

IBAGUÉ GOES CIRCULAR

- *The capital of Tolima (Colombia) hosted the Glocal Circular Economy Summit – Nova Next Summit, positioning itself as a Latin American reference point for sustainability, innovation and territorial cooperation.*
- *With the participation of the **European foundation Finnova** and public authorities, international organisations, companies, entrepreneurs and European partners, the Summit highlighted circular economy as a driver of competitiveness, investment and new business models.*



Opening of the Glocal Circular Economy Summit – Nova Next Summit.

From 21 to 23 April 2026, Ibagué, the capital of Tolima in Colombia, became an international platform for sustainability and innovation with the celebration of the **Glocal Circular Economy Summit – Nova Next Summit**. Held at the Museo Panóptico de Ibagué, one of the city’s most emblematic cultural landmarks, the event brought together public institutions, international organisations, companies, universities, entrepreneurs and civil society representatives to explore how circular economy can be transformed into concrete policies, investment opportunities and territorial development strategies.

The Summit confirmed Ibagué’s ambition to become more than a host city. It presented the city as a living laboratory for circular economy in Latin America, capable of connecting local challenges with global solutions. The programme addressed key issues such as waste management, water reuse, sustainable mobility, circular design, sustainable fashion, green finance, entrepreneurship, innovation and multilevel governance.

The institutional leadership of the event was represented by **Johana Aranda**, Mayor of Ibagué, whose participation underlined the city's commitment to sustainability as a pillar of public policy and economic transformation. Under her leadership, Ibagué projected itself as a city seeking to combine environmental responsibility with competitiveness, social inclusion and innovation.



Johana Aranda, Mayor of Ibagué, inaugurating the Glocal Circular Economy Summit.

A central role was also played by **Milton Restrepo**, General Manager of Ibagué Limpia, the public waste management company of the city, responsible for promoting sustainable waste management and circular economy initiatives. His vision helped shape the event as a “glocal” platform: deeply rooted in the needs of Ibagué and Tolima, while connected to international cooperation networks, European expertise and multilateral organisations. This approach gave the Summit a distinctive identity, showing that local action can generate global relevance when supported by strong alliances and practical implementation.

One of the most relevant themes of the Summit was the role of the **Zona Franca de Ibagué** as a potential engine for circular economy in the region. The discussion on free zones highlighted their capacity to attract investment, promote sustainable industrial processes and support new circular value chains. In a city seeking to strengthen its productive base, the Zona Franca de Ibagué can become a strategic space for companies that wish to reduce waste, reuse resources, improve energy efficiency and develop innovative models linked to recycling, logistics, manufacturing and green technologies.

This vision is especially important for intermediate cities such as Ibagué, where circular economy is not only an environmental agenda but also an economic

opportunity. By linking the free zone with entrepreneurship, innovation and sustainable production, Ibagué can position itself as a **regional hub for circular business models**. The Summit made clear that the transition to circularity requires not only regulation and awareness, but also industrial spaces, financing tools, public-private partnerships and international cooperation.

The event also gave strong visibility to the role of cities and regions in implementing circular economy strategies. Sessions involving international organisations such as the **European Commission, OECD, OEI, Asocapitales** and **ICLEI** reinforced the importance of multilevel governance, policy coherence and cooperation between national and local governments. Ibagué thus entered a broader international conversation on how territories can accelerate the transition towards more sustainable and resilient economic systems.

Water was another major focus of the Summit. In a Latin American context marked by climate change, demographic growth and pressure on natural resources, circular water management emerged as a strategic priority. Discussions addressed reuse, efficiency, wastewater valorisation and the need to develop infrastructure capable of supporting more resilient urban systems.

The Summit also connected **circular economy** with culture, creativity and fashion. Through sessions on sustainable fashion and circular design, the event showed that sustainability is not limited to waste or infrastructure, but also concerns the way societies create, consume and value materials. This broader approach helped bring circular economy closer to citizens, entrepreneurs and cultural industries.

A major highlight was the celebration of the **Ibagué Startup Europe Awards** by Nova Next Summit, promoted within the Startup Europe Awards methodology of **Finnova** foundation. These awards recognised innovative projects offering practical circular economy solutions to environmental and urban challenges, while also showing potential for international scalability.

Among the awarded initiatives, **Bioferric**, from Alicante, Spain, was recognised in the wastewater management category for its proposal to improve industrial water regeneration and reuse through accessible circular technologies. **Bio-Circular Ibagué**, represented by **Natalia Ramírez**, stood out in the urban organic waste category for its local Colombian model to transform organic waste into biogas and organic fertiliser. **PlastiCycle Digital**, from Cartagena, Colombia, was awarded in the sustainable materials and recycling category for its solution to transform plastic and textile waste into construction materials for social housing, while incorporating digital tools to support recyclers and environmental education.

The Ibagué Startup Europe Awards were not only a recognition ceremony. They acted as a bridge between public challenges and entrepreneurial solutions. By giving visibility to startups and circular projects, the awards contributed to building an innovation ecosystem in which local entrepreneurs can connect with

international networks, mentoring opportunities and European funding perspectives.

In this framework, the participation of the **European foundation Finnova** added a clear European dimension to the Summit. **Juan Manuel Revuelta**, CEO of Finnova Foundation, contributed to strengthening cooperation between Europe and Latin America in circular economy, entrepreneurship and EU funding. He stated: “Ibagué has shown that circular economy is not only an environmental priority, but also a powerful driver of innovation, entrepreneurship and territorial competitiveness. The Glocal Circular Economy Summit has created a bridge between Latin America and Europe, connecting local solutions with international cooperation, European funding opportunities and the Startup Europe ecosystem”.



Milton Restrepo, General Manager of Ibagué Limpia and Juan Manuel Revuelta, CEO of Finnova Foundation, at the Circulab Hub.

Revuelta also underlined the strategic role of the city: “Ibagué can become a reference point for circular innovation in Latin America. Its free zone, entrepreneurial ecosystem and institutional commitment offer an excellent basis to attract investment, create green jobs and develop circular value chains with international impact”.

Michel Lapierre, Director for Latin America and Mercosur at Finnova Foundation, reinforced the strategic link with Latin American partners and the development of long-term alliances around sustainability and innovation.

Juan Viesca, Director of European Funds at Finnova Foundation, contributed to connecting the discussions in Ibagué with practical opportunities offered by European programmes and international project development.

Through its participation, Finnova helped position the Summit as a platform for **cooperation between Latin America and Europe**, linking local circular economy

challenges with instruments such as LIFE, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, AL-INVEST Verde and Startup Europe initiatives. This contribution was particularly relevant for startups, municipalities and institutions seeking to transform ideas into fundable projects with international impact.

The **Glocal Circular Economy Summit – Nova Next Summit** confirmed that Ibagué has the potential to become a strategic territory for circular innovation in Latin America. By combining political leadership, free-zone potential, entrepreneurship, international cooperation and cultural identity, the city showed that circular economy can be a real driver of competitiveness and sustainable development.

More than a three-day event, the Summit marked a step forward in the construction of a **new cooperation model between Europe and Latin America**: one based on circularity, innovation, knowledge transfer and local impact with global ambition.