Telangana**, said, *"Initiatives like Youth Co:Lab reinforces the power of innovation, collaboration, and youth leadership in addressing some of our most pressing challenges. We are proud to have been part of this journey and remain committed to nurturing ecosystems that enable young changemakers to transform ideas into meaningful impact."*

“India does not have a startup problem. India has a distribution problem. A distribution of capital — too concentrated in Bangalore and Delhi. A distribution of mentorship — too thin in Tier-3 and the North-East. A distribution of opportunity — too narrow for women, persons with disabilities, and founders from

socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Programmes like Youth Co:Lab exist to fix that distribution problem. And the evidence we are unveiling today suggests they are starting to,” said Prateek Deshmukh, Program Director, Atal Innovation Mission, NITI Aayog.

“One of India's greatest resources is its youth dividend. With nearly 65 percent of the population under the age of 35, the country's ability to meet its development and climate goals will depend on how effectively we support young innovators to turn ideas into action. More than 350 startups stepped forward with solutions to some of the most pressing challenges of our time, from waste and water scarcity to unsustainable production systems. More than 40 percent of the selected ventures are women-led, demonstrating the diversity of talent driving India's innovation ecosystem. With the support of our partners, we are proud to invest in a generation that is actively building a better future, “ said **Dr. Angela Lusigi, Resident Representative, UNDP India.**



The finale also featured a panel discussion on "Inclusion as Infrastructure: Building Innovation Ecosystems That Work for Everyone", moderated by Pankaj Vaish, Head, Startup for GCCs, T-Hub. Panellists included Shravya Kanithi (Senior Professional for Learning and Inclusion), Manabendra Sanyal (CEO, Youth Aid Foundation), and Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli (Development Professional and Member, Supreme Court of India constituted Justice Asha Menon Advisory Committee).

A second panel, "Betting on Youth: What Investors and Institutions Look for in the Next Generation of Impact Founders", was moderated by Vitasta Tiwari, Innovation Lead, AIM, and featured Sidhartha Mohanty, Founder, Brahma Kamal and Angel Investor; Viiveck Verma, Founder and CEO, Upsurge Global; Amit Kumar, Head, Sustainable Inclusive Growth, UNDP India; Prateek Deshmukh, Program Lead, AIM; and Padmavathi Annapurna, Vice Chairperson, Skill Development, ALEAP.

About Youth Co:Lab

Co-created in 2017 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Citi Foundation, Youth Co:Lab aims to establish a common agenda for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to empower and invest in youth so that they can accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through leadership, social innovation, and entrepreneurship. Read more about Youth Co:Lab [here](#).

About Atal Innovation Mission (AIM)

AIM including Self-Employment and Talent Utilisation (SETU) is the Government of India's endeavor to promote a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. Its objective is to serve as a platform for the promotion of world-class innovation hubs, grand challenges, start-up businesses, and other self-employment activities, particularly in technology-driven areas.

About UNDP

UNDP works in more than 170 countries and territories, supporting efforts to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities and exclusion. In India, UNDP partners with the Government of India to localize and accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals. It promotes sustainable and inclusive growth, climate action, and stronger energy and environmental systems. UNDP also supports resilience building and health system strengthening across all states and union territories. For more information, visit <https://www.undp.org/india>

About Citi Foundation

The Citi Foundation works to promote economic progress and improve the lives of people in low-income communities around the world. We invest in efforts that increase financial inclusion, catalyse job opportunities for youth and reimagine approaches to building economically vibrant communities. The Citi Foundation's "More than Philanthropy" approach leverages the enormous expertise of Citi and its people to fulfil our mission and drive thought leadership and innovation. For more information, visit www.citifoundation.com.

About T-Hub

T-Hub is the world's largest startup hub, supporting founders from ideation to scale through programs, partnerships, and global access anchoring some of the world's most significant incubation and innovation initiatives.

It brings together startups, corporates, academic institutions, government bodies, investors, and global markets to support founders from ideation to scale. Through cohort-based initiatives across sectors, T-Hub enables founders to engage with leading mentors and access structured, stage-appropriate support, visit www.t-hub.co

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