SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FORUM
CAMBRIDGE 2026

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary

Circularity: The New Reality – Sustainability for Growth

The Sustainable Development Forum Cambridge 2026, held at Cambridge Judge Business School on 21 May 2026, brought together leaders from academia, business, finance, international organisations, and public policy to address the growing role of circularity in future growth, competitiveness, and resilience. The Forum responded to geopolitical fragmentation, supply chain disruption, resource constraints, and climate pressures. Participants examined how circular economy principles move beyond sustainability initiatives to shape economic policy, industrial strategy, finance, and competitiveness.

Throughout the day, one message was clear: circularity is now essential for economic strategy, not just for the environment. Discussions highlighted a substantial shift: instead of viewing sustainability and competitiveness as competing, participants increasingly saw circularity as a way to strengthen resilience, improve resource productivity, reduce vulnerabilities and create long-term value. The Forum explored this transition through discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals, industrial transformation, finance, food systems, artificial intelligence, data infrastructure and European competitiveness.

Several key conclusions emerged from the day's overarching discussions.

First, circularity is linked to economic security. Participants emphasised the connection between resource dependency, supply-chain resilience, and strategic autonomy, seeing circular models as mechanisms to reduce exposure to shocks.

Second, competitiveness and sustainability are converging. Future competitiveness will depend on preserving value, optimising resources and strengthening resilience, not merely labour productivity and investment.

Third, finance is a key enabler of circular transformation. While capital exists, challenges remain with measurement, standards, risk, and investment-ready projects.

Fourth, our food system needs systemic transformation, and circularity in food must move from concept to coordinated action. Tackling food waste requires a combination of stronger regulation, better labelling, supply-chain collaboration, and consumer education. Prevention must come first, and long-term sustainability policies can strengthen environmental outcomes and resilience, resource security, and competitiveness across the food system.

Fifth, data and AI are becoming essential infrastructure for circular economies, enabling traceability, resource optimisation, and investment decisions across multiple lifecycles.

Finally, while the Sustainable Development Goals still offer a comprehensive framework for sustainable development, implementation is the main hurdle. The need for practical action, measurable outcomes and stronger collaboration was clear.

The Forum closed with a fireside conversation connecting the day's themes to Europe's future competitiveness, highlighting circularity as part of a broader economic strategy for resilience, innovation, productivity and prosperity.

The overall message of SDF Cambridge 2026 was clear:

Circularity has become an integral part of economic systems, not just a peripheral sustainability concept.

2. Cross-Cutting Themes Emerging Across the Forum

The following themes consistently emerged across discussions throughout SDF Cambridge 2026 and provide a framework for understanding the strategic role of circularity in future economic development:

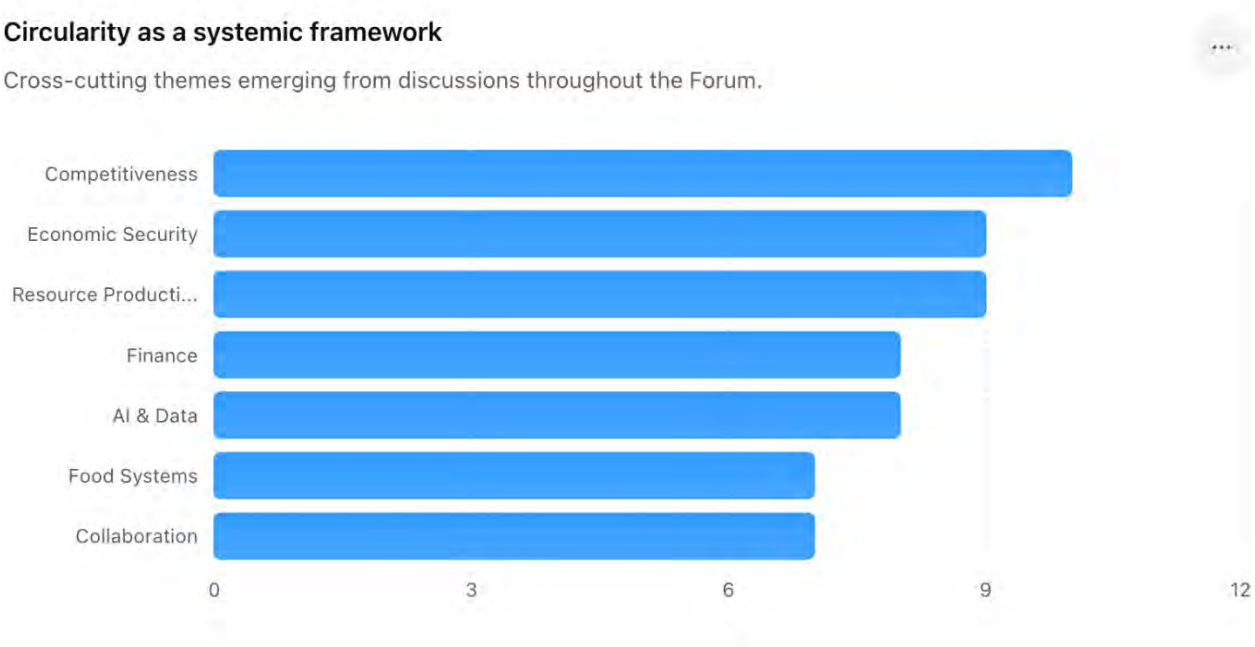
- **Circularity as Competitiveness**
- **Circularity as Resilience**
- **Circularity as Economic Security**
- **Finance as a Catalyst**
- **Data as Infrastructure**
- **Collaboration as a Precondition**

Table 1. SDF at a Glance

Metric	Overview
Date	21st of May 2026
Venue	Cambridge Judge Business School
Theme	Circularity: The New Reality – Sustainability for Growth
Sessions	8
Participants	160 + attendees
Countries Represented	20 +
Organisations Represented	20 +f
Speakers	28 speakers & moderators

Source: Author's synthesis of discussions across all sessions of SDF Cambridge 2026.

Figure 1. Figure 2. Circularity as a Systemic Framework



Source: Author's synthesis of discussions across all sessions of SDF Cambridge 2026.

3. SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Opening Remarks

From Linear Limits to Circular Advantage

The Forum opened with a discussion on how circularity is increasingly moving beyond environmental policy and becoming a response to wider economic pressures. Speakers highlighted climate risk, resource scarcity, supply chain instability, and geopolitical fragmentation as major forces shaping economic decision-making. The session introduced the Forum's central thesis: circularity is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for resilience, competitiveness and long-term growth.

Key Insights:

- Circularity is an economic necessity, not simply an environmental ambition.
- Competitiveness and sustainability are becoming increasingly interconnected.
- Natural capital, institutional capital and social trust are critical foundations of prosperity.
- Circularity is fundamentally about preserving value within economic systems.

UN High-Level Dialogue – Circularity and the SDGs

This session brought together key figures involved in developing and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Discussions focused on the role of circular economy principles in accelerating progress across the SDGs and on the future of sustainable development beyond 2030. Participants acknowledged that many targets remain off track but expressed continued confidence in the SDG framework's relevance and importance. The session made clear that the SDGs remain the right framework for global progress, but the central challenge is now implementation at scale. Speakers emphasised that the next phase must focus less on new ambition and more on practical delivery through stronger measurement, regulation, and financing.

Key Insights:

- The SDGs remain the world's most comprehensive development framework.
- Implementation is now a greater challenge than goal-setting. The next phase must focus on **practical delivery**: better measurement, stronger regulation, and aligned financing.
- Circularity can support multiple SDGs simultaneously **and** should be made more explicit in the post-2030 agenda.
- Water emerged as a critical priority, showing that there is no circular economy without circular resource use.
- Progress requires measurement, accountability and international cooperation.

Circular Economy at Scale

The panel examined how circularity is evolving from isolated initiatives into a systemic economic model. Discussions explored industrial competitiveness, resilience, global value chains and the role of business leadership in scaling circular solutions. Participants highlighted the need to move beyond pilot projects and towards large-scale implementation capable of transforming industries and markets.

Key Insights:

- Scale is now the central challenge.
- Circularity is increasingly influencing industrial strategy.
- Business value and sustainability objectives can be aligned.
- Global collaboration remains essential.

Circular Finance & Capital Allocation

- This session explored how banks, investors and development finance institutions are integrating circularity into investment decisions. It was noted that cu**rrent financial models are built for linear systems and** existing risk and return frameworks do not yet adequately capture circularity’s resilience value, long-term benefits, or regulatory dependencies. Discussions focused on risk, measurement, project bankability and the mobilisation of capital for resilient growth. Participants agreed that finance has a critical role in accelerating circular transitions but that stronger standards and frameworks are needed.

Key Insights:

- Finance is a critical enabler of circularity.
- Business and Finance need a common language: Investors require measurable outcomes and clear standards to evaluate circular performance

  Regulation, demand signals, and long-term offtake agreements are vital for viable circular investments.
- Capital exists, but project pipelines remain limited.
- Public and private finance must work together.

Circular Food Systems

The food systems panel examined the relationships among food waste, climate resilience, and food security. Speakers highlighted the need to first reduce waste through prevention, improve resource efficiency, and strengthen agricultural resilience across global value chains. Circularity in food means designing systems where materials and resources do not become waste and better **food law and regulation** are becoming essential to drive accountability. Discussions emphasised that food security and sustainability should be viewed as complementary rather than competing priorities.

Key Insights:

- Food waste remains a major economic and environmental challenge.
- Long-term sustainability policies may incur short-term costs but can lead to a competitive advantage over time.
- **Prevention** must come first through labelling and supply chain collaboration.
- Circularity strengthens food security and resilience.
- Packaging, logistics and consumer behaviour all play important roles.
- The strongest outcomes come when **policy, industry systems, and firm-level action** are aligned.

AI, Data & the Circular Economy

This session explored the role of digital technologies as the decision infrastructure of circular economies. Speakers discussed lifecycle management, data flows, AI-enabled optimisation and digital product passports. A recurring theme was that circular systems depend on information as much as material flows. Data is increasingly becoming essential for traceability, scalability and investment decisions.

Key Insights:

- Data is becoming foundational infrastructure.
- AI can support resource optimisation and circular business models.
- Traceability is critical for scaling circularity.
- Digitalisation must itself become more sustainable.

Fashion Industry & Sustainability

The fashion panel explored how the industry is transitioning from sustainability commitments towards business transformation. Discussions focused on circular design, product longevity, material transparency and changing consumer expectations. Participants argued that sustainability should be embedded throughout organisations rather than treated as a separate function.

Key Insights:

- Circular business models are gaining momentum.
- Product longevity is becoming a source of value creation.
- Sustainability must be integrated into core business operations.
- Consumer behaviour remains a critical driver of change.

Fireside Conversation

Professor Mario Monti & Professor Khaled Soufani

The closing discussion connected the day's themes to Europe's future competitiveness. The conversation explored how Europe can reconcile sustainability and competitiveness while strengthening resilience in an increasingly fragmented world. Participants discussed industrial policy, resource security, strategic autonomy and the role of circularity in supporting long-term prosperity.

Key Insights:

- Europe faces a new competitiveness challenge.
- Resource productivity is becoming increasingly strategic.
- Circularity can strengthen resilience and security.
- Sustainability and growth should be viewed as mutually reinforcing objectives linking regulation, industrial systems and firm level action
- Long-term prosperity depends on preserving value across economic systems.

4. KEY CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 2. Key Conclusions

Conclusion	**Strategic Implication**
Circularity is becoming an economic strategy	**Competitiveness agenda**
Resource security matters	**Resilience agenda**
Finance is critical	**Capital mobilisation**
AI and data matter	**Digital infrastructure**
Food systems need transformation	**Security and sustainability**
SDGs remain relevant	**Implementation challenge**

Source: Author's synthesis of discussions across all sessions of SDF Cambridge 2026.

Key Conclusions

1. Circularity is becoming an economic strategy.

Circular economy principles are increasingly influencing industrial policy, competitiveness agendas and long-term economic planning.

2. Competitiveness and sustainability are converging.

Future economic success will depend on resource productivity, resilience and value preservation alongside traditional measures of performance.

3. Resource security is becoming a defining challenge.

Critical materials, food systems, energy security and supply-chain resilience are emerging as major drivers of circular transformation.

4. Circularity requires systemic change.

The transition will depend on redesigning products through ecodesign for modularity, durability and, repairability, business models that promote share and reuse to retain value and reshaping financial systems and institutions to support circular outcomes rather than focusing solely on recycling.

5. Finance is central to scaling circularity.

The availability of capital is not the primary constraint. The challenge lies in creating investable projects, establishing common standards, and developing effective risk frameworks. turning circularity from a sustainability ambition into a **measurable, bankable, system-level business proposition**.

6. Data is becoming the infrastructure of circular economies.

Traceability, digital product passports, lifecycle monitoring and AI-enabled decision-making will increasingly underpin circular business models.

7. Food systems represent a major opportunity.

Preventing food loss, reducing waste and improving resource efficiency can simultaneously strengthen food security, business resilience and economic value creation while supporting sustainability outcomes.

8. Circularity must be embedded into business models.

The most successful organisations will be those that integrate circular thinking into design, operations, procurement and value creation as a strategic opportunity to drive innovation, strengthen resilience, improve resource security, and create long-term competitive advantage.

9. The SDGs remain relevant beyond 2030.

While many targets remain off track, participants expressed broad support for continuing and strengthening the SDG framework but their future impact will depend on stronger implementation, clearer measurement, and better alignment between policy, finance, and delivery.

10. Collaboration remains essential.

The transition requires stronger cooperation between governments, businesses, financial institutions, academia and civil society.

Recommendations

Table 3. Recommendations by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder	**Priority Actions**
Governments	Industrial policy, procurement, regulation
Business	Circular business models, lifecycle management
Finance	Standards, risk models, blended finance
International Organisations	Harmonisation, capacity building
Academia	Research, measurement, implementation

Source: Author's synthesis of discussions across all sessions of SDF Cambridge 2026.

For Governments

- Integrate circularity into industrial and competitiveness strategies so that business models and material efficiency become standard tools for competitivenesss.
- Strengthen policies with harmonised resource efficiency rules to support resilience
- Use public procurement to accelerate market transformation and pull demand toward circular products and services.

For Business

- Move beyond compliance-driven sustainability approaches.
- Embed circularity into core business models and product design.
- Invest in lifecycle management and resource optimisation.

For Financial Institutions

- Expand the use of circular finance instruments and blended finance mechanisms.
- Improve methodologies for assessing circular risks and opportunities.
- Support project preparation and market development.

For International Organisations

- Strengthen collaboration between sustainability, trade and development agendas.
- Promote harmonised standards and measurement frameworks.
- Support implementation through technical assistance and capacity building.

For Academia

- Develop new approaches to measuring prosperity and value creation.
- Strengthen links between research, policy and implementation.
- Expand interdisciplinary collaboration around circular economy solutions.

SDF Cambridge 2026 demonstrated that circularity is no longer a niche sustainability concept. It is increasingly emerging as a framework through which governments, businesses and financial institutions can address competitiveness, resilience and long-term prosperity in an increasingly fragmented world.