

**AAUN Conference 2026**  
**Nelson Mandela University**  
**Gqeberha, South Africa**

**AAUN Africa Forum, 08-11 June 2026 Concept Note and Programme**  
**Theme: Circular Economies for Inclusive and Sustainable Futures**

**1. Context and Rationale**

The concept of the circular economy (CE) has gained significant momentum as a transformative approach to sustainable development. Unlike the traditional linear “take-make-dispose” model, the CE promotes systemic change that decouples economic growth from resource use by designing out waste and pollution, keeping materials in use for as long as possible, and regenerating natural systems<sup>12</sup>. It rests on three key principles: (1) preserving and enhancing natural capital, (2) optimising resource yields by maintaining the value of products and materials, and (3) fostering system effectiveness by minimising negative externalities. Despite its origins in high-income contexts, the CE has important implications for the Global South. In Africa and other developing economies, the concept is increasingly being adapted to local realities, where unregulated economic activity, limited resources, and social inequality intersect with opportunities for innovation and climate resilience. The transition to CE is not only about waste management and recycling; it also requires new business models, design thinking, institutional reform, and cross-sectoral collaboration at multiple levels, from micro (products and enterprises) to macro (national and regional policy)<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN) is uniquely positioned to contribute to the scholarly and practical discourse on CE. Its dual presence in Australia and Africa enables rich comparative dialogue, the sharing of knowledge and policy lessons, and the development of joint research and innovation platforms that advance the priorities of both continents. The 2026 AAUN Africa Forum provides a timely platform to interrogate and shape these trajectories.

**2. Circular Economies for Inclusive and Sustainable Futures**

The theme of the 2026 Forum reflects an intentional shift towards more holistic and inclusive models of sustainability. CE is often critiqued for prioritising economic and environmental goals at the expense of social equity<sup>4</sup>. In response, this Forum will adopt a systems-based framing that positions CE not only as a tool for green transition, but also as a lever for just transition, job creation, and social innovation. The forum will explore how CE can be effectively embedded in key sectors, including water, energy, food, health, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2015). Towards the Circular Economy: Economic and business rationale for an accelerated transition. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Geissdoerfer, M., Savaget, P., Bocken, N. M. P., & Hultink, E. J. (2017). The Circular Economy – A new sustainability paradigm? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 143, 757–768. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.12.048>.

<sup>3</sup> Miatto, A., Fry, J., Lane, A., El Achkar, H., & Moore, S. (2024). Metrics for Australia’s circular economy transition. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 28(1), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.13457>.

<sup>4</sup> Kirchherr, J., Reike, D., & Hekkert, M. (2017). Conceptualizing the circular economy: An analysis of 114 definitions. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 127, 221–232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2017.09.005>.

the built environment, all of which are pivotal to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>5</sup>. In Africa, informal economies play a significant role in CE practices, from repair and reuse to upcycling and urban farming. The Forum will provide a space to examine how these practices can be formalised and scaled, and how policy, financing, and education systems must evolve in tandem. Drawing on recent studies, key topics will include:

- Policy, Finance, and Governance Mechanisms for Circular Economies
- Circular Solutions in Food, Water, Energy and Health Systems
- Circularity in the Built and Natural Environment
- Circular Business Models and Inclusive Innovation Ecosystems
- Education for Circular Economy and Future Skills
- Creative Economies and Circular Cultures

### **3. Regional and Global Relevance**

The African Union's Continental Green Recovery Action Plan, the African Circular Economy Alliance, and national roadmaps such as those of Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa highlight CE as a strategic priority for sustainable development and climate resilience. Australia's CE journey, although at a more advanced regulatory stage, also reveals the challenges of implementation, particularly in ensuring cross-sectoral alignment and robust measurement<sup>6</sup>. By linking Australian and African research, the Forum aims to foster mutual learning on CE pathways that are equitable, effective, and adaptable. There is growing recognition that CE in the Global South must consider socio-technical transitions, local material flows, and inclusive governance models that reflect community needs<sup>7</sup>.

### **4. The Role of the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN)**

The AAUN offers a collaborative platform for addressing complex global challenges through joint research, capacity building, and policy engagement. Nelson Mandela University, as the 2026 host, brings a strong institutional commitment to sustainability, social justice, and transdisciplinary research. Its research agenda emphasises the circular economy across multiple domains, including food systems, water management, sustainable construction, digital innovation, and coastal livelihoods. The Forum will build on existing AAUN research clusters and partnerships and serve as a springboard for new collaborations, funding proposals, and joint postgraduate training initiatives. It will engage researchers, policymakers, private sector leaders, civil society organisations, and youth to co-create a circular economy research and innovation agenda that reflects mutual priorities.

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<sup>5</sup> Mathews, J. A., Tan, H., & Hu, M. (2023). Circular economy strategies in the built environment in the Global South. *Resources, Conservation & Recycling*, 189, 106786.

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2023). Circular Economy Ministerial Advisory Group Report. Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. <https://www.dcceew.gov.au>.

<sup>7</sup> Schroeder, P., Anggraeni, K., & Weber, U. (2019). The Relevance of Circular Economy Practices to the Sustainable Development Goals. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 23(1), 77–95.

## **5. Expected Outcomes**

The 2026 AAUN Africa Forum will:

- Advance cross-regional collaboration by strengthening partnerships between Australian and African universities on circular economy (CE) research, innovation, and policy engagement.
- Identify contextually relevant practices by showcasing scalable models and adaptations for CE implementation across diverse African and Australian settings.
- Build capacity and promote knowledge exchange through inclusive engagement with CE scholars, early-career researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.
- Inform strategic CE dialogues by contributing insights to national, regional, and global agendas on inclusive green transitions and just sustainability pathways.
- Catalyse future collaborations by serving as a platform to seed AAUN-aligned CE projects, thematic working groups, and innovation partnerships.

## **6. Conclusion**

Circular economy transitions are essential to addressing the interconnected challenges of resource depletion, climate change, and inequality. Yet, building inclusive and sustainable futures requires more than technical solutions. It demands integrated, locally grounded approaches that are socially just, context-responsive, and institutionally embedded. The 2026 AAUN Africa Forum aims to serve as a catalyst for such approaches by fostering meaningful collaboration between African and Australian partners. Through dialogue, knowledge exchange, and joint reflection, the Forum will contribute to shaping a shared research and innovation agenda for circular economies that advance mutual priorities and promote equitable green transitions.

## DRAFT PROGRAMME

### Sunday 7 June 2026

#### Arrivals

17:00-18:15: AAUN Africa Steering Group Meeting (*by invitation*)

18:30: Welcome Cocktail

Venue: The Beach Hotel, Marine Drive, Summerstrand, Gqeberha

### Monday 8 June 2026

Time	Activity	
0800-0830	Arrival, registration and refreshments for AAUN Board	
0830-1030	<b>AAUN Annual General Meeting (AGM)</b> <b>Venue:</b> Ocean Science Conference Centre, Nelson Mandela University The AAUN Board will meet in the Conference Centre for the AGM (virtual link will be provided) ( <i>by invitation only</i> )	
1030-1100	<b>Tea/Coffee Break (AAUN Board) and Delegate Arrival, Registration and Refreshments</b>	
1100-1300	<b>Parallel Session 1</b> <b>Venue:</b> Science Centre, Ocean Sciences Campus, Nelson Mandela University  MASTERCLASS: Building Skills for Circular Futures, Facilitated by the African Circular Economy Network (ACEN)  Session Chairperson: Dr Priscila Mensah, Director: Research Development, Nelson Mandela University	<b>Parallel Session 2</b> <b>Venue:</b> Ocean Science Conference Centre, Nelson Mandela University  ELAAD Cohort 2 Leadership Workshop  A/Prof David Mickler, Co-Chair (Australia) AAUN, Dean Global, Africa, Curtin University
1300-1400	<b>Lunch &amp; Networking</b>	
1400-1530	MASTERCLASS: Building Skills for Circular Futures, Facilitated by the African Circular Economy Network (ACEN)  Session Chairperson: Dr Priscila Mensah, Nelson Mandela University	ELAAD Cohort 2 Leadership Workshop  A/Prof David Mickler, Co-Chair (Australia) AAUN, Dean Global, Africa, Curtin University
1530-1600	<b>Tea/Coffee Break</b>	
1600-1730	MASTERCLASS: Building Skills for Circular Futures, Facilitated by the African Circular Economy Network (ACEN)  Session Chairperson: Dr Priscila Mensah, Nelson Mandela University	ELAAD Cohort 2 Leadership Workshop  A/Prof David Mickler, Co-Chair (Australia) AAUN, Dean Global, Africa, Curtin University
1800-2000	ECR Strategy Session 1	

<b>Tuesday 9 June 2026</b>	
<b>Venue: Science Centre, Ocean Sciences Campus, Nelson Mandela University</b>	
0800-0900	Arrival, Registration and Refreshments
0900-0920	<b>Official Forum Welcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nelson Mandela University</li> <li>▪ High Commission of Australia to South Africa</li> <li>▪ National Research Foundation</li> <li>▪ AAUN Co-Chairs</li> </ul>
0920-1030	<b>Policy frameworks and regulatory environments for CE in Africa and Australia</b>
1030-1100	Tea/Coffee Break
1100-1300	<b>Keynote Address:</b> Circular Futures for Africa: Unlocking the Potential of Resource Efficiency and Innovation
1300-1400	<b>Group Photo, Lunch and Exhibitions</b>
1400-1600	<b>The Creative Economy as a Driver of Circular Practices</b>
1800-2100	<b>Forum Dinner</b> <b>Venue:</b> The Plantation, Sardinia Bay Rd, Lovemore Park, Gqeberha (Buses depart from two hotels)

<b>Wednesday 10 June 2026</b>				
<b>Venue: Science Centre, Ocean Sciences Campus, Nelson Mandela University</b>				
0830-0900	Arrival and Registration			
0900-1030	<b>Innovative Pathways for Circular Transitions in Africa and Australia</b> (Examples: Localised CE practices, cross-regional learning, regional roadmaps)			
1030-1100	<b>Tea/Coffee Break</b>			
1100-1300	<b>Parallel Session 1: Circular Solutions in Food, Water, Energy and Health Systems</b> (Examples: Agroecology, urban farming, regenerative water and energy use, CE in health waste)	<b>Parallel Session 2: Circularity in the Built and Natural Environment</b> (Examples: Mass timber, low-carbon construction, ocean plastics recovery, nature-based CE)	<b>Parallel Session 3: Circular Business Models and Inclusive Innovation Ecosystems</b> (Examples: CE startups, social enterprises, community-led circular hubs)	<b>Parallel Session 4: Policy, Finance, and Governance Mechanisms for Circular Economies</b> (Examples: Financing CE transitions, enabling regulation, informal sector inclusion)
1300-1400	<b>Lunch and Exhibitions</b>			
1400-1600	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ECR Strategy Session 2</li> <li>- Bilateral business meetings</li> </ul>			
Open evening				

<b>Thursday 11 June 2026</b>	
<b>Venue: Science Centre, Ocean Sciences Campus, Nelson Mandela University</b>	
0830-0900	Arrival and Registration
0900-1030	<b>Digital Tools and Data for Measuring CE Impact</b> (Examples: CE indicators, lifecycle analysis, CE measurement frameworks)
1030-1100	<b>Tea/Coffee Break</b>
1100-1300	<b>Closing and AAUN Business Session</b>
1300-1400	<b>Lunch and Departure</b>