

# 2025 POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS

ECOSYSTEM  
OF CHANGE

REPORT



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KOZMINSKI  
BUSINESS HUB

# 2025 POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS

REPORT

ECOSYSTEM  
OF CHANGE



Publisher:



KOZMINSKI  
BUSINESS HUB

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Bolesław Rok

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# Introduction

**Ada Stępień**

CEO & Co-Founder of Slappa



**This report is dedicated to those who believe that business can - and should - be about more than just profit. It's created out of admiration for people who choose the harder path: the path of responsibility, courage, and commitment to building a better world.**

Impact startups - as we often call them - are not just companies. They're micro-revolutions in everyday life, proving that change is possible. The impact movement is gaining real momentum. More and more people want to work for and invest in projects that matter - to people and to the planet. More and more consumers are choosing products and services that reflect their values. And more and more founders are starting companies not just to "make an exit," but to solve real problems.

But as the movement grows, it also raises a crucial question: What's next? What really matters now for the future of the impact startup ecosystem? What values, skills, and decisions are key if this wave is to keep rising - wisely, ethically, and sustainably?

For some, it will be measurable impact - numbers showing tons of CO<sub>2</sub> reduced, people given access to education, or resources saved. For others, it's authenticity - the alignment between mission and action. Still others will point to the power to build community and raise awareness.

To us, one thing remains constant: the impact movement is, above all, about **people who care**. People who act even when the conditions aren't perfect. Who say "no" to shortcuts when they come at the cost of ethics. Who choose the harder path - day after day - because they know their work matters.



This report is also our way of saying thank you. To those who don't cut corners. To those who share knowledge, support others, and don't compete at all costs. To those who believe that success can be shared - and that sustainable growth is not just a dream, but a real possibility.

We invite you to help shape this story. Let's take a moment to reflect and ask ourselves the questions that can strengthen this movement:

- What are the biggest challenges you're facing right now?
- What truly motivates you?
- What values guide your business decisions?
- What do you need to grow with impact – and without compromise?






We're not looking for the one right answer. We're looking for diverse voices - because positive impact has many faces. Because real change doesn't always start with a big innovation. Sometimes it starts with a simple question - "How can I help?" - and the decision to take that first step.

We believe impact startups are not a niche. They are the future - more responsible, more human, more sustainable.

Thank you for building it with us.



## PANEL OF PURPOSEFUL PEOPLE 2025

- |                           |   |   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| ▪ Ada Stępień             |    |    |
| ▪ Adrian Migoń            |    |    |
| ▪ Agnieszka Oleksyn-Wajda |    |    |
| ▪ Anna Węgrzynowicz       |    |    |
| ▪ Berenika Pel            |    |    |
| ▪ Bolesław Rok            |    |    |
| ▪ Dominik Krawczyk        |    |    |
| ▪ Justyna Markowicz       |  |  |
| ▪ Maciej Otrębski         |  |  |
| ▪ Magda Andrejczuk        |  |  |
| ▪ Michał Miszułowicz      |  |  |
| ▪ Mirella Panek-Owsiańska |  |  |
| ▪ Monika Kulik            |  |  |
| ▪ Patrycja Radek          |  |  |
| ▪ Piotr Boulange          |  |  |

# Positive Impact Startups

This year's List of Positive Impact Startups came together thanks to the energy and insight of our Panel of Purposeful People. They combined publicly available info with their own experience and real-world perspectives from across the startup and business scene.



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY DRIVERS OF POSITIVE CHANGE 2025

### **Alohacamp** **alohacamp.com**

A startup operating in the travel and tourism sector, focused on nature-based experiences. It offers a platform for booking trips in remote, off-the-beaten-path locations, aimed at individuals and groups seeking peaceful, immersive experiences surrounded by nature.

### **Levelly** **levelly.ai**

An HR tech company specializing in solutions for pay equity. They use AI-driven analytics and real-time salary data to help organizations identify and close gender pay gaps, promoting fair compensation practices and supporting an inclusive work environment.

### **Use Waste** **usewaste.eu**

A research and development startup transforming the textile industry. It develops technology that eliminates textile waste through textile-to-textile recycling. The goal is to eliminate textile waste by converting it into new, high-quality products.



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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
PRODUCTS THAT ARE GOOD FOR THE PLANET 2025

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**Kopyto**  
[kopyto.co](https://kopyto.co)

A brand that, thanks to high-quality natural wool and affordable prices, enables ethical consumer choices while reducing plastic use and single-use solutions.

**MycoVibes Biotech**  
[mycovibes.eu](https://mycovibes.eu)

A biotech startup developing an innovative method for producing mycoprotein as a sustainable, nutritious, and environmentally friendly alternative to animal protein.

**Regenario**  
[linkedin.com/company/regenario](https://linkedin.com/company/regenario)

A combination of photovoltaic farms and regenerative agriculture to enable sustainable energy and food production while simultaneously improving soil quality.

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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
TECH WITH A POSITIVE IMPACT 2025

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**Fieldcontrol**  
[fieldcontrol.pl](https://fieldcontrol.pl)

An app that enables real-time monitoring of crops, optimizing irrigation and analyzing data. Its smart algorithms improve production efficiency and support the sustainable development of agricultural operations.

**Redigo Carbon**  
[redigocarbon.com](https://redigocarbon.com)

A cloud-based sustainability platform offering a comprehensive toolkit for accurately assessing carbon dioxide emissions; it not only helps calculate carbon footprint but also provides solutions for reducing it.

**Virtual Power Plant**  
[vpplant.pl](https://vpplant.pl)

Optimization of energy usage in modern buildings, supported by an AI-powered service for active management of building comfort while meeting ESG goals and controlling client costs.

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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
**SOCIALLY POSITIVE SERVICES 2025**

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**Filipina**  
[filipina.com.pl](https://filipina.com.pl)

Connecting Rural Housewives' Circles (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich) with businesses to create a platform of mutual benefits. It fosters relationship-building, supports local initiatives, and bridges tradition with modern business, creating valuable partnerships.

**Kraina**  
[fundacijakraina.pl](https://fundacijakraina.pl)

A structured mutual aid, goods, and service exchange program, prototyped in Warsaw's Mokotów district (Puławska 67). It aims to create a replicable model for other districts and local communities.

**Punkt Zwrotny**  
[punktzwrotny.com](https://punktzwrotny.com)

A modern space full of multimedia challenges and puzzles, where everyone can discover the secrets of circularity. It also offers workshops for companies wishing to share knowledge and passion with employees or partners in an inspiring environment.

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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
**ECO-POSITIVE SERVICES 2025**

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**Bee Healthy Honey**  
[varroastopper.com](https://varroastopper.com)

Bee Healthy Honey's mission is to improve bee health worldwide by introducing an ecological alternative to chemical varroa treatments. The startup was founded by a granddaughter and grandfather who combined their strengths to create the sonic device Varroa Stopper.

**Envirly**  
[envirly.com](https://envirly.com)

Sustainability reporting according to CSRD and ESRS, carbon footprint analysis (GHG Protocol, scopes 1, 2, and 3), and product life cycle analysis. They offer consulting, expert knowledge, and technological solutions.

**INTU**  
[intucircularity.com](https://intucircularity.com)

A team of experts in circular economy, fashion, and design, whose passion is to create a fashion industry that doesn't harm the planet. Their goal is to revolutionize the industry through repair, redesign, and building a B2B ecosystem that extends product lifecycles and supports sustainable business models.



**Las Na Zawsze**  
[lasnazawsze.org.pl](http://lasnazawsze.org.pl)

An organization dedicated to the protection and conservation of Polish forests, promoting sustainable forest management. It engages in ecological education, tree planting initiatives, and advocacy for nature conservation.

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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
TECH FOR WELLNESS 2025

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**Finally Me**  
[finally.me](http://finally.me)

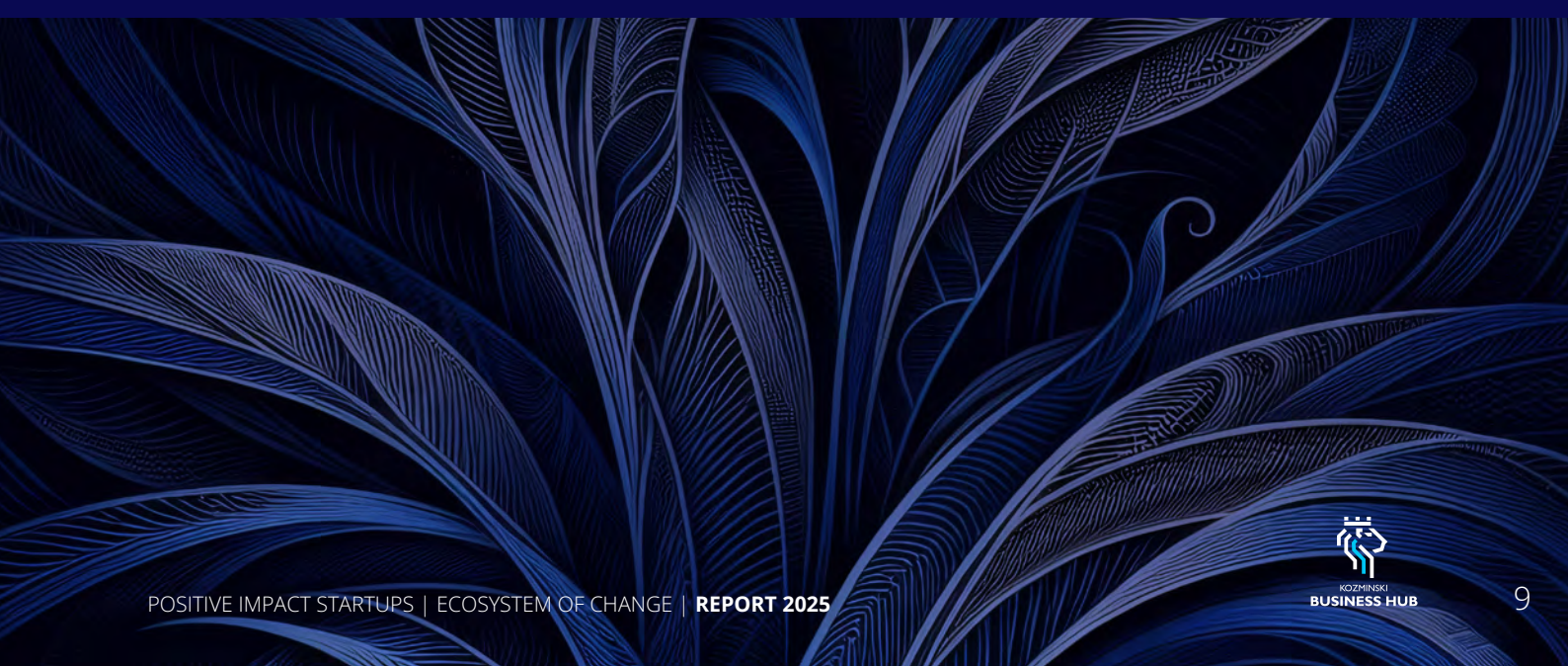
Focused on women's intimate well-being through a menstrual tracking app and hygiene products. They measure their impact through small and big changes – from daily comfort and breaking taboos to supporting better diagnostics. They hold "Pending B Corp" status.

**Ouli**  
[ouli.io](http://ouli.io)

A device designed for at-home scar therapy after cesarean section, enabling users to perform effective treatments remotely under physiotherapist supervision. A scar isn't just a cosmetic issue – without proper therapy, it may lead to long-term health complications.

**WOO. Well Over One**  
[wooapp.eu](http://wooapp.eu)

A tool created by specialists and practitioners across disciplines, offering a holistic approach to mental and physical well-being. It also serves as a revolutionary HR support program offering comprehensive employee care: psychotherapy, physical activity, physiotherapy, and dietetics.





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LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY  
FOOD WITH A POSITIVE IMPACT 2025

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**Biossom**  
[biossom.bio](https://biossom.bio)

Tasty, natural, ecological products in reusable glass packaging. A world without plastic, full of good, natural, organic food.

**MOG. Mother of Gut**  
[motherofgut.com](https://motherofgut.com)

MOG's mission is to create food products that support health. Their goal is to provide access to nutrient-dense foods that can be consumed on their own or used as a base for delicious, nutritious meals.

**SweetVegy**  
[sweetveggy.pl](https://sweetveggy.pl)

A snack made from minimally processed vegetables for lovers of good food and simple living. Perfect for school breaks or weekend hikes, delivering a healthy energy boost.

**Wajko**  
[wajko.pl](https://wajko.pl)

A versatile, plant-based egg substitute suitable for both small bakeries and large manufacturers. It's an alternative to chicken eggs, ideal for baking, cooking, and confectionery.





PART I

# What you should know

before launching a positive impact  
startup



# From market curiosity to strategic partner

– what drives the success of Polish  
positive impact startups?

**Magdalena Feliniak**

DANONE Group – certified B Corp and co-organizer  
of the Positive Impact Academy



**Welcome to the startup world – where innovation and passion collide with constant challenges and market uncertainty. Success is far from guaranteed. Just look at the numbers: according to Failory, about 90% of startups fail <sup>1</sup>. Different studies quote different figures, but one thing's consistent – most startups shut down before their first birthday.**

But rather than focus on failure, I wanted to understand the other side of the story – success. What helps Polish impact startups (SPWs) beat the odds? Is it the founders' passion or investor support that makes the difference? I decided to ask a few founders directly about the factors behind their business success <sup>2</sup>.

Their stories are full of grit, inspiration, and an unrelenting drive to grow and change the world for the better. I invite you to explore them – whether you're building or investing in a startup, these insights might just guide your next move.

<sup>1</sup> <https://upmetrics.co/blog/startup-failure-rate>

<sup>2</sup> Survey conducted via MS Forms in April 2025. Not a scientific study – respondents were selected based on author's judgment to explore startup success from a practical, anecdotal perspective.

## What does success mean for Polish impact startups?

Before we dig into the success factors, let's take a step back: how do these startups define success in the first place? As Bartłomiej Rak, CEO of Rebread, told me: "Impact startups in Poland don't achieve the kind of success typically associated with the global startup scene – explosive growth, rapid funding rounds, or scaling up teams to hundreds of people."

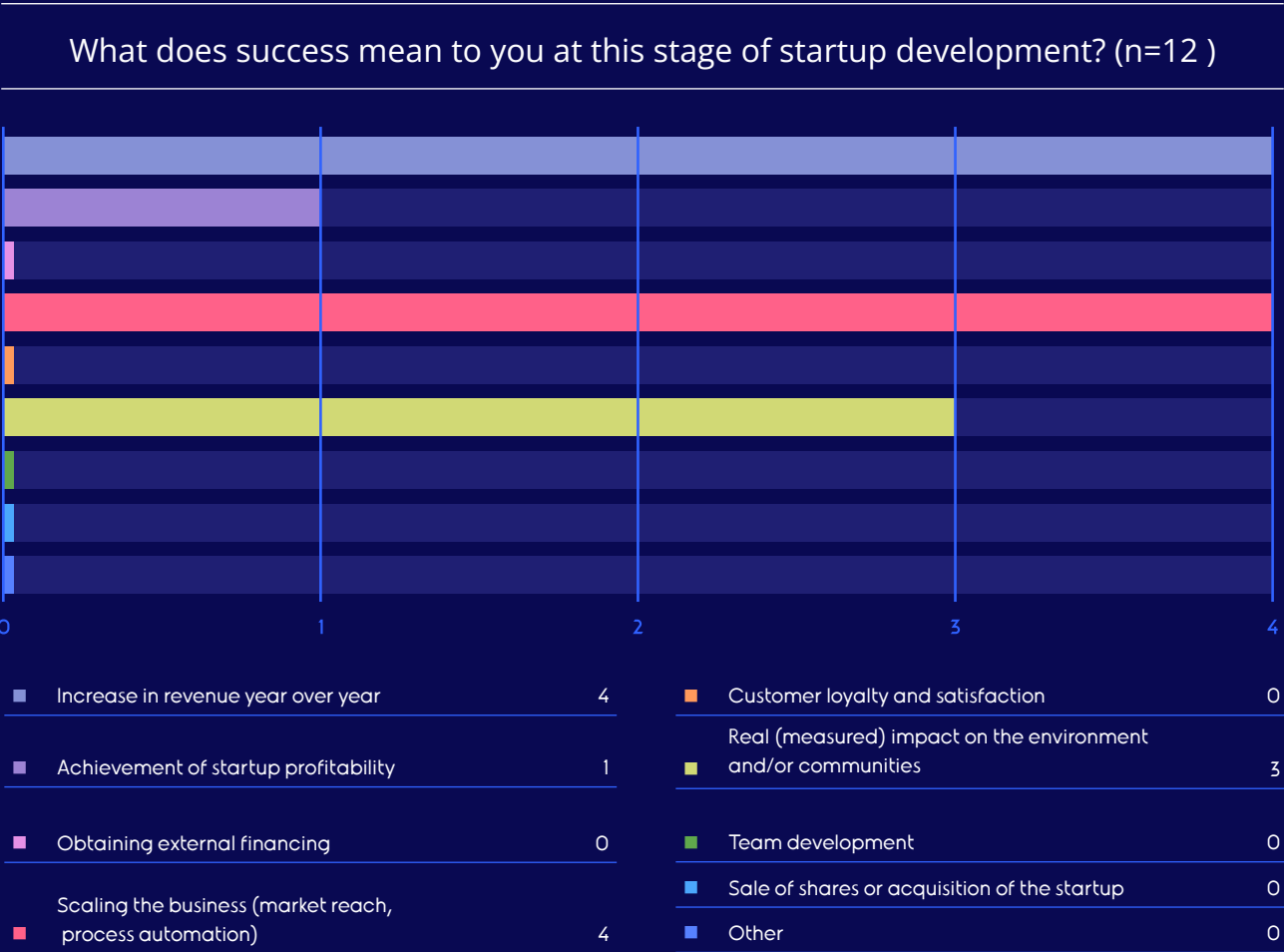
And after speaking with several founders and reviewing their survey responses, I have to agree with him.

Nearly all startups I talked to defined success in terms of **scaling impact** – increasing revenue or market

reach, and having a **real, measurable effect** on the environment and society. Raising funding, selling shares, or getting acquired didn't even make the list of top success indicators (see Chart 1).

“

For me, success isn't about numbers, awards, or recognition – it's about real change I help co-create, says founder **Martyna Zastawna**. It's knowing my actions helped reduce harm to the planet or improved someone's life. True success is doing things differently, even if they're not yet popular. It's the good we leave behind – not just for today, but for future generations.

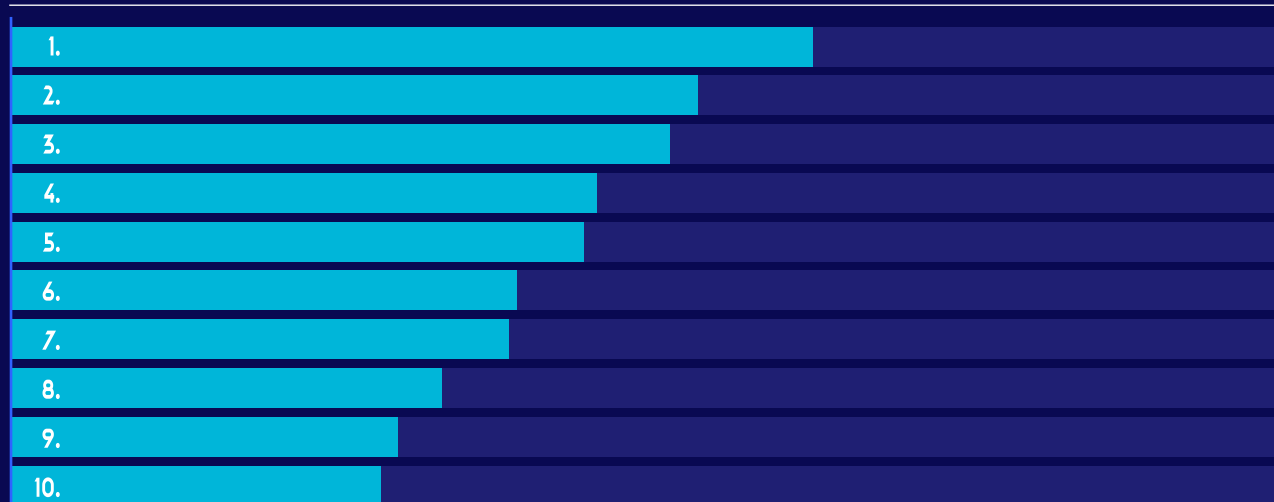


## What are the key drivers of success?

Pinpointing what really drives startup success? Not so simple. When I tested the first version of my survey, one founder told me, "Honestly, I'd check everything." Patryk Kamiński, CEO of Waterly, added: "It's hard to pick just one. Truth is, every factor played a role in getting us where we are today." So instead of picking one „most important“ element, I asked them to rank the success factors by relevance.

The result? A top 10 list of factors ranked by 12 Polish impact startups (see Chart 2). And surprise – networking and investor support didn't top the list.

What factors do you think contributed the most to achieving this stage of success?  
Rank them in order of importance (n=12)



1. passion and commitment of the startup founders
2. innovativeness and uniqueness of the product
3. competences of the founding team
4. sustainable business model
5. ability to scale the startup

6. adaptability and flexibility of the startup
7. effective communication and marketing
8. mentor support and network
9. innovativeness of the technology
10. support of investors

## Wait, what about networking and investment?

That surprised me too. Everywhere you look, you hear about the importance of networking, pitching, investor decks, and chasing funding. But none of the surveyed startups ranked those among the top drivers of success. In fact, only two listed investor support in their top three.

That said, some founders did acknowledge its importance. Monika Kowalewska from Finally.me said her project wouldn't have taken off without early-stage investor backing. It filled a real, unmet need among women and resonated deeply with cultural trends.

**Katarzyna Kolanowska** from **Karmnik** agreed:

“

*Thanks to our passion and our investors' support, we pivoted from our original idea, adapted to new market conditions, and grew revenue with a clear path to profitability.*

The team behind **Mother of Gut** noted:

“

*Investors invest in co-founders. You have to show your vision, your commitment, and your willingness to work hard.*

So maybe that's the answer. Funding is essential – but it follows **authentic passion and commitment**. Without that spark, money doesn't show up in the first place.

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## Scaling with impact

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For these startups, scaling isn't just about bigger numbers. It means increasing revenue and reach while maintaining – or amplifying – positive environmental and social impact. It's about expanding in ways that benefit both the business and the world around it.

**Bartłomiej Rak (Rebread)** says:

“

*Scalability is crucial, and the dedication of the founding team matters even more in Poland than in more mature startup ecosystems.*

**Roman Stanek** from **Barents.pl** adds:

“

*We're in a scaling phase now. The hardest part is working with people – convincing them this makes sense and will lead to better efficiency down the line.*

## Technology that makes a difference

**Monika Radomska** from **EcoBean** emphasized not just scalability, but also the uniqueness of the product and the tech behind it:

“

*Our success is rooted in a business model that tackled a real problem and developed advanced tech to solve it. It's a win-win-win: for the customer, for us, and for investors. Our tech is scalable – we can solve this problem anywhere it exists.*

**Maciej Deoniziak** from **GURU Ferment** echoed this:

“

*Our key to success? Developing an entirely new technology to create high-protein products from legumes – with minimal processing and better nutritional value than competitors.*

## And the gold medal goes to... passion and grit

“

*Passion and commitment are essential – whether you're building a startup or any business. They fuel creativity and help you survive tough times. But in today's uncertain world, adaptability is just as critical. It helped us pivot – twice.*

says **Magda Karpińska**, co-founder of **Karmnik**.

**Katarzyna Młynarczyk** from **Rebread** emphasized the founder's drive:

“

*We chose a mission-driven model – turning stale bread into a valuable resource instead of waste. Our licensing model isn't based on a single product or tech. It's tough, but allows us to scale and solve real problems. Despite funding and operational challenges, our passion and vision keep us going. Startups focused on impact need to be prepared for a rough, winding road. It takes true belief in the problem, resilience, adaptability, and the humility to really listen to the market.*





**Patryk Kamiński** from **Waterly** adds one more key ingredient – communication:

“

*No question – passion and persistence were #1 for us. We had at least 100 moments when we could've quit – but didn't. #2 is communication and marketing. From day one, we've been active at events, competitions, and accelerators. That visibility helped us find customers, partners, and growth opportunities.*

And I couldn't agree more – as a communication expert, I know the power of telling your story.

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### Staying present, staying balanced

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One founder summed it up perfectly:

“

*We're in our 10th year now. We've got industry experience, but we still haven't cracked scalability. Without it, we won't survive long in this fast-paced market. And honestly? Balancing sustainability with business growth is getting harder. We're sticking to our values – recycled plastics, eco-friendly packaging – but it's a constant battle to win customers and invest in marketing.*

She added one more sentence that stuck with me: “Those who aren't visible, don't get a voice.”

At DANONE, we say: “There's no sustainable development without business success, and there's no future for business that ignores sustainability.” If we want business to change the world, we need the **resources** – revenue, reach, and reputation. Striking that balance is one of the biggest challenges for any impact-driven startup. But it's also non-negotiable.

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### Final thoughts?

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Yes, it's possible to align profitability with positive impact – but only if the founder's passion kicks down the door and climbs in through the window, just like a startup chasing its first investor.



# What the world expects from positive impact startups

**Bolesław Rok**

Kozminski University



**What does the world expect from business today? It's not as straightforward as it used to be. For decades, business success was measured primarily by shareholder value and return on investment. For startups, that expectation included rapid scaling. But today, expectations have grown more complex – especially when it comes to impact startups – those with a social or environmental mission at their core.**

So, should startups prioritize stakeholder expectations or stay laser-focused on their mission? After all, these ventures are built around innovative solutions that drive climate neutrality, ecosystem regeneration, circularity, human rights, safety, and quality of life. That's what they're here for.

Impact startups are expected to deliver real change – in a specific area, within a relevant timeframe. These are organizations that empower passionate changemakers to amplify their positive impact on the environment and society. They contribute to solving major challenges in the broad field of sustainability and ESG. And in doing so, they increase the company's value while improving lives and ecosystems in their sphere of influence.



## So – what does the world expect from you?

Let's be clear: we expect impact startups to deliver products and services that make life better for people and the planet. That's the core. Of course, you can phrase it more broadly – as delivering solutions to urgent social and global challenges. But people don't walk around talking like that every day. Others might focus on breakthrough technologies, sustainable and innovative business models, or job creation for passionate changemakers. These are systemic expectations.

Impact investors, in particular, look for a balance – profit in the not-so-distant future and fulfilment of a clearly defined social mission. But expectations vary

across the capital ecosystem – from VC funds and corporate incubators to angel investors, banks, and financial institutions.

### What do they look for?

- Growth potential (scalability, market competition, product-market fit)
- Competence and experience of the team
- Transparent governance structures
- Forecasted return on investment

Impact investors also assess measurable impact using indicators and frameworks tailored to the startup's mission. And across the board, there's growing emphasis on stakeholder-aligned governance.

## Stakeholder-aligned management

This reflects a new management paradigm: leading with the belief that stakeholder expectations matter. This approach – rooted in the ESG concept of double materiality – emphasizes listening to diverse perspectives. It encourages transparent communication about challenges, risks, realistic goals, and strategic plans. And it aims to build trust by consistently demonstrating that the organization *walks the talk*.

Start by mapping stakeholders – understanding how they influence your growth and how your startup affects them. This isn't about managing or manipulating stakeholders. It's about evolving from simple dialogue (seeking buy-in), to collaboration (co-creating value), and ultimately to partnership

– bringing the right people to the table to design and implement solutions to meaningful social or environmental problems.

One powerful format for this is the participation platform: a shared space for maximizing positive impact as a common goal.

### What do stakeholders typically expect? You can often break it down into a core set of values:

- Authenticity – a real commitment to the social or environmental mission
- Effectiveness – contributing to real change; rejecting greenwashing
- Openness – sharing progress and insights
- Transparency – honest impact measurement
- Willingness to collaborate – engaging in partnerships for systems change
- Participation – social innovation over zero-sum competition

## Communicating your impact

**When talking about impact, it's important to distinguish between different stages:**

- Estimating impact – early-stage
- Monitoring impact – during implementation
- Planning impact – during strategy development
- Measuring and evaluating – after the fact

**You should clearly communicate the form of impact you're creating. Are you:**

- Implementing meaningful solutions that significantly increase positive impact?
- Delivering partial benefits to select stakeholder groups?
- Preventing or mitigating negative impacts?

**You also need to define the type of impact:**

- Potential or actual?
- Caused by your startup, contributed to by your startup, direct or indirect?
- Short-, medium-, or long-term?

**And finally, who is impacted?**

- Customers or end users
- Citizens or communities
- Employees or supply chain partners
- The natural environment

One more important question: How significant is your impact? Are you making a small difference for many people, or a major difference for a smaller group? How essential is your contribution to the outcome?

## Don't forget your customers

At the end of the day, survival in the market depends on your users – your customers and clients. Their expectations also need to be understood, monitored, and addressed. The specifics will vary depending on your business model, industry, and audience.

**There's no one-size-fits-all roadmap for impact startups here. But the foundation always includes:**

- Professionalism
- Accessibility
- Credibility
- Accountability

Certifications and industry standards help. But equally important is whether your solution aligns with a corporate client's ESG-driven strategy, and whether your message resonates with decision-makers.



# Social readiness of technology

## – a necessity, not an option

**Dr. Patrycja Radek**

Innovation Broker at the Center for Knowledge Transfer, Head of Acceleration at Startup Booster for Social Impact, SWPS University



**We're constantly bombarded with news of breakthrough technologies – but it's becoming increasingly clear that innovation doesn't exist in a vacuum. Every technological advancement is deeply embedded in social, political, and cultural contexts.**

Everything we do in science, technology, and innovation touches not just research labs, data, and measurement tools, but also people – along with their values, fears, and beliefs. Technology profoundly shapes our lives. That's why understanding and integrating social impact and readiness from the very beginning is not just a key to successful implementation – it's an ethical and practical necessity.

Social readiness means assessing the societal consequences of a technology from its earliest development stages. It's not just about user acceptance – it's about asking: Who is this for? Why is it being developed? What impact will it have? It involves factors like education, trust, safety, cultural norms, inclusivity, and both social and economic

accessibility. Technologies that fail to consider these dimensions often face resistance, rejection, or backlash. On the other hand, deep engagement with diverse user groups opens doors to greater social equity and solutions that are universal – not just tailored to the privileged few.

This is why socially conscious design must start well before the product hits the market. It requires attentiveness from day one – from the first concept through design, testing, and assessing long-term social consequences. That means bringing in sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, ethicists, and designers during the early stages of tech development. Their input helps anticipate user responses, understand key values, identify risks, and design for prevention.

## Social readiness means assessing the societal consequences of a technology from its earliest development stages.

Innovation is change. And it's natural – even healthy – for people to react to change with caution, scepticism, or resistance. That's why successful technological innovation isn't just about the product or technical specs – it's about designing the full human experience and understanding the complex interactions that unfold over a product's lifecycle.

Interdisciplinary collaboration and design methodologies help decode these dynamics and keep the user's well-being at the centre. Tools like design

thinking, lean startup, and lean impact – alongside methods like social impact assessment and life cycle assessment – can guide the process.

Technology can be a tool for empowerment or destruction. It can extend our reach, deliver global solutions, and bring help where it's most needed. But concerns remain – and rightly so – around the risks posed by emerging technologies: AI, space exploration, hydrogen power, telecom infrastructure, vaccine development, and more. In these domains, the social and environmental impact must be studied and monitored with rigor.

Responsible, durable innovation is born through interdisciplinary teamwork. Technology that ignores the social context is incomplete. Its long-term

effectiveness depends on whether it's designed with and for people, reflecting their needs, concerns, diversity, and aspirations.

What we need is greater social imagination – rooted in ethics, inclusivity, openness, and dialogue. Social readiness is the foundation of responsible innovation. It allows us to blend bold creativity with deep responsibility. Today, "do no harm" isn't enough. It's time to systemically design technologies that help repair the world.



# Twin transition

## - a new era of development

**Anna Węgrzynowicz**

Social Responsibility Office, Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK)



**We're living in a time of unprecedented global challenges – climate change, biodiversity loss, overproduction of waste, and grim forecasts for the decades ahead. Without urgent and coordinated action, the cost of inaction will far outweigh the cost of transformation.**

In this context, digital and green transformation have become the two defining forces shaping our societies and economies. The so-called twin transition refers to the simultaneous integration of cutting-edge digital technologies and sustainability-focused practices. Increasingly, startups are discovering they don't have to choose between technological progress and environmental responsibility. The key is designing and managing technology with intention – aligning innovation with the goals of sustainable development.

Leading global organizations like the OECD and the World Economic Forum (WEF) emphasize that digital tools – such as AI, IoT, blockchain, cloud computing,

and big data – can play a major role in tracking emissions, managing energy, minimizing waste, and improving supply chain transparency.

**Increasingly, startups are discovering they don't have to choose between technological progress and environmental responsibility.**





## Data that drives change

According to the WEF, digital solutions could help reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by up to 20% by 2050. The UN reports that digital tools could support over 70% of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance:

- Telemedicine and e-health platforms advance SDG 3 (Good Health)
- Smart energy and transport systems drive progress in clean energy and sustainable cities (SDG 7, 11)
- Online learning improves access to education (SDG 4)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalization enabled continuity of work and education while limiting travel-related emissions. But rapid digitalization comes at a cost. The ICT sector already accounts for 5–9% of global electricity use and over 2% of global emissions. Data centers and communication networks are projected to consume up to 8% of global electricity by 2030. These systems also require vast water resources and generate electronic waste.

Socially, digital tools have huge potential to improve access and inclusion – but they also come with risks: job displacement from automation, privacy concerns from data processing, and a growing digital divide between connected and disconnected communities.

Moreover, we still lack standardized metrics to measure the environmental footprint of digital technologies. Tech and sustainability teams often operate in silos, and decision-makers face a dilemma: how to balance innovation with responsibility? This is where startups shine.

## Startups as innovation sensors

Startups operate like sensors in the innovation ecosystem – they detect tensions early, test solutions quickly, and can fail cheaply compared to the cost of missteps by governments or corporations. Their agility, creativity, and mission-driven models make them catalysts for meaningful change.

From clean energy to circular economy, from smart cities to sustainable transport and public health – impact-driven startups are pioneering new

approaches. Their strength lies in values-led innovation and the courage to experiment.

**Startups operate like sensors in the innovation ecosystem – they detect tensions early, test solutions quickly, and can fail cheaply compared to the cost of missteps by governments or corporations.**



## Between regulation and revolution

The twin transition is rooted in EU-level strategies – most notably the Fit for 55 package, which aims to cut emissions by at least 55% by 2030. It promotes the development of low-emission tech and the use of digital tools to optimize environmental processes.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Poland is emerging as a regional leader: over 43% of startups working on climate tech in the region are based here <sup>1</sup>.

Globally, startups are transforming key sectors:

- **Energy:** AI tools forecast renewable energy generation, while smart grids help balance supply and demand.
- **Mobility:** Platforms for managing EV fleets and autonomous delivery drones are gaining traction.
- **Education:** Apps and online courses are boosting environmental literacy and green tech skills.

In 2024 alone, AI-related projects in Poland attracted over 1 billion PLN in investment <sup>2</sup>. At the same time, “green innovation” startups focused on renewables, circularity, and emissions reduction are entering foreign markets and gaining investor trust.

## Vision and values: what drives impact startups?

Startups move fast, solve concrete problems, and see technology as a tool for change – not just profit. Their digital solutions are already supporting the environment:

- **Spectrally** developed the world’s first fully autonomous quality control system for chemical production – cutting waste and emissions while improving efficiency.
- **Bin-e** launched AI-powered smart bins that automatically sort and compress waste – optimizing recycling and reducing emissions from waste collection.
- **Airly** created a global network of air quality sensors and apps – used by citizens and governments to combat smog. Their AI-powered forecasting engine achieves 95% accuracy.
- **BLISKO** uses AI to create personalized educational plans for preschoolers – fostering social awareness and adaptive learning.
- **Njord Energy** is building high-altitude wind-powered kites to generate clean electricity – offering a low-impact alternative to traditional turbines.
- **LOGIBIKE** promotes low-emission last-mile urban logistics through electric cargo bikes and bike-sharing platforms.

Each of these startups embodies the core idea of „green by IT” and „green by data” – doubling both environmental and business performance.

<sup>1</sup> <https://pfr.pl/artykul/start-upy-i-ekologia-zielone-rozwiazania-polskich-firm-technologicznych>

<sup>2</sup> <https://startup.pfr.pl/artykul/polski-rynek-vc-w-2024-roku-przyszlosc-ekosystemu-startupowego>

## How to unlock startup potential

Startups can play an even greater role in accelerating the twin transition – if supported effectively. What's needed?

- **Integrated strategies** that combine digital and green investments – like fast internet and data centres powered by renewables, alongside climate programs.
- **Capital and regulatory support** – incentives for green digital solutions (tax relief, R&D grants) and regulations to curb tech's environmental costs (data centre efficiency standards, e-waste recycling policies).
- **Skills development** – training that merges digital and green competencies (e.g., coding for climate data, low-carbon design for engineers).
- **Better access to funding** – venture capital, public procurement, and open innovation partnerships with corporates can help startups scale.
- **Transparency and measurement** – develop indicators for tracking twin transition progress, including IoT-driven environmental data platforms.
- **Geopolitical readiness** – digital sovereignty and access to critical raw materials are becoming strategic concerns in the global innovation race.

## Digital Sustainability at BGK

Digital Sustainability is a concept that promotes the responsible use of digital tools in ways that support both social progress and environmental protection. At BGK, our Digital Sustainability initiative responds to the growing role of technology in everyday life. The program aims not only to support innovation but also to raise awareness of its impact – on mental health, on the environment, and on society.

Key goals of the initiative include:

- Educating people about sustainability in the digital world
- Promoting responsible digital resource use – like e-waste recycling
- Addressing the social challenges of digitization, especially youth mental health
- Supporting educational projects that teach how to use tech ethically and sustainably



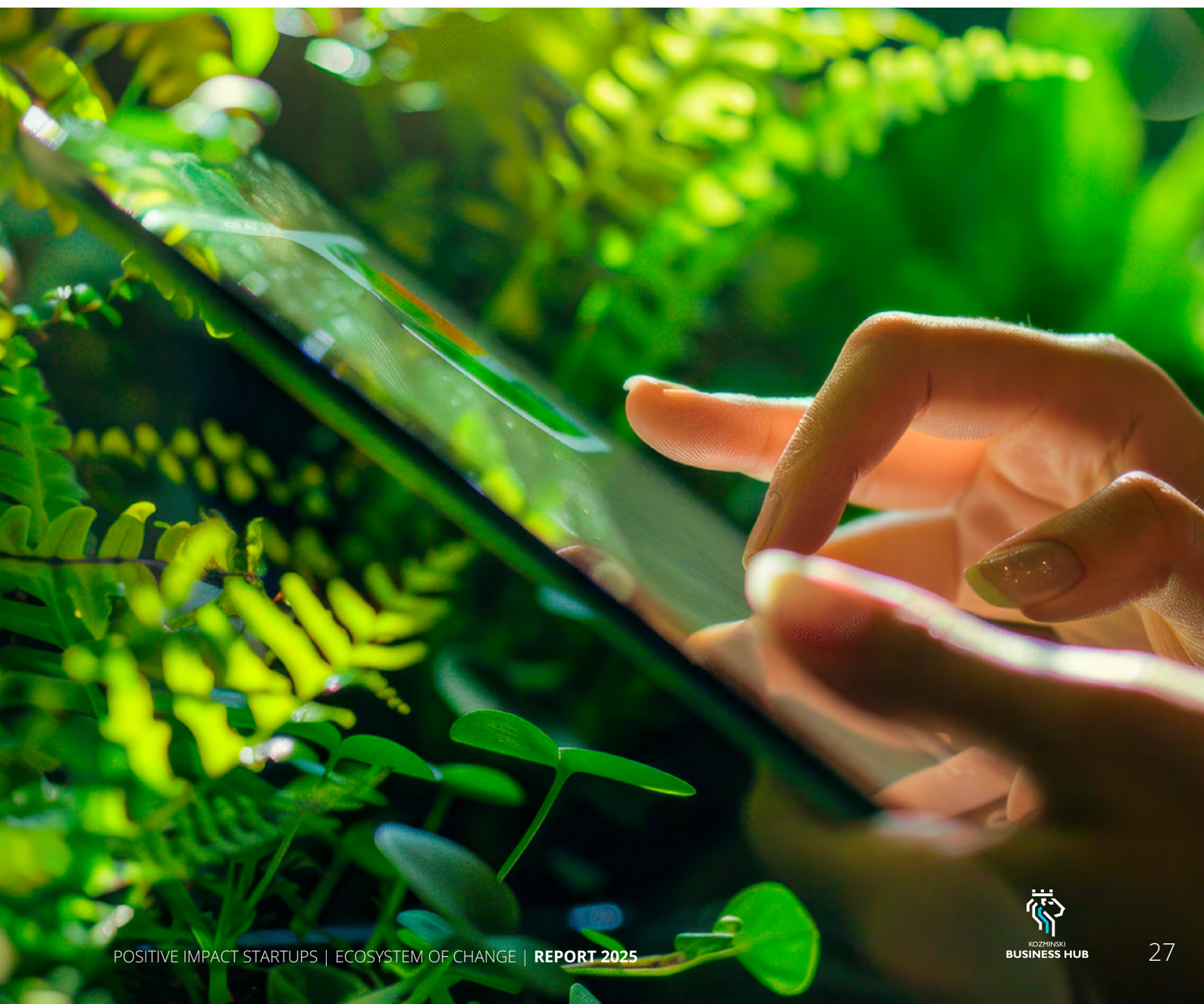
## The startup moment

Systemic digital change is inevitable – but whether it benefits people and the planet depends on the actions we take now. Many traditional jobs will be automated. But new roles – requiring digital and sustainability skills – are emerging. That’s why investment in education and training is critical.

Startups today are what labs were during the Industrial Revolution – small, agile spaces where the future is tested in real time. In this era of twin transition, they

are not just innovators – they are guardians of what comes next. They don’t aim to build more. They aim to build better.

The decisions we make now will shape the twin transition’s long-term impact. To succeed, we must support innovation that delivers profit and purpose – serving global sustainability goals. “Startups are beacons of the future – they shine where governments and corporations haven’t yet looked.” This isn’t just a metaphor – it’s a mission statement. But for their light to keep shining, startups need bold investment, collaborative ecosystems, and systemic support. Twin transition is a civilizational challenge. And startups are among the few actors capable of truly rising to meet it.



# The tide, the Omnibus directive, and ESG-certified swimwear

– why impact startups shouldn't fear  
the truth

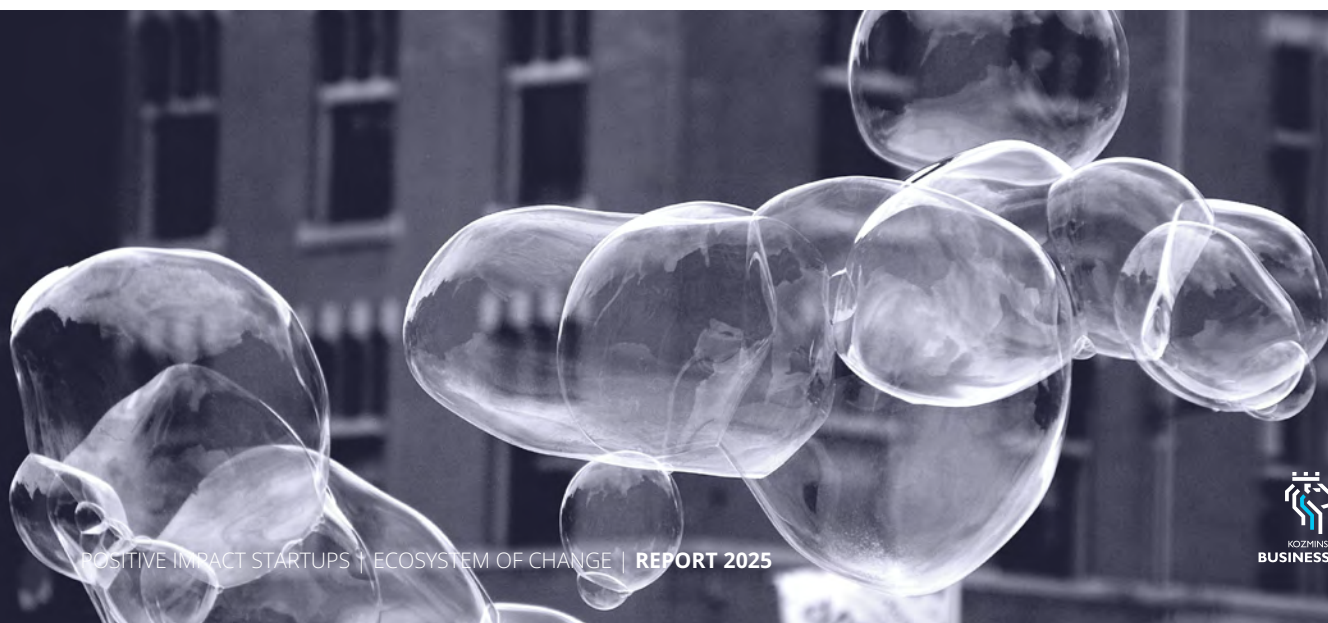
**Michał Miszułowicz**

Director, Cooperation with the Innovation Sector, BNP Paribas Bank Polska S.A.



**It all started with big dreams and bold plans – on a journey to reinvent the world. But let's not forget that Icarus tried that once before, and we all know how it ended. Flying too high can get you burned. Which is why taking the middle road – a narrower path leaning more towards evolution than revolution – might be the safer, and ultimately smarter, route. Ambition and setbacks, after all, shape solid foundations. And it's clear now: we're on the right track when it comes to building a future for impact startups.**

Back in April 2021, the European Commission introduced the CSRD – Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. For the first time, ESG entered the economic mainstream with serious weight. Fast forward to December 2022, and the CSRD was officially adopted by the European Parliament and Council, setting the stage for a systematic rollout of sustainability reporting obligations for large groups of companies.





Start - stop

ESG reporting and decarbonization efforts were on a roll – until November 2024, when President-elect Donald Trump announced that the U.S., one of the world’s largest economies, would once again withdraw from the Paris Agreement. At the same time, he proposed deregulating emissions tracking and loosening ESG standards.

In Q1 2025, the European Union responded by introducing a temporary freeze on reporting obligations for selected business groups – known as “Stop the Clock.” For the first time in years, the pressure to be „green and sustainable” visibly weakened. The ESG market, previously buoyed by political momentum and regulatory push, suddenly had to confront a new reality. But this wasn’t the first time we’d seen the bubble burst:

Bubble	Driven by	Cause of collapse
Biofuels (2006–08)	Policy and regulation	Food crisis, public backlash
Solar China (2010–13)	Subsidies and global hype	Tariffs, subsidy cuts
EVs (2019–24)	Green Deal, investor enthusiasm	Regulatory shifts, demand/supply bottlenecks
Offsets (2021–23)	Net zero pressure	Credibility crisis, fraud
ESG boom (2020–24)	Institutional/fund narratives	Political backlash, “goodness inflation”

Every market goes through a hype cycle. Exuberant optimism always gives way to reality. We are likely to see a wave of failures among those who rode the “green trend” bandwagon without offering anything substantial.

## When the tide goes out

To quote Warren Buffett: "Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked." Many impact startups are now facing serious challenges – customer churn, drying up investment pipelines, restructuring pressures. The psychological shift is just as important: the impact startup has gone from being the 'prince on a white horse' rescuing corporate 'damsels' to becoming just another player in the game. To survive, it must prove that it delivers real, measurable value. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

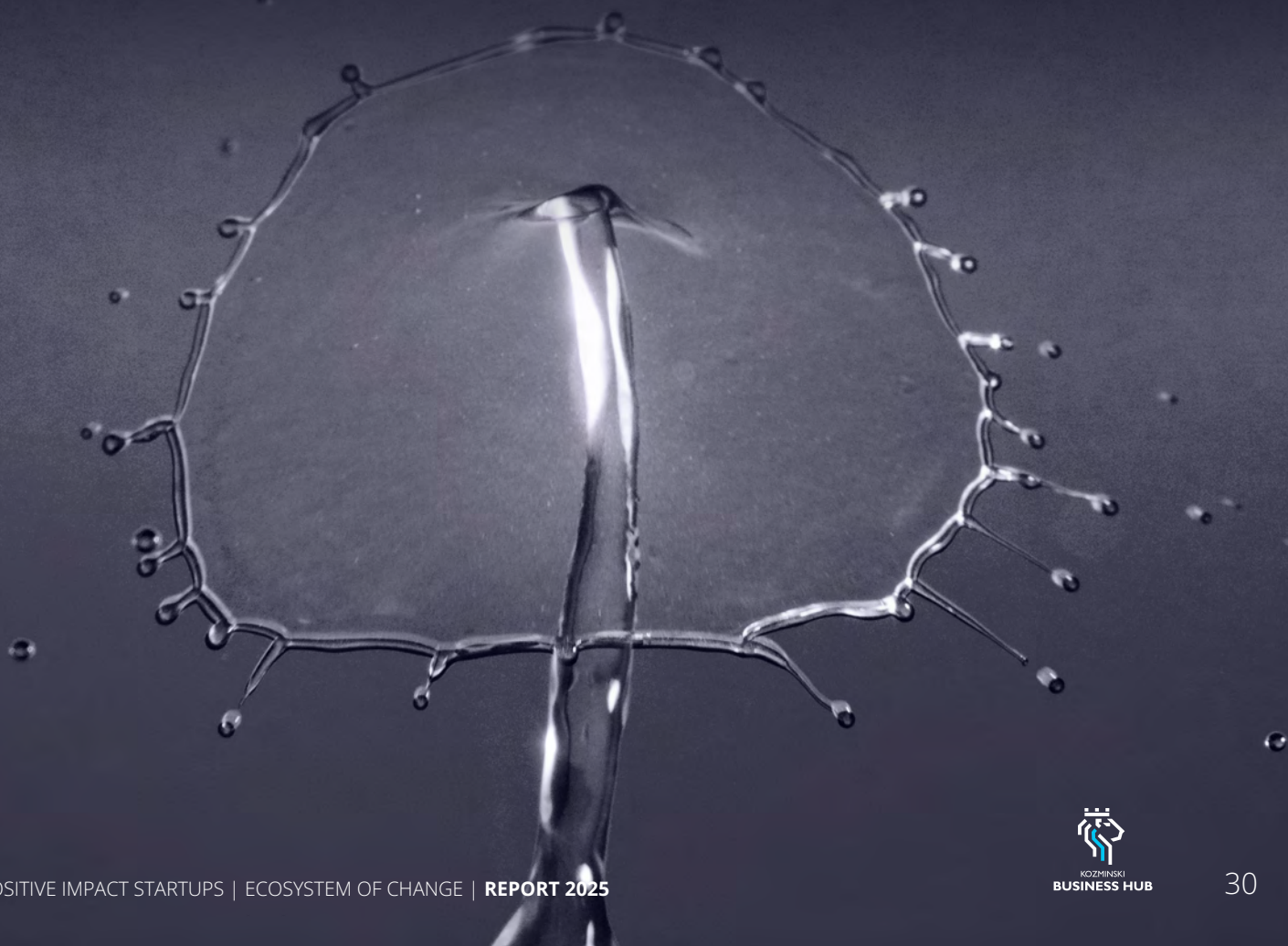
Every market goes through a hype cycle. Exuberant optimism always gives way to reality. We are likely to see a wave of failures among those who rode the "green trend" bandwagon without offering anything substantial. But the problems these companies aimed

to solve – climate change, social inequality, energy inefficiency – have not gone anywhere. If anything, they are getting worse, especially in light of the current AI hype. What we are witnessing is a healthy market correction.

Yes, positive impact can generate profits. However, this is only possible if you accurately diagnose real problems, offer viable solutions, and operate in a genuinely sustainable way.

I believe that the past few years have laid the foundations for a more stable and resilient impact economy. The next wave of startup champions will likely emerge from this sector. Startups such as

Contec and Ecobean, which are based on proprietary scientific innovation, are already contributing to a circular economy. Areas such as recycling (especially urban mining) and alternative energy sources.



PART II

# Everyday life

of a positive impact  
startup

CONVERSATIONS



# Mother of Gut

The story of MOG: a journey fuelled by intuition and determination

**Magdalena Feliniak** talks to **Natalia Franczak** and **Julia Taranko**, co-founders of Mother of Gut (MOG). Both are driven by a need to turn their energy into something real – something that brings value to people and the planet.



Do you remember the exact moment you decided to launch your startup?

**Natalia:** The idea for MOG didn't happen overnight. It was the result of a long process – figuring out what we wanted to do together. You could start our story at different points, but really, it all began when we met. There was an instant spark – a kind of energy for collaboration.



**As an adult, I realized I wanted to help others navigate their own healing journeys, especially through nutrition. That's where the inspiration came from.**

**Julia:** Totally. This wasn't some pre-packaged idea we just grabbed off a shelf – we built it. When we met, I was running a small production house creating content for food brands. I wasn't burnt out, but I did feel like something was missing. I wanted to do something that brought people real value. Natalia was working in a corporate ad agency and felt like she couldn't fully express her ideas or potential. Meeting each other was the turning point – we both wanted to take that energy and build something meaningful.

**So what led you to collagen-rich bone broths, specifically?**

**Julia:** It goes back to my childhood. I had an autoimmune condition, and after conventional treatments didn't work, my parents turned to alternative methods – based on food, rest, and natural care. Think millet, long-simmered broths, steamed veggies. It was rooted in traditional Chinese medicine, in a way.

Living like that was considered "weird" back then – but it worked. And it stuck with me. As an adult, I realized I wanted to help others navigate their own healing journeys, especially through nutrition. That's where the inspiration came from.

**Natalia:** Our trip to Japan also had a big impact. The level of craftsmanship in food there blew us away. Every product felt like a tiny masterpiece. That experience made us realize how much detail and care go into good food – not just the taste, but the whole experience. That mindset became a core part of how we do things at MOG.

**Your website says I should drink 125 ml of your collagen broth daily. Why that amount?**

**Natalia:** Because in just 125 ml, you're getting as much collagen as you would from many popular supplements. Regular consumption supports gut lining health – which is crucial for overall wellness and immunity. That's why our motto is "Your health begins in the gut."

We simmer our bone broths (beef and chicken) and fish broths for a long time, drawing out maximum nutrients, including collagen. We're all about clean, natural ingredients – no preservatives, no artificial additives. We took a lot of that from what we learned in Japan.

**Julia:** And that long simmering process – 20 hours! – makes a big difference. It breaks nutrients down into forms your body can absorb easily. Our broth is packed with amino acids like glycine and hydroxyproline, which support digestion, tissue repair, and overall gut health.



**Everyone brings something valuable to the table, and our strength is in partnership and collaboration. We each have our responsibilities, but decisions are shared.**

We drink it first thing in the morning on an empty stomach. It's like a warm hug for your insides. Collagen helps tissue regeneration, and the amino acids aid nutrient absorption. Having a jar of it in your fridge makes healthy habits so much easier. We always recommend starting your day with a warm cup of broth.

**MOG isn't just the two of you. What kind of leaders are you?**

**Natalia:** We actually don't love the word "boss." We see ourselves as team leaders. Everyone brings something valuable to the table, and our strength is in partnership and collaboration. We each have our responsibilities, but decisions are shared.

**Julia:** Totally agree. Our core team is the two of us, my dad Jacek – who helps with recipes and logistics thanks to his background in food – and Adrian, our angel investor who's now also involved in sales and investor relations. I focus on communication and marketing, and Natalia is brilliant with e-commerce and ops.

Our team is small but well-rounded. We each have distinct skill sets, and that's been key to our success – maybe to any startup's success, really.

**Natalia:** Of course, the team goes beyond just the four of us. Early on, we set up a professional production facility certified by the health authority. Julia only cooked one test batch at home before we realized: nope, not sustainable!

We invested in a commercial kitchen, but still found ourselves chopping veggies and managing production ourselves. Sometimes we'd be pitching investors in the morning and slicing onions in sweatpants by afternoon. Calluses included.

Now we have a small but mighty kitchen and logistics crew – many of them more experienced than we are! And we love learning from them.

**Julia:** Fun fact: we've never held a formal recruitment. Most team members joined through personal recommendations or organic connections. That's helped us build a close-knit team that really shares our values.

That said, we still do a lot ourselves. Many startups go straight to hiring after their first funding round – we took a different route. It's more work, but staying hands-on has helped us stay grounded.





## Have you had mentors along the way? What's your advice for other startup founders?

**Julia:** We've never had formal mentors, but we've learned a lot from books, podcasts, and founders who share their experiences online. That's one great thing about the world today – knowledge is everywhere.

One great tip we picked up from a podcast was to create a waiting list before launching. Two months before our first production run, we had a big list of interested people. That was the green light – we were ready. It took a lot of the pressure off.

**Natalia:** We're currently part of the Positive Impact Academy run by DANONE and Kozminski University. Being around people who care more about impact than profit is incredibly energizing. It's also preparing us for B Corp certification, which we've been thinking about for a while now.

But honestly? Our biggest asset is our lived experience. We both have backgrounds in food and wellness. That combination has shaped everything we do at MOG.

## You recently posted a funny reel on Instagram – counting down "30 days until we shut down." What was that about?

**Natalia:** [laughs] That was our cheeky response to someone online who said we wouldn't last six months. You have to laugh at comments like that. It's wild how people can judge without knowing anything about who we are or what we've built. For us, what keeps the business going is our team, our commitment to sustainability, and our storytelling. That's the trifecta.



### Let's talk fundraising. What was that like for you, and what advice would you give?

**Julia:** First tip: talk about your idea with everyone. Our initial funding came from personal savings, friends, and family – including Adrian, our now-partner. That got us far: production space, branding, a working web shop. Then... we ran out of money. Within four weeks of launching, we knew we needed serious funds to scale up. So, we got to work.

**Natalia:** We spent a lot of time crafting our investor deck. It wasn't just about raising money – it helped us clarify our entire business model. It forced us to define our vision.

**Julia:** Once we had the deck and valuation ready, we reached out to friends and family who had shown interest. Some had congratulated us on launching the business, so we followed up with an invite to invest. That's how we closed our friends & family round.

**Natalia:** Our biggest takeaway? Investors invest in people. So, show your vision, your grit, and your long-term commitment.

### Your product is designed for health-conscious consumers. How do you reach your audience?

**Natalia:** Our main communication channel is Instagram. That's where we build a community around gut health and healthy living.

**Julia:** We also work with brand ambassadors – people who genuinely care about what we do and share it on their platforms. It's a great marketing strategy if you pick the right people. We also use email marketing to share news and benefits of our products – and promote our subscription model for broth deliveries.

### You're listed as a Positive Impact Startup – that's a badge of honour. How do your values guide your business decisions?

**Natalia:** Our mission isn't just a side note – it's our compass. Everything we do comes back to helping people improve their gut health through food and education.

**Julia:** Ingredients matter too. We prioritize quality, ethics, and sustainability. No plastic. Our broths are packaged in glass. Our kitchen is 100% stainless steel.

**Natalia:** That's why we're working toward B Corp certification. We want our impact to be recognized and audited by an independent standard.

Last question. You've got a cooking playlist on your website. What song best captures the spirit of MOG?

**Natalia:** "The Time Is Now" by Moloko. It's our anthem. Yes, we have long-term plans – but we're also very present. We celebrate the small wins. We trust the process.

**Julia:** Mine would be "I'm Still Standing" by Elton John. Every time I hear it, I get emotional. We've come so far, despite the obstacles. And we're still standing.

You started this journey on day one with a leap of faith. Looking back, what advice would you give yourselves on that very first day?

**Natalia:** "Trust yourself & keep going." Yes, the business is built on numbers, but intuition plays a huge role too. We've learned to trust both.

**Julia:** "Don't be afraid." I'm incredibly proud of what we've built – and even prouder that we did it on our own terms.



[motherofgut.com](https://motherofgut.com)





# Bee Healthy Honey

A story of passion, biodiversity, and intergenerational collaboration

**Marta Czerniawska-Stankiewicz** talks to **Oliwia Myczkowska**, co-founder of Bee Healthy Honey – a startup she launched with her grandfather, **Professor Marian Surowiec**.

Their mission? To improve bee health worldwide with a natural, non-chemical solution to varroa mite infestation.



**Tell us about how Bee Healthy Honey started. Why bees – and why a startup?**

Bee Healthy Honey is rooted in an intergenerational story. My grandfather, Professor Marian Surowiec, has been running his own apiary for years, but his background as a biophysicist goes much deeper. He specializes in how ultrasound affects living organisms – and one day, science met passion. That's how the idea for the Varroa Stopper was born.

As his granddaughter, I grew up helping him with experiments and slowly fell in love with bees. When I realized the commercial potential of what he had created, I knew we had to turn it into a startup. What makes us different is our mission: we want to *protect bees and revolutionize how beekeepers fight varroa mites* – without using harmful chemicals.

We combine my grandfather's 77 years of scientific wisdom with my 18-year-old startup energy. That's the magic of our intergenerational business.

**If you could give yourself one piece of advice on the day you launched the startup, what would it be?**

"Be ready – success brings unexpected challenges." Nobody talks about the dark side of early success. We've faced hate, misinformation, and age-based bias. I've seen people dismiss our work just because I'm 18 and working with my 77-year-old grandfather. At one point, false claims about our device being harmful to bees led to threats. It was brutal. But it also taught us just how fragile reputation can be – and how important mental resilience is in business. Ironically, those challenges made our bond stronger and our mission even clearer.





**We complement each other: he's calm, analytical, and methodical – I'm more dynamic, creative, and, as he puts it, "a little wild." That balance helps us make smart, well-paced decisions.**

### **What makes Varroa Stopper truly innovative compared to existing solutions?**

The Varroa Stopper uses targeted ultrasound waves – specifically tuned to the anatomy of the *Varroa destructor* mite. Unlike chemical treatments, our device is based on pure physics. Here's how it works:

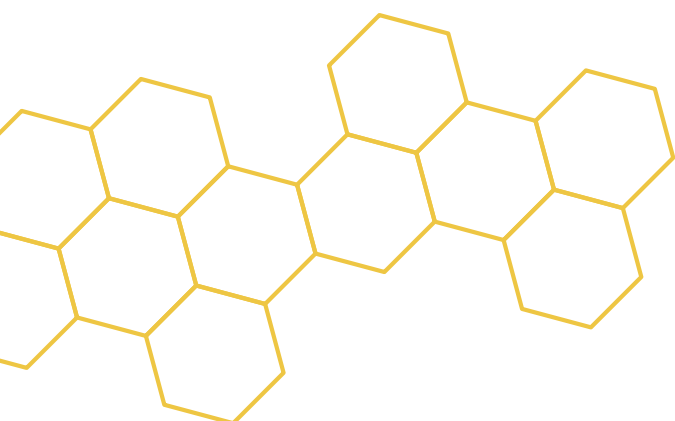
- The sound waves disrupt the mite's orientation, movement, and ability to feed.
- They also stimulate bees to clean themselves more vigorously, which strengthens their natural defences.

And because we're not using any chemicals (like amitraz, which is potentially carcinogenic), there are zero residues in the honey, wax, or propolis. That's a big win for eco-conscious consumers. Our approach also replaces harsh diagnostic methods – like the alcohol wash – that kill bees. Varroa Stopper is a safe, sustainable, and effective game-changer in varroa control.

### **Is your solution 100% organic – and certified-bio friendly?**

Absolutely. That's one of our biggest selling points. The device works only through physical means – ultrasound waves that affect mites but not bees. The parasite is about 300 times lighter than a bee, which makes it vulnerable to the vibrations we generate. Bees remain completely unharmed.

There are no chemicals, no toxins, and no contamination of hive products. We've been testing the technology since 2019, and our patent was approved in 2022. It's proven safe for both bees and consumers – unlike traditional chemical treatments, which can linger in honey and wax. That makes our solution ideal for organic-certified beekeeping.



**You co-founded the company with your grandfather. How do you divide responsibilities?  
Does the generation gap help or hurt?**

It's honestly our secret weapon. Professor handles all R&D, technical validation, and scientific integrity. I focus on business strategy, marketing, customer relationships, and scaling. We complement each other: he's calm, analytical, and methodical – I'm more dynamic, creative, and, as he puts it, "a little wild." That balance helps us make smart, well-paced decisions.

There are, of course, some generational tensions: we work at different speeds, use different tools, and communicate differently. But with clear goals, strong respect, and good communication, we make it work. More than that – we learn from each other every day.

**What's your vision for the future – and what challenges do you face?**

We have big plans. Right now, we're focused on growing our presence in Poland through a network of beekeeping equipment distributors. Next steps: expand into Europe, then the Americas, Australia, and Asia. We're also customizing our offer for large-scale beekeeping operations, which have specific technical needs. And we're applying for funding to help more beekeepers access our solution – especially those seeking organic alternatives. Our biggest challenge? Beekeeping is a conservative industry. Many beekeepers still rely on old-school methods passed down over generations. They're sceptical of new tech.

Also, combating misinformation about our product takes constant effort. We've learned firsthand how damaging false claims can be. But we're building trust through scientific data and customer results – and the number of happy users keeps growing.

**How does your solution contribute to biodiversity – not just saving honeybees?**

The Varroa Stopper is part of a much bigger biodiversity story. Honeybees don't live in isolation. When infected with varroa mites, they can pass the parasite to wild pollinators by sharing nectar sources. Healthy, mite-free bees help protect native species. Plus, by eliminating the need for chemical treatments, we reduce toxic substances in the environment – chemicals that often end up in soil, water, and plants.

In short: our device helps create cleaner ecosystems, supports organic farming, and boosts pollination efficiency – all of which lead to better crop yields with less reliance on pesticides or fertilizers. It's a full-circle sustainability win.

**Technology is a catalyst that helps transform traditional sectors into sustainable, socially responsible industries.**



**Do you think technology can help shift business mindsets toward sustainability?**

Absolutely. The Varroa Stopper solves a real problem, generates profit, and drives a bigger mindset shift toward sustainable entrepreneurship. It proves that you can build a profitable, innovative business that's *also good for the planet*. We started in beekeeping, but the ripple effect touches everything from food safety to consumer awareness.

And as an intergenerational startup, we're breaking age-related stereotypes. Our story shows that diverse teams – with different ages, backgrounds, and perspectives – can build bold, world-changing solutions. Technology is a catalyst that helps transform traditional sectors into sustainable, socially responsible industries.

**Last question: what song best captures the spirit of Bee Healthy Honey – and why?**

"Don't Worry, Be Happy." This track sums up our startup vibe perfectly. It's all about optimism, staying calm under pressure, and pushing forward – even when things get tough.

We've been through a lot: industry skepticism, ageism (18 and 77 isn't your average startup combo!), online hate, and misinformation. But we stayed true to our mission, and we stayed positive.

This song reminds us – and our customers – that there's a better, more natural way to protect bees. No chemicals, no stress. Just safe, science-backed innovation. It's a little tune that keeps us smiling – and keeps the bees happy, too.





# GURU Ferment

Proof that peas can be cool

**Ewelina Wieczorek** chats with **Maciej Deoniziak** (Founder) and **Alicja Łabędź** (Creative Director) of GURU Ferment. GURU isn't just a company – it's a movement to reinvent how we produce and eat food.



**GURU**





**. Our goal was never “just” to make a product. We’re part of a bigger shift in the food system: smarter sourcing, shorter supply chains, and strong partnerships between farmers, producers, and eaters.**

#### How did it all start? Why this kind of business?

It all started with... peas! We wanted to create high-protein, plant-based foods using local legumes – ingredients rooted in our food culture. Peas turned out to be the perfect fit. We were inspired by Indonesian tempeh but took our own path, developing a unique fermentation process to make something not just super nutritious, but also good for the planet.

#### And the name GURU? Sounds like a superhero.

Exactly! Our pea is a total superhero – on a mission to make sustainable, healthy proteins a norm. That takes guts and stamina. So we needed a name with bold energy, one that’s easy to remember and inspires curiosity.

#### What values did you start with, and are they still present today?

From day one, we believed food can be made better – cleaner, more local, more respectful of nature. Our goal was never “just” to make a product. We’re part of a bigger shift in the food system: smarter sourcing, shorter supply chains, and strong partnerships between farmers, producers, and eaters. These values still guide us every day.





**What were your biggest challenges in the early days – and how did you overcome them?**

Everything was a challenge! We were introducing a totally new product. Nobody knew what to expect. We had to convince people that peas can be cool. On top of that, we were building our own tech, trying to go plastic-free, scaling fast, and making tempeh a daily staple. It wasn't easy – but with help from amazing people, we're still here and still growing. We know the real journey is just getting started.

**What are the environmental challenges of making tempeh from peas in Poland?**

The biggest ones are logistics and raw material quality – not all peas are created equal, and we're committed to top-notch quality. Scaling sales and distribution for such an unconventional product is a big learning curve, too.

**How do you build relationships with business partners and suppliers?**

We believe in direct connections and shared values. We're super transparent about how we work – especially on social media. We're still pretty new to the "corporate deal" world, so until now, it's been all about coffee chats and community-based growth.



**The HoReCa scene gives us credibility and exposure – recommendations from chefs go a long way in building trust with consumers.**

**How do you collaborate with local farmers to promote sustainable pea farming?**

We talk. We listen. We co-create. From the beginning, we aimed to support local farmers and shorten the supply chain. It's not always smooth – logistics and processing are real pain points – but step by step, we're building a model that works and respects everyone involved.

**What are your key distribution channels – and why?**

Restaurants. Restaurants. And... restaurants. That's where people discover new flavours. The HoReCa scene gives us credibility and exposure – recommendations from chefs go a long way in building trust with consumers.

**Are you planning to launch other fermented products based on local legumes?**

Yes – this is one of our top priorities. We're working on new products made from broad beans, lupin, lentils, and local varieties of beans – all crops that thrive in our climate and are great for the soil. We're not quite ready with production capacity yet, but it's just a matter of time.





**Do you also focus on educating people about fermentation and the health benefits of tempeh?**

Absolutely. Education is everything. We run workshops, do pop-ups, and are super active on social. Our product is based on something familiar – peas – but the fermentation part still feels exotic to many people. That's why open conversation and awareness-building are core to our mission.

**If an investor were reading this, how would you convince them to back GURU?**

GURU isn't just a brand – it's a movement. We're tapping into two of the most powerful trends out there: the rise of healthy, plant-based diets and the urgent need to lower the carbon footprint of food production. We've already gained recognition – "Best New Plant-Based Brand of 2023" and listed as a Positive Impact Startup. We're scaling up, developing ready-to-eat options, and building partnerships with international companies. We've proven our tech works. Now we're looking to take it to the next level – with the right partners on board.

**How do you define "positive impact" in your business?**

For us, it's about popularizing local legumes as an alternative to industrial feed crops. We want to help shift Polish agriculture away from soy and corn grown for livestock, and toward peas, fava beans, and lupins – plants that feed people and regenerate the soil. We're building a food system that's low-emission, zero-waste, and hyper-local – the kind of system our society and planet desperately need.



If you could go back to the day you launched the startup, what advice would you give yourselves?

Take part in more startup programs and accelerator competitions before launching. That would have given us more structure, resources, and time to prepare before jumping into the deep end. That said... the "jump-first" approach gave us grit, speed, and boldness. It made us who we are.

Final question: what song best represents your startup – and why??

"L'Amour Toujours" by Gigi D'Agostino. Just like the song, it's all about endless energy, joy, and turning dreams into reality – step by step, beat by beat.



[guruferment.pl](https://guruferment.pl)



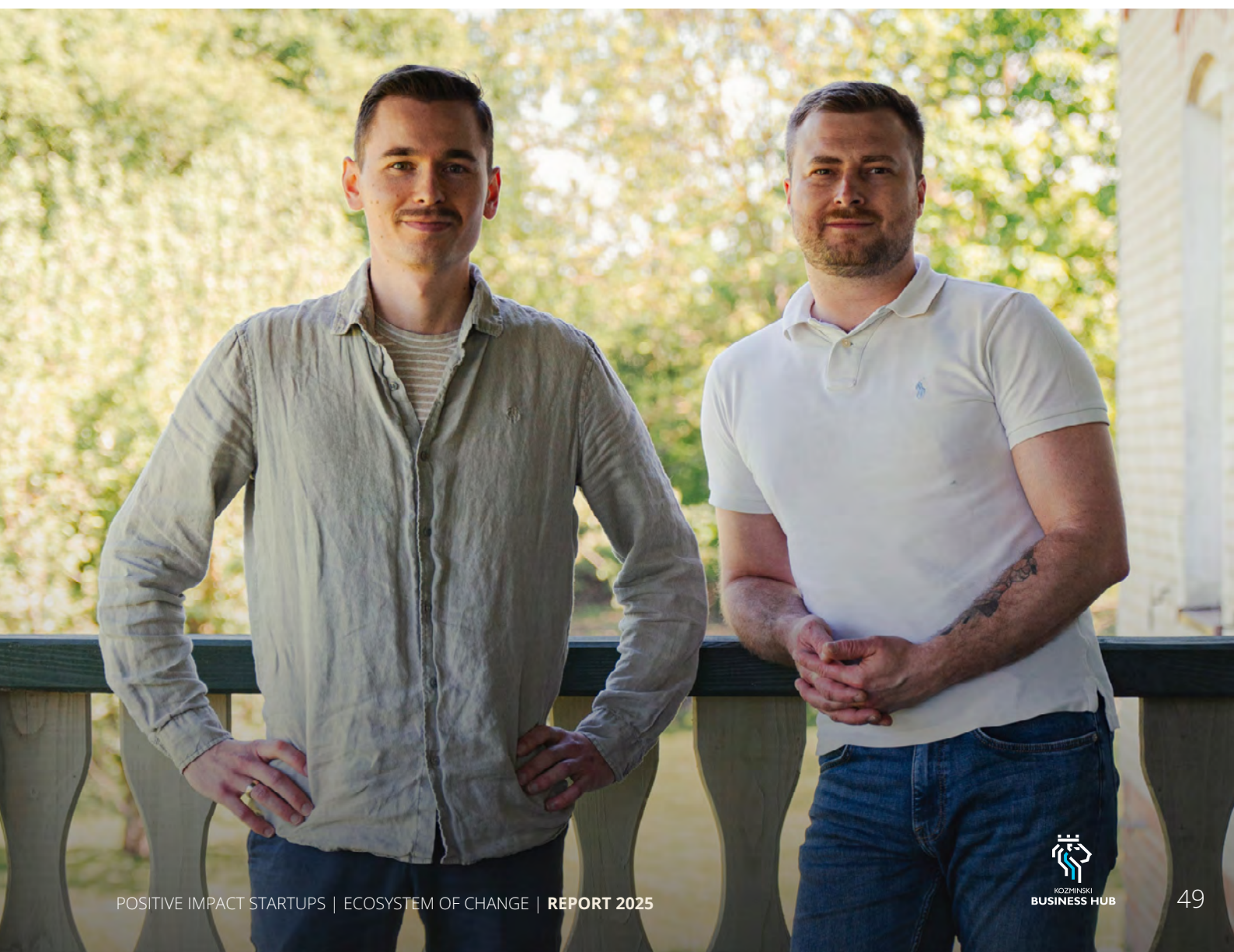
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# Millek

A response to the hunger for authenticity, truth and freedom

**Marta Czerniawska-Stankiewicz** in conversation with **Dmytr Bilokon** and **Sylwester Kościuk** – co-founders of Millek, a plant-based startup rooted in history, craft and radical authenticity.





**Millek is a modern return to the past: mindful of the planet, of health, and rooted in deep tradition. We don't just make plant-based cheese substitutes – we craft living, fermented foods with soul.**

You're making fermented plant-based products inspired by traditional Źuławy cheesemaking. Where did the idea come from?

The idea was born from longing – for real food, for authenticity, for flavours that tell the story of a place and its people. Źuławy is a land full of stories, especially about old dairies that once stood at the heart of rural life – symbols of patience, craft, and respect for nourishment. We wanted to bring that spirit back – not in a nostalgic way, but reimagined for the now. Millek is a modern return to the past: mindful of the planet, of health, and rooted in deep tradition. We don't just make plant-based cheese substitutes – we craft living, fermented foods with soul.

Did you have support when you launched Millek, or was it more of a "swimming against the current" situation?

Both. We had encouragement from people close to us, who saw our drive and passion. But at the same time, we were definitely going *against the grain* – especially in a place where dairy is practically sacred. Talking about "cheese without milk" in a region where cows are cultural icons took courage and patience. It meant building trust and educating, step by step. It wasn't easy at first, but slowly the wind started blowing in our favour.



What changed for you after being recognized as a Positive Impact Startup last year?

That moment mattered – it validated the idea that business doesn't have to be a numbers game. You can build like a farm: first nurture the soil, then the harvest will come. Over the past year, we matured. We improved our operations. We made tough calls. But more importantly, we realized that our role goes far beyond the product. We're also educators, storytellers, and co-creators of a new food culture.

Do you think Polish consumers are ready to shift away from traditional dairy?

The change is already happening. Quietly, gradually – but irreversibly. People are asking better questions now: *Where did this come from? How was it made? What does it mean – for me, for the planet?* That's a big shift. We're not telling anyone to "give up milk." We're simply inviting people to try something different – something with meaning, depth, and flavour. No preaching. No pressure. Just an open seat at the table.

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How do you talk to people about your products and get them curious?

We don't *convince* – we tell stories. About fermentation. About almonds. About how each wheel is aged and crafted. We show that this isn't a "substitute" – it's real food, made with care and knowledge. And then... we let people taste it. That's where the magic happens. People quickly realize it's not just "for vegans" – it's for anyone looking for something real and honest.



What are your plans for the future? Any dreams on the horizon?

We dream of seeing our *Green Creamery* truly green – surrounded by a micro-farm, built on permaculture, with its own processing workshop and a space for people to come learn and co-create. A place rooted in land, community and tradition. We don't want to become a plant-based "dairy corp." We want to stay local, true, delicious – and future-friendly.

If you could go back to day one of Millek, what advice would you give yourselves?

We'd say: *Don't try to please everyone.* Be yourselves. Fully. Authentically. That's how you attract the right people – partners, customers, allies. And also: don't rush nature. Fermentation takes time. So does growing a company, a community, an idea.

If Millek were a song, what would it be – and why?

"Take Me to Church" by Hozier. Not just a song – it's a statement. It speaks to resistance, raw emotion, and a hunger for truth and freedom. That's the spirit Millek was born from – a deep need to do things differently. With respect for life, but without bowing to hypocrisy. You hear that song, and you *feel* it's about something bigger. That's what we hope people sense when they taste our food.

Thanks so much – and here's to more people discovering your soulful, plant-based creations.



millek.bio

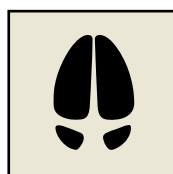




# Kopyto

On the beautiful and the tough moments

**Marta Poniewierka** in conversation with **Zofia Lohman-Ndou**, co-founder and CEO of the ethical fashion brand Kopyto.



**The fashion industry consumes enormous amounts of water, pollutes rivers through dyeing processes, and generates textile waste due to overproduction. Is it actually possible to run a clothing brand that doesn't make things worse?**

Yes – but it's not easy. It takes conscious decisions, and often a willingness to sacrifice short-term gains for long-term responsibility. At Kopyto, we take full responsibility for the natural materials we use. We plan production carefully to reduce waste and avoid overstock. We design timeless, high-quality pieces – no seasonal collections, no flash sales, no pressure to overconsume. Our materials and suppliers are selected based on strict sustainability and transparency criteria. We believe in certifications, because they ensure real accountability. Most importantly, we aim for circularity. For now, we're focused on educating customers about garment care and repair. But we're also actively developing systems to take back used clothes and recycle the raw material. In short, it is possible to run a fashion brand responsibly – but only if every stage, from design to post-sale, is treated with intention and ethics.

**How did the idea for Kopyto first come about?**

We actually started not as a fashion brand, but an accessory brand. The goal was simple: to make wool hats accessible – not expensive, not exclusive, not luxury. We wanted to promote wool as the brilliant, natural, breathable, long-lasting material that it is. Our heads deserve real wool, not synthetic blends drowning the market.

**Staying true to ourselves. Not chasing profit above all else.  
Taking responsibility for every decision.**

**How long did it take you to prepare for the launch?**

About nine months. A full-term commitment. 😊

**Starting a new fashion label is costly. How did you make it work?**

We didn't have a big budget. We took a big risk. One crucial thing was negotiating delayed payments with our manufacturer, so we could shift production costs toward the end of the sales season. We also skipped traditional, expensive marketing – and instead went for creative, community-driven methods. That helped us stay lean.





### What's your recipe for running a sustainable business?

Staying true to ourselves. Not chasing profit above all else. Taking responsibility for every decision. We live by the idea of sustainable growth, where success means feeling good about the trace we leave behind.

### You're already doing a lot for the planet. Any next big goals?

Our current mission: creating a recycling system for our garments. We want to close the loop and give our raw material a second life.



### What were the most beautiful – and most difficult – moments so far?

The hardest moments were when we hit a wall while looking for a sustainable solution we could truly stand behind. The most beautiful? When we found that solution anyway. Or when we get deeply heartfelt feedback from customers who genuinely appreciate what we're doing. Those moments are everything.

### How did you get your RWS certification? How long did it take?

It took nearly a full year – from the decision to apply to completing the audits. We were the first in Poland to do it. It wasn't easy – we had to convince our suppliers to undergo audits, implement traceability procedures, create documentation proving that we don't sell more certified products than we could possibly make from certified material. It required persistence and guts. But it was worth it.



**If you could give your startup-self one piece of advice – what would it be?**

Honestly, we're proud of how we grew. It matched the growth of our awareness. We learned to educate consumers patiently, to build demand organically. Maybe we'd just say: trust the process. Don't get discouraged by what doesn't exist yet on the market – if it's missing, go ahead and create it. Innovation brings fulfilment. That's our advice: be the one who creates what's not there yet.

**And finally, what song best describes your startup – and why?**

"Big Yellow Taxi" by Joni Mitchell. Because it's about what we lose when we stop paying attention. And how we have the power to protect what matters, if we act with care.

**Thank you for the conversation – and may your journey continue with even more bold, beautiful choices.**



kopyto.co





# Waterly

Thanks to Waterly, everyone can access free, real-time water quality data

**Marta Poniewierka** in conversation with **Patryk Kamiński**,  
CEO and co-founder of Waterly



## Why water? Why not air quality sensors or some futuristic drone? What led you to build a water monitoring system?

Air already has a head start - there are well-developed monitoring systems and great companies working on it (shoutout to the team at Airly!). But water? That's a whole different story.

I'm from Suwałki, and growing up I spent every free moment at my grandparents' in the countryside – usually by a river or lake, fishing or just messing around. It was actually during one of those quiet fishing sessions

back in 2019, when I caught absolutely nothing, that the thought hit me: Is this water even liveable for fish? Everyone was talking about smog – but what about water quality?

I started looking for real-time data and realized it basically didn't exist. Access to water info was minimal, and there was no system tracking water quality live. At that point, my co-founders and I already had solid experience in custom-built IoT solutions (Tomek has over 30 years of experience!). So we said: "Let's go for it." And that's how Waterly started.

## What did the journey from idea to prototype look like?

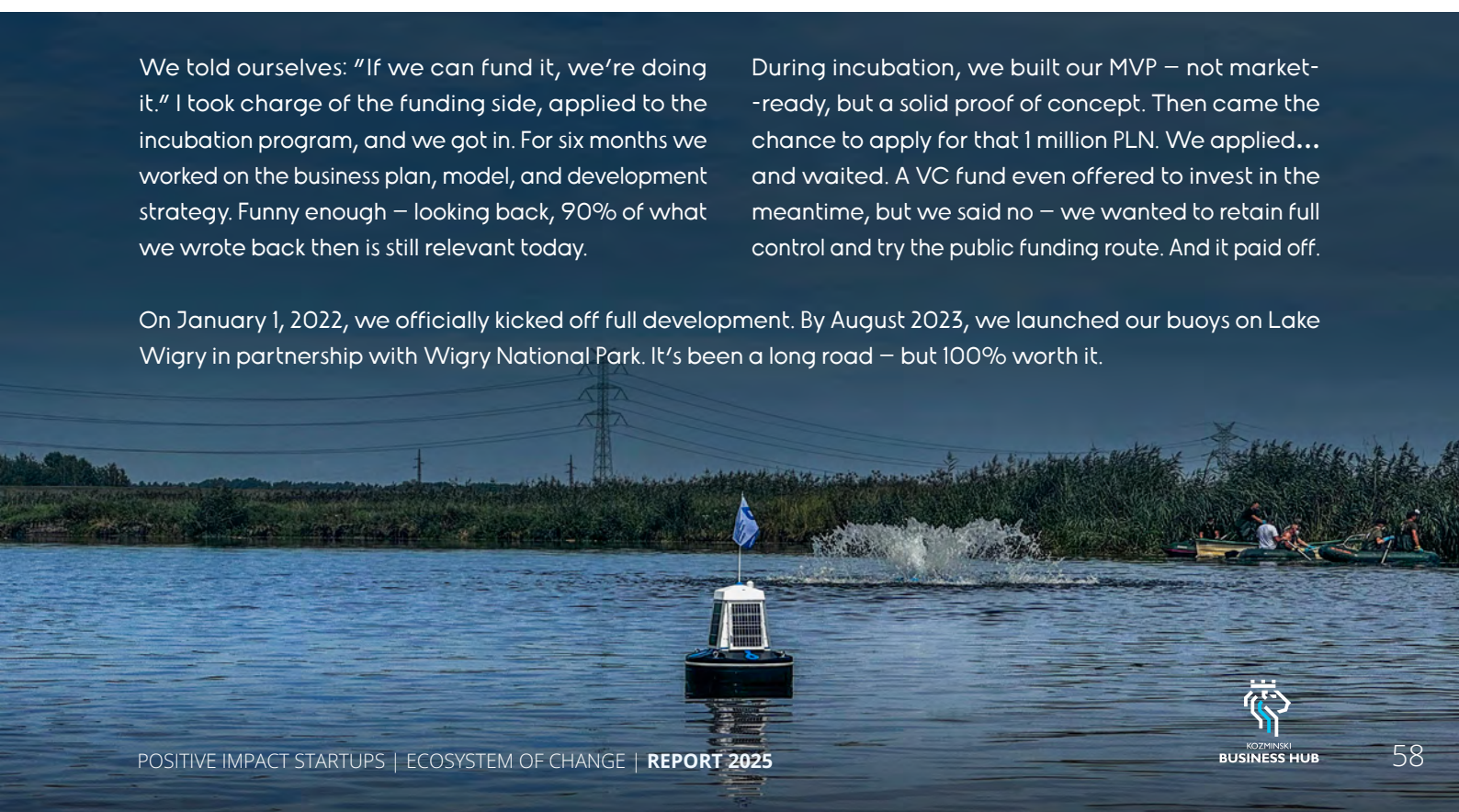
We kicked things off with market research – what's out there, how it works, whether real-time water data even exists. Spoiler: it didn't. Then we dug into technical and operational challenges. And we thought: "Yeah... we can build this." Next came financial reality: we calculated we'd need two full years, lots of materials, more hardware than we had. So we asked: How do we fund this?

Here's a fun fact: at the time, I didn't even know what "startup" really meant. I googled it and found a PFR (Polish Development Fund) program for startups from Eastern Poland – with a potential grant of 1 million PLN.

We told ourselves: "If we can fund it, we're doing it." I took charge of the funding side, applied to the incubation program, and we got in. For six months we worked on the business plan, model, and development strategy. Funny enough – looking back, 90% of what we wrote back then is still relevant today.

During incubation, we built our MVP – not market-ready, but a solid proof of concept. Then came the chance to apply for that 1 million PLN. We applied... and waited. A VC fund even offered to invest in the meantime, but we said no – we wanted to retain full control and try the public funding route. And it paid off.

On January 1, 2022, we officially kicked off full development. By August 2023, we launched our buoys on Lake Wigry in partnership with Wigry National Park. It's been a long road – but 100% worth it.





Let's say I work at a company in Warsaw and want to monitor water quality in the Vistula River. Can I buy a buoy from you? How much does it cost? Will my data be shown on your public Water Quality Map?

Yes, you can! But heads up – our buoys aren't budget gadgets. They're built to be fully autonomous and withstand tough conditions: ice, flooding, strong currents. So the standard buoy for a river like the Vistula costs 29,990 PLN (incl. VAT), plus a monthly subscription of 159 PLN for connectivity, data analytics, alerts, and platform access.

Alternatively, we offer a subscription model – think SaaS, but with hardware. We call it HaaS (Hardware as a Service). For 1,990 PLN per month, you get full service: installation, maintenance, updates, and

zero upfront costs. That's a great fit for institutions or companies – like manufacturers using water in their processes or those tracking their environmental footprint.

Also: if someone wants to sponsor a public buoy, they absolutely can. We'll show a sponsor badge in the app, which can link to your company or cause. And yes, data from that buoy will appear on our public Water Quality Map. The Vistula is a public river – so data belongs to everyone.

So renting a buoy is already possible?

Yep! It's one of our key services. Clients can subscribe to our monitoring solution – hardware included – and get full access to real-time data, alerts, analytics, and reports. We handle everything technical. Our clients just focus on making smart, data-driven decisions.





Think of it like medical diagnostics – you can't treat what you don't understand. Water is no different. Without data, we're flying blind. Waterly's job is to provide the right data, in real time and at the right scale.

Who's your typical customer – governments, businesses, or individuals?

All of the above – though our business model leans toward institutions and companies. In the public sector, we work with national parks, local governments, environmental NGOs. On the business side, our clients include mines, factories, marinas, fisheries, and shellfish farms – anyone who interacts with water regularly.

As for individuals – we want everyone to have free access to water quality data. Transparency matters. Sometimes just knowing which lake is cleaner or

warmer is all it takes to choose where to spend your weekend.

What role do you see Waterly playing in the fight against global water pollution?

Our mission is to create a dense network of water monitoring points. This way, we don't just see general trends – we can pinpoint potential pollution zones or illegal discharges in real time.

That allows local authorities to respond faster, identify problems more precisely, and stop environmental law violations before they spread. Think of it like medical diagnostics – you can't treat what you don't

understand. Water is no different. Without data, we're flying blind. Waterly's job is to provide the right data, in real time and at the right scale.



**You've won several prestigious international awards – congrats! Has that changed your approach or motivation?**

Thanks! Awards are great – they validate your work and definitely lift your spirits when you're wondering if it's all worth it. But to be honest, what's more valuable than the trophy is what comes after – the opportunities, the people you meet, the conversations you have. Events like the World Summit Awards trip to India opened doors we never imagined. Sometimes a single question from someone outside your bubble makes you rethink your assumptions. That's the kind of feedback that fuels real growth. So yeah – awards are cool, but the people and insights behind them? That's the real prize.

**If you could give your founding team one piece of advice on Day 1, what would it be?**

Don't be afraid to fail. Not everything will go according to plan – and that's okay. Be patient. Results take time. Also: build relationships early and often. Networking isn't a nice-to-have – it's the engine. The product will come together with enough work and iteration. But connections – with mentors, partners, users – that's what helps you actually take off.

**What song best describes your startup – and why?**

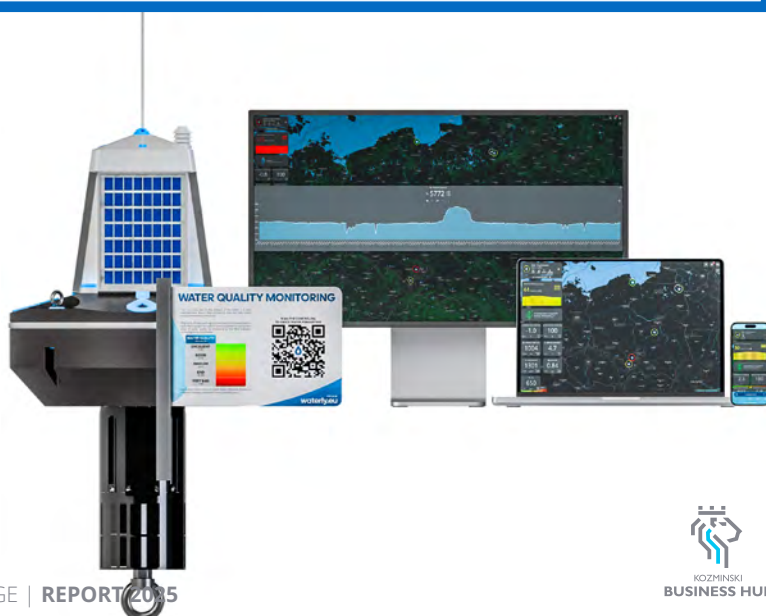
Ha! Good one. Well, let's just say when we're testing our devices, we prefer it when there are no waves. ☺ Personally, I listen to a lot of Polish rap, especially PROBL3M – you'll find more than a few verses that mirror the chaos and rhythm of startup life. But a single track to define Waterly? Hmm... still looking for that perfect anthem.

**Thanks so much for the chat – and here's to bringing clean, transparent water data to everyone. 💧**

Sometimes a single question from someone outside your bubble makes you rethink your assumptions. That's the kind of feedback that fuels real growth.



waterly.eu



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# Good Spirits

You can celebrate life  
– the healthy way

**Paulina Falkenberg-Kwast** in conversation with **Joanna Banaszewska**,  
co-founder of Good Spirits





## Where did the idea for Good Spirits come from?

It all started with my own experience. After two pregnancies, I stopped drinking alcohol – not because I missed the buzz, but because I was craving something delicious, healthy, and alcohol-free. And I simply couldn't find anything that fit. Around that time, I was also watching a huge wellness wave taking off in the U.S., and I realized – this is the future. I knew it was worth investing in.

## How long did it take to go from idea to launch?

About a year. First, we worked on the concept and initial formula. Finding people who were willing to develop something totally new wasn't easy – dozens of them turned us down, saying what I had in mind was impossible.

## What was the hardest part early on?

The toughest thing was convincing people in the food and beverage industry that our idea made sense. We kept hearing "no." We stayed true to our vision – no preservatives, no sugar, no artificial flavours – and still low-calorie. That combo seemed too ambitious for most. But we didn't give up.



**The market just wasn't there yet. But awareness is growing every day – and we're proud to be pioneers of the NoLo movement in Poland.**

**How did you fund the company? Did you look for investors?**

To this day, we've built Good Spirits entirely from our own resources – sometimes with loans from friends and family. So far, it's 100% self-financed.

**Was the Polish market ready for alcohol-free drinks?**

Definitely not at first. We had to explain what our products even were and who they were for. The market just wasn't there yet. But awareness is growing every day – and we're proud to be pioneers of the NoLo movement in Poland. It's amazing to see how far we've come – and to know we helped shape this category.

**Who's your core customer – and is that changing?**

People who are health-conscious and care about wellbeing. They understand that what you eat and drink affects your body and your mood. They want to enjoy life without the hangover – to celebrate everyday moments and big ones alike, without compromising on taste or health. Once they try Good Spirits, they often become fans for life.

**What makes Good Spirits stand out in the NoLo market?**

Our formulas. We focus on rich, natural ingredients and intense, layered flavors – with very few calories. We don't compromise. Our drinks are light, but full of character. And we produce everything in Poland – it helps us control quality at every step.

**You're now in major supermarkets across Poland – congrats! How did that happen?**

At first, we did the outreach ourselves. But as the category started booming, retailers began contacting us. That shift felt huge – we knew we were onto something real. And our experiences with partners so far have been overwhelmingly positive.



**Awareness is growing, and so is the demand for healthier options.  
Giving people easy access to better choices makes it easier  
to stick to their goals – and just live better.**

**What was your biggest breakthrough moment so far?**

There have been many, but the most powerful was April 2024 – when we launched our first mocktail, Après Midi, and sold out a whole year's stock in just a few weeks. That moment confirmed everything we believed in – people really wanted this.

**What's the future of the NoLo category in Poland and Europe?**

I think NoLo will follow the same path as non-alcoholic beer. At first, it was a novelty – now, every store has it. Awareness is growing, and so is the demand for healthier options. Giving people easy access to better choices makes it easier to stick to their goals – and just live better.

**What's next for Good Spirits?**

We want to grow – not just in Poland, but across Europe. Fingers crossed for us!

**If you could give yourself one piece of advice back when you started – what would it be?**

We don't look back. We don't have time for that – and that's exactly how we like it.

**What song would best describe your startup – and why?**

Hmm... maybe Wind of Change? My dad would love that one 😊



[good-spirits.com](https://good-spirits.com)



# Well Over One

Is also about handling rejection  
and challenges

**Magdalena Feliniak** in conversation with **Ada Jakimowicz**,  
founder of WOO



**Let's start with a twist: Imagine it's the day you decided to start your own startup. What advice would you give yourself now, knowing what you know today?**

"Trust yourself." That's what I'd say. Self-trust and confidence in your decisions are absolutely crucial when building a startup. I'd also tell that early Ada: do your research. Get real market insights *before* you start pitching to investors. Find people who can complement your skills and – seriously – always sign NDAs.

Building WOO taught me a lot about myself. It's been part therapy, part crash course in everything from product development, tech basics, UX design,

team leadership to startup marketing. I'd also help my younger self plan better. But hey – hindsight's 20/20.

**On your website you say: "Every story is different." What's yours? What made you start WOO?**

It wasn't like I went looking for a startup idea. I was working as a therapist and trainer when I started noticing how often my clients were misdiagnosed. Some were told they had clinical depression, but it turned out they had insulin resistance. What helped them most was the fact that I understood both the mental and physical side of health.

One day, a friend told me she was designing furniture as part of a new architecture project, and something clicked. I thought, "I want to create something bigger too – something that could help more people." That's

how the idea of WOO came to life. I imagined an app that could "know" people as well as I knew my own clients – and truly support them on multiple levels.

# well over one

## So what exactly is WOO – and how does it work?

WOO is a digital wellness assistant that supports users across four pillars: psychotherapy, physical activity, nutrition, and physiotherapy. It's designed to help people keep the benefits of therapy going in their daily lives – and even speed up their progress.

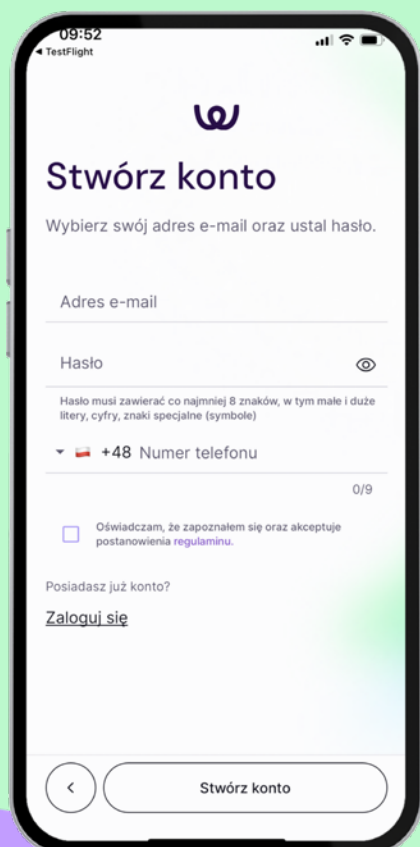
The user starts with a profiling process that includes several personality tests. Then they chat with the in-app assistant – right now it's text-based, but we're

working on voice support. It's not just another chatbot. The engine is built on real psychological knowledge, and offers evidence-based, real-time support.

WOO helps people recognize harmful thought patterns and behaviors *as they happen* – without judgment, and always with encouragement. It's for anyone who's been in therapy or is planning to return but needs ongoing support in between sessions.

## Who's actually using WOO? Is it who you originally expected?

We initially thought our core audience would be women in their 30s – ambitious, juggling careers or businesses, and craving balance. But in practice, our users are simply people with some therapy experience, who want help maintaining progress in everyday life.



## How do you reach new users? What channels work best?

Social media, hands down. It lets us talk directly to our audience. We also partner with therapists, who recommend WOO to their clients as a tool between sessions. That was really important to me – I didn't want to build something that competes with therapy. WOO is about *supporting*, not replacing, real human connection.



The first idea rarely looks like the final product. What matters is staying open, while sticking to your values.

Have mentors played a big role in building your startup?

Absolutely. As a therapist, I understood the mentor's role from the start: they don't tell you what's "good" or "bad," but they guide you, help you grow. One turning point for me was joining *Sieć Przedsiębiorczych Kobiet* (Network of Entrepreneurial Women). That support was a game changer.

I remember being invited for an interview with *MamStartup* right after an investor turned me down. I was embarrassed – I almost cancelled. But my mentor Magda said, "So what? Do your thing. The rest will come." And she was right. Startups evolve. The first idea rarely looks like the final product. What matters is staying open, while sticking to your values.

Winning the *Mazovian Startup* competition was another breakthrough. It opened the door to expert support – lawyers, accountants, business strategists – and gave me the confidence to *talk* to users. That's when I *really* understood: if you're not talking to your users, you're not building the right thing.



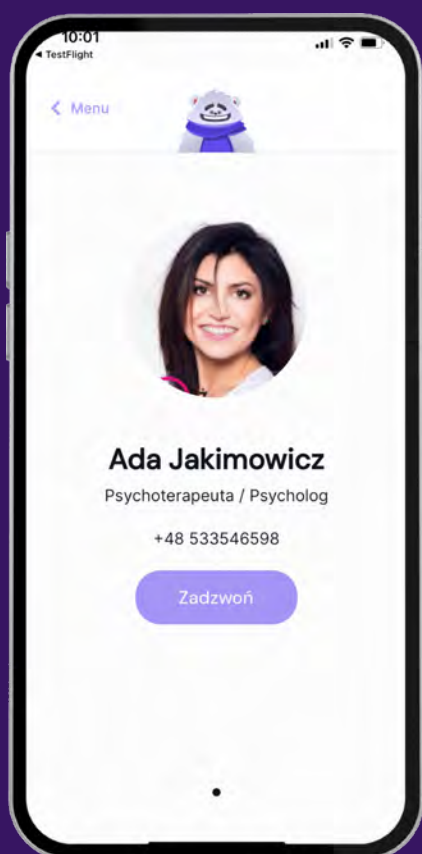
## Let's talk money. How did you fund WOO, and what advice would you give others?

Having money but no startup know-how can be dangerous – you'll burn through it fast. The post-competition support helped me learn how to build smart, lean, and fast. Before any funding, I bootstrapped from my own savings. I started talking about the idea with people in my network – including folks in finance. But for a long time, nothing came through. I kept hearing: "Love it, but we're not investing right now." Frustrating, for sure – but I used that energy to keep going.

I threw myself into startup life – free events, networking, meeting people. At first, it was awkward and exhausting. I'd think, "Why am I even here?" But with time, it got easier. Then, out of the blue – months

later – one of those early contacts called me back. She became my first investor. I was thrilled... but also realized: this just got real. I had funding, but now I needed a serious product roadmap.

My advice? Just start. Don't wait for everything to be perfect. And don't limit yourself to the startup bubble – talk to people *everywhere*.



## You sound like a confident leader. How do you build and lead your team?

I prefer the word *leader* to *boss*. A leader sets the pace and direction – and knows when to let others take the wheel. Early on, I realized I couldn't do it all. I brought in a close friend I trust completely – someone who actually *does the work*. That mattered, because early in my journey, I met people more excited about the idea of being a "startup founder" than actually building something.

We work 98% remotely. We meet daily (sometimes more than once), and use good old Excel to track progress and plan the next steps. We also collaborate with lawyers, accountants, and consultants – and we've moved from outsourcing development to building our app in-house with a developer named Tomek.

I try to be a supportive leader who gives space for ideas, while also respecting contracts and NDAs. Realizing that you're *running a business*, not just chasing a dream – that's a key mindset shift.



### What's a typical "startup day" for you like?

Pretty normal, actually. I start with therapy sessions – working with clients helps me keep the app aligned with real user needs. Then I dive into WOO: tasks, calls, updates. In the afternoon, I spend time with my daughter – that's sacred. I'm big on balance.

Burnout is real in the startup world. And WOO is a long-term project. If I push too hard, I'm actually less productive. That said... you know how it is in the early days. 😊

### How do you cope with the mental load of being a founder? You're a therapist – do you use your own tools?

Building WOO has been *deeply* personal. It brought up fears I didn't even know I had – especially fear of failure and rejection. I faced tons of rejections in the beginning. It hurt. But I learned not to take it personally. Seeing WOO as a *product*, not just an extension of myself, made it easier to adapt and make clear decisions. Flexibility is key. Things won't go as planned – and that's fine. I actually use WOO myself. It helps me stay grounded. Sometimes, as a founder, it feels like no one *really* gets what you're dealing with – so yeah, I talk to WOO, not just for testing, but for support.

I brought in a close friend I trust completely – someone who actually *does the work*. That mattered, because early in my journey, I met people more excited about the idea of being a "startup founder" than actually building something.

### What does success look like to you – in the context of WOO?

For me, success is getting the subscription model up and running – and knowing that users find real value in it. If they're willing to pay, it means we're solving something that matters. That keeps me going.

### What's next for WOO?

We're launching the subscription model soon. It'll give us financial stability and let us grow more intentionally. I used to think you needed your business model figured out from day one. Now I know – you learn it *with* your users. Long-term? International expansion. WOO is designed to scale – and we're ready to take it global.



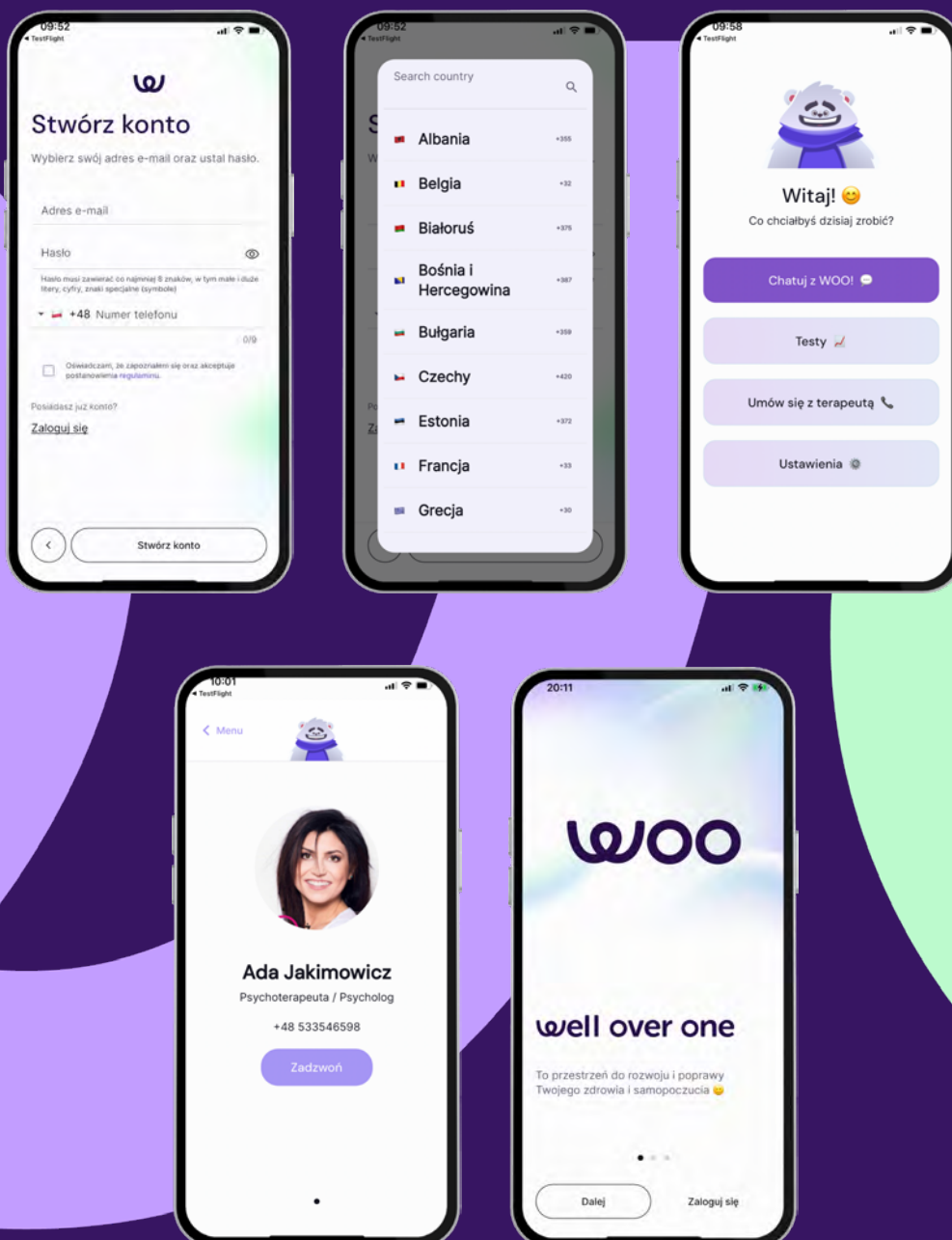


## What song best describes your startup journey – and why?

“Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” by Marvin Gaye. That one’s been with me for years – I even got part of it tattooed. It reminds me that no matter what happens, I’ll find a way through. Every challenge is a mountain to climb or a river to cross – not an obstacle, but something that makes *me*, and WOO, stronger.



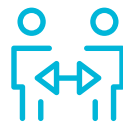
wooapp.eu



PART III

# How to grow

and with whom – as a positive  
impact startup



# Unlikely alliances

On the power of partnerships between family businesses and impact startups

**Anna Bielak-Dworska**

Institute of Family Business



**When searching for best practices, we can look to nature – the largest and most complex organization on the planet. It's at the intersection of ecosystems – where stone meets soil, where lakes border meadows, where wetlands give way to open space – that the richest biodiversity and most innovative lifeforms emerge. These transitional zones, full of interaction between different life systems, inspire us to explore what happens when diverse strengths and perspectives collide.**

We see a similar opportunity at the meeting point of family businesses and impact startups. When tradition meets innovation, structure meets agility, and experience meets boldness, a new space opens up – one with powerful potential. This article explores when such partnerships make sense for both sides, and how to make them work effectively.

It is based on a series of recent in-depth conversations with representatives of family businesses, startups, and innovation support organizations. Time and again,

interviewees emphasized: while these two worlds may seem fundamentally different, they share a growing belief in the value of collaboration.

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*At first glance, they seem like opposites – mature, often conservative family firms versus young, dynamic ventures focused on social or environmental change. But that difference is exactly where innovation is born.*

**Marietta Mucha**, successor and expert in innovative business models, Institute of Family Business



## Readiness for change

Our first question was about organizational readiness: When is a company most open to embracing innovation as a system, not just a one-off project? In family firms, this openness often emerges with the arrival of a new generation – bringing fresh perspectives on climate, technology, and internationalization. But that alone isn't enough.

Monika Synoradzka from Huge Thing pointed out that organizational culture matters deeply: engaged leadership, structured processes, project management skills, a willingness to test and iterate, and a clearly defined business challenge are essential conditions for meaningful innovation.

Impact startups, in particular, can help family firms see beyond daily operations. When shared values, mutual understanding, and a sense of "flow" emerge, a co-created vision and trust can form – the foundation for long-term, sustainable collaboration.



*Impact startups can act as catalysts for change in family businesses. They expand perspective and help you look beyond daily routines. But it all comes down to trust – in people, in the process, and in the belief that what we build together will last longer than one generation.*

**Tomasz Wróbel**, successor and co-owner of Grupa Wróbel

## From one-off initiatives to systemic impact

At the heart of most family businesses are values – values that naturally lean toward positive impact on communities and the environment. Strong family ties often translate into committed employees and loyal customers. The long-term perspective of generational ownership sends a clear message: *We'll partner with you because we're here to stay.*

Family firms often support local initiatives or react to social needs – not as part of a strategic CSR plan, but from a place of genuine care. Yet many of these actions are sporadic and ad hoc.

Here's where impact startups come in – with tools,

processes, and a culture of co-responsibility. They help shift from reactive actions to systemic solutions, embedding impact into the business model itself.

- Instead of one-off donations – build a microloan system.
- Instead of occasional ideas – run a transparent innovation challenge.
- Instead of a charity run – launch an employee volunteering program.
- Instead of carbon-heavy raw materials – source sustainable alternatives.

Impact startups offer method and strategy in places where leadership alone has driven decision-making. And they do so with the goal of lasting, structural change.



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*For family firms to embrace impact innovation, they need to recognize that their current model is no longer enough. There has to be a moment of truth – a recognition of risk in staying the same.*

**Marcin Burkietowicz**, 4th generation successor, co-owner of Grupa Burkietowicz

## Operational support

In a conversation with Marta Motz-Szwajcowska, founder of BiBi's and Experience Strategy Director at Full House Group, another key point emerged: many startups are born from personal passion – a desire to create something meaningful. This was the case with *Coastal*, a brand she co-founded.

“

*Startup ideas often come from emotion, relationships, and personal commitment. But without operational support, it's hard to turn them into viable businesses.*

**Marta Motz-Szwajcowska**, successor and entrepreneur

Jak wskazywał prof. Bolesław Rok podczas jednego z webinarów organizowanych przez firmę rodzinną Prof. Bolesław Rok, during a webinar hosted by the family-owned Klimas Wkręt-Met, noted that startups operating within large organizations may have a better chance of survival than external ventures. Family firms offer a unique advantage here: access to patient capital, long-term orientation, strong values, and relational depth.

When innovation grows from that spirit – not just as a PR tool – it can trigger true transformation toward more sustainable business practices.

Ultimately, partnerships with impact startups can transform organizational culture – by teaching

hypothesis building, prototyping, piloting, and learning from failure. It's not about revolution, but about gradual capacity-building – a crucial skill in an increasingly complex and volatile world.

“

*Family businesses have capital, experience, and values. Startups bring speed and fresh thinking. But they often speak different languages. Risk capital and legacy thinking don't mix easily. But with a shared problem and clear terms of collaboration, they can do great things together.*

**Michał Wojewoda**, founder of Petsy



## Final reflection

**Nora Bateson** once wrote:

“

*The name is not the thing named. The model is not the modeled. The language of complexity is not the complexity.*

Her words – and my own lived experiences – remind me that one of the most essential change-making skills is attentiveness: resisting the urge to rush into solution design before truly understanding the problem. In the worlds of startups and family businesses, we often reach for quick fixes to challenges that are far more complex than they appear.

That’s where deeper dialogue begins – between systems of family, business, and transformation. Where a single interaction can, over time, become fertile ground for innovation that genuinely changes our world.

This article is based on qualitative material from six in-depth interviews conducted in May 2025 with representatives of family businesses, impact startups, and innovation support institutions. The conversations were semi-structured. The insights gathered were synthesized into this analytical and reflective piece. My heartfelt thanks to all interviewees for their openness and generosity in sharing their experiences.

# Corporations and positive impact startups

## An (un)likely match? Collaboration at the intersection of two worlds

**Berenika Pel**

Sustainability Specialist, DANONE group of companies in Poland



In recent years, we've witnessed growing interest in collaborations between startups and large corporations. This is no accident. Rapid market changes, the need for agile innovation, and increasing pressure to meet sustainability goals are forcing new operational models. Startups bring freshness, agility, and disruptive thinking – qualities that mature corporations increasingly need. At the same time, young ventures look to big companies for stability, resources, and the chance to scale.

### Embracing differences

Startups and corporations come from different worlds. Startups are agile, experimental, and growth-oriented. Corporations are stable, process-driven, and accountable to shareholders. For a long time, this contrast was seen as a barrier – but today, it's increasingly seen as an opportunity. These differences can generate powerful synergies: startups gain access to customers, distribution channels, and infrastructure; corporations tap into new technologies, creative teams, and unconventional business models <sup>1</sup>.

The motivations are often practical. Corporations – especially those in mature markets – need to seek innovation externally, often faster than they can develop it in-house. As a report by Huge Thing highlights, "Innovation and the right approach to it are the core of startup–corporate collaboration" <sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Bańka, M., Marczewska, M., Andrade, R.D.D., Kowalski, A., Boulangé, P., Sedkiewicz, K. and Murawski, J. (2025), "Collaboration between corporations and startups: goals, expectations and outcomes", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-04-2024-0219>

<sup>2</sup> Huge Thing & PFR Ventures (2019). Czy korporacje w Polsce są realnie gotowe na współpracę ze startupami? BRIEF. Available online: <https://brief.pl/czy-korporacje-w-polsce-sa-realnie-gotowe-na-wspolprace-ze-startupami/> [access: 27.05.2025]





On the other side, startups need a strong partner to help them scale and break through barriers like production flexibility, certification processes, logistics, and acquiring corporate clients. In fact, for many retailers, production flexibility is a dealbreaker. Startups are expected to meet the same operational standards as seasoned market players – despite vastly different capabilities. Large producers can absorb significant volume fluctuations week to week; startups usually can't.

Another challenge is payment terms. Corporations often impose lengthy timelines, which can make or break a startup's liquidity. Some companies, such as Kaufland during the 2020 pandemic, shortened

payment terms<sup>3</sup>, while others – like Żabka<sup>4</sup> – have launched dedicated pilot programs to support early-stage startups.

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## Cultural friction – and opportunity

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Before successful collaboration happens, both sides must face cultural and organizational hurdles. Different work styles, decision-making hierarchies, and expectations can cause friction. Startups often see corporations as rigid and overly procedural; corporations see startups as risky, disorganized, and overly optimistic. Studies in the Journal of Innovation & Knowledge show that failed collaborations often stem from unclear decision-making processes and a lack of communication frameworks<sup>5</sup>.

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## Collaboration models in practice

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To overcome these obstacles, organizations are turning to structured collaboration models. One of the most popular in Poland is the accelerator program. A notable example is the Positive Impact Academy, created by DANONE group of companies in partnership with Kozminski Business Hub.

The Academy connects businesses that have already gone through ESG transformations with startups just starting out. It's built on a cross-sector model – combining corporate experience, academic insight,

and startup energy. Its goal? To strengthen the skills of impact-driven leaders and build a supportive environment for sustainable businesses<sup>6</sup>.

Another effective approach is the venture client model, in which a corporation becomes a startup's first paying customer – without taking equity. This reduces investment pressure and allows startups to scale more freely<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Poradnik Handlowca. (2024, 15 maja). Kaufland skraca terminy płatności. Access 27.05.2025 <https://poradnikhandlowca.com.pl/artykuly/kaufland-skraca-terminy-platnosci/>

<sup>4</sup> Żabka Group. (2024). Współpraca ze startupami. Access 27.05.2025 <https://zabkagroup.com/pl/wspolpraca-ze-startupami/>

<sup>5</sup> von Leipzig, T. et al. (2024), Understanding corporate concerns", Journal of Innovation & Knowledge. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2024.100347>

<sup>6</sup> Danone. (2025). Druga edycja Akademii Pozytywnego Wpływu DANONE za nami. Available online: <https://danone.pl/druga-edycja-akademii-pozytywnego-wplywu-danone-za-nami/> [dostęp:27.05.2025].

<sup>7</sup> World Economic Forum (2020), Collaboration Between Start-ups and Corporates: A Practical Guide. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_White\\_Paper\\_Collaboration\\_between\\_Start-ups\\_and\\_Corporates.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_White_Paper_Collaboration_between_Start-ups_and_Corporates.pdf)



More mature startups may seek strategic investors or acquisitions. One example from Poland is Wege Siostry, a plant-based dairy alternative brand. In 2021, part of the company was acquired by Hochland Polska. For Wege Siostry, the partnership enabled distribution growth, better access to specialist knowledge, and a stronger market position. For Hochland, it was a strategic move to expand its plant-based portfolio, which at that time had included one brand – SimplyV<sup>8</sup>.

## Scaling without losing identity

These partnerships offer clear benefits – but also raise concerns. Positive impact startups – those aiming to deliver social or environmental value, not just profits – often fear losing their mission when absorbed by a bigger player.

A powerful safeguard is B Corp certification, and particularly its key requirement – the mission lock – which legally embeds the company's values into its bylaws, protecting them through ownership changes<sup>9</sup>.

For startups less than a year old, B Lab, a certifying non-profit body, offers the Pending B Corp status – a pathway to full certification. Even at this early stage, startups must codify their mission, commit

to stakeholder governance, and complete a lighter version of the B Impact Assessment – the foundation for full B Corp certification one year later<sup>10</sup>.

A strong example of a pending B Corp is Finally.me, a startup focused on women's intimate and menstrual health, launched in 2024. Its co-founder, Monika Kowalewska, explains:

*“From the very first investor meetings, we knew we had to protect our impact and accountability principles. In the UK, most brands in our category are B Corps, so we decided to apply for Pending B Corp even before our market debut. We're now pursuing full certification in our first year of operations.”*

Tools like B Corp help balance scaling with identity – empowering startups to grow without compromising their values.

## From transactions to co-creation

Modern partnerships are shifting from transactional to co-creative models – built on trust, shared value, and knowledge exchange. Researchers emphasize that value alignment and mutual learning are key to success<sup>11</sup>. More and more companies are embracing open innovation strategies, where startups, universities, NGOs, and corporations work together to solve real-world environmental and social challenges.

8 „Hochland Polska i Wege Siostry rozpoczęły współpracę”, Hurt i Detal. Access 11.02.2025, [https://hurtidetel.pl/article/art\\_id,35504-107/hochland-polska-i-wege-siostry-rozpoczely-wspolprace/](https://hurtidetel.pl/article/art_id,35504-107/hochland-polska-i-wege-siostry-rozpoczely-wspolprace/)

9 B Lab. (b.d.). The legal requirement for Certified B Corporations. B Corporation. Access 27.05.2025 <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/about-b-corps/legal-requirements/>

10 B Lab. (b.d.). Pending B Corps. B Corporation. Access 27.05.2025 <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/programs-and-tools/pending-b-corps/>

11 Wehnert, P. et al. (2023), “Cooperation between large companies and start-ups”, Journal of Business Research. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114135>



While Poland is seeing more of these initiatives, there's still room for improvement. Startups often report unclear collaboration terms, long decision cycles, and a lack of trust towards corporations. Yet overall, the sentiment remains positive.

A McKinsey study found that 84% of DACH-region startups in one-on-one partnerships with corporations were satisfied with the collaboration. For institutional programs, the satisfaction rate was 57%<sup>12</sup>.

Polish corporations also value these relationships. A 2024 report by Startup Poland revealed that out of 211 surveyed companies, 116 were already working with startups, and 95 more wanted to. Among those already in partnership, 83% expressed satisfaction<sup>13</sup>.

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### A shared path – or a power play?

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For small businesses, working with corporates is still a choice – but increasingly, it's also a necessity and an opportunity. For these collaborations to succeed, both sides must move from power-based relationships to purpose-driven partnerships.

Startups must learn to protect their mission as they grow. Corporations must approach innovators with humility and openness. When built on mutual respect, shared goals, and complementary strengths, these partnerships can deliver much more than profits – they can create lasting meaning and a better future.

12 Dörner, K., Flötotto, M., Henz, T., & Strålin, T. (2020). You can't buy love: Reimagining corporate–startup partnerships in the DACH region. McKinsey & Company. Online: <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/McKinsey%20Digital/Our%20Insights/Cant%20buy%20love%20Corporate%20start%20up%20partnerships%20in%20the%20DACH%20region/You-cant-buy-love-Reimagining-corporate-startup-partnerships.pdf>

13 Startup Poland. (2024). Korporacje, które dostrzegły potencjał startupów. Współpraca korporacji ze startupami – Vol. II. Fundacja Startup Poland. Online: <https://mamstartup.pl/czy-korporacje-polubily-startupy-premiera-raportu-fundacji-startup-poland>

# Impactful but isolated

– what really holds back startups aiming to change the world?

**Adrian Migoń**

CEO, Youth Business Poland



**In a world where technology can either accelerate catastrophe or help save the planet, impact startups aren't a luxury – they're a necessity. Yet in Poland, instead of thriving, they often find themselves strangled by bureaucracy, lack of capital, and market indifference. Why?**

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Impact isn't a niche – it's the future

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Impact startups aren't just about green tech or coffee shops employing marginalized groups – though those are important too. They're tackling some of the world's toughest problems: zero-emission construction, medical diagnostics, digital inclusion, water quality monitoring, and more.

Despite widespread agreement that these solutions are vital, impact-driven ventures are still seen in the Polish startup ecosystem as "second-class startups": less scalable, less investable, too idealistic. But the

numbers tell a different story. According to the 2025 Positive Impact Startups Report, over 700 impact ventures are actively operating in Poland, and 90% of them are still growing.

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Big ideas, harsh reality

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Surveys by Mentors4Starters, InCredibles, and the PFR School of Pioneers paint a clear picture: impact founders tend to be mission-driven visionaries. They know why they're building their companies – but not always how.

Many lack experience in commercialization, team management, and fundraising. Over 67% of impact startups in Poland report annual revenues under 100,000 PLN – far below the interest threshold for

traditional VC funds, who prioritize rapid growth, exits, and ROI. Mission? That's secondary – if it makes the cut at all.



At our own Impact Startup Accelerator, we often see founders begin generating revenue and gaining traction during the program. But when they pitch to VCs, they often hear: “not innovative enough,” “too early,” or “not a fit for our criteria.”

Yet a simple early-stage capital injection – just 200–300K PLN – can make all the difference. Many of these startups only raise funds one or two years later, delaying their progress significantly. Within 6 months of acceleration, we can already spot which teams and projects are likely to scale. Sadly, the funding system isn’t built to meet them where they are.

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### A support system that’s not built for them

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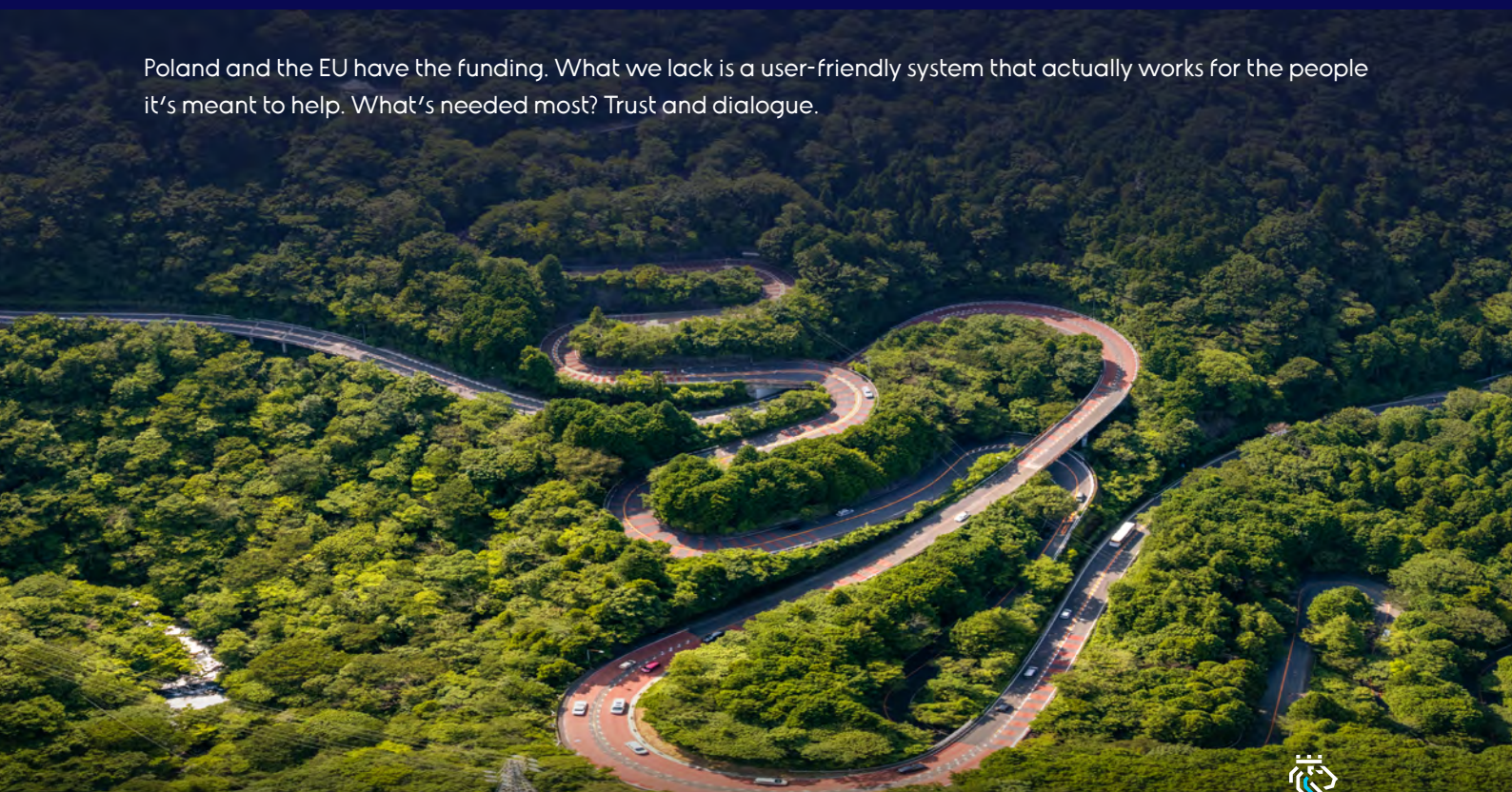
Programs like Platformy Startowe offer up to 600K PLN in grants (with potential for an extra 2M PLN in follow-up funding) along with legal, accounting, and product development support. Similarly, Startup Booster Poland – Smart UP offers up to 400K PLN in grants for startups aligned with UN SDGs and Poland’s National Smart Specializations..

Sounds great, right? The catch: application processes are complex and bureaucratic. For founders who often lack business backgrounds, navigating these detailed

applications, compliance requirements, and reporting obligations is a massive challenge.

The result? Many promising initiatives either give up or outsource the process to consultants – who profit from the paperwork rather than the innovation. The system doesn’t reward bold ideas or social good – it rewards those who write solid grant proposals. Add to that overly complex contracts, risk-heavy terms, and delayed grant disbursements, and you’ve got a recipe for early-stage death – slow or fast.

Poland and the EU have the funding. What we lack is a user-friendly system that actually works for the people it’s meant to help. What’s needed most? Trust and dialogue.





## Corporations: supportive in theory

In Western Europe, many corporations run CVC programs, invest in startups aligned with ESG strategies, and genuinely support impact. In Poland? It's more marketing than money. There are few genuine partnership programs and even fewer long-term collaborations with accelerators and incubators. The SPW Report makes this clear: companies say they want impact – but they're not building the infrastructure for it. It's better than it was five years ago, but there's still a long way to go in terms of bold, future-ready initiatives.

## And investors? Poland is falling behind

Across Western Europe and the U.S., impact investing is surging. In 2022, the EU's impact investing market surpassed €80 billion. Globally, it passed \$1 trillion, according to GIIN.

In Poland?

- There are a handful of true impact funds: Simpack, Invento, Rethink.
- But their investment activity is a fraction of what's happening abroad.
- Most impact startups still rely on NGO grants, not seed rounds.

Access to early-stage capital (Seed and Series A) is especially limited, especially for science-based or deeptech startups. In 2024, the number of seed funding deals plummeted from around 100 per quarter to just 20-30 – a stark sign of tough times for first-time fundraisers. The Polish startup scene is maturing, but still waiting for a breakthrough exit – something to signal market readiness and attract major investment.



## Impact requires different tools

Impact startups don't scale in 18 months. They need longer runways, mentorship, and a deeper understanding of social and regulatory problems. They need investors who measure success not just in ROI but also in SROI – Social Return on Investment.

There's a fundamental mismatch between impact startups and traditional VC expectations. Conventional investors want fast growth and clear exit strategies. Impact startups often have dual goals – financial and social/environmental – and take longer to become

profitable. To traditional VCs, this equals higher risk, lower return – but only if you're looking through a narrow lens. That's a structural barrier. Mainstream capital doesn't yet match the impact-first mindset.

## The good news? it's not all bad

There are bright spots on the horizon:

- Mazovian Startup supports impact-driven ventures with a social mission.
- Ashoka Polska is developing changemakers and social entrepreneurs.
- The Positive Impact Ecosystem at Kozminski University combines education, networking, and visibility for impact startups

These are valuable steps – but still too few and far between. Many programs open only once per year. For a country the size of Poland, that's simply not enough. What's more, Polish accelerators rarely take equity stakes in startups, unlike many of their international counterparts. Equity-based models allow accelerators to grow alongside their startups – and bring a more entrepreneurial mindset to the support system. We hope to see the professionalization of the impact support ecosystem – because the need is urgent.

## Time for systemic change – not cosmetic tweaks

Impact startups are not just a "nice-to-have" addition to the tech ecosystem. They are the core of a future-proof economy – one that can face climate, demographic, and health crises head-on. Poland is home to outstanding impact innovations in energy, environment, healthcare, food systems, and education. We have the talent. We have the societal need. We have a young, ambitious ecosystem.

What we lack is the courage to redesign the system – and the collaboration across key actors: founders, NGOs, investors, government, universities, and corporates. History shows that real innovation starts

where others only see problems. Now is the time to build the support system these startups deserve – and that our future demands.



# Why it's worth supporting social entrepreneurship in Poland?

**Mirella Panek-Owsiańska**

ESG and social communication expert



**Startup competitions are multiplying, new incubators and accelerators are popping up to support young founders, and most companies listed in the Positive Impact Startups database are registered as commercial entities. Yet there's a whole other group playing a vital role in our economy: social enterprises.**

They're a unique breed – blending business with mission – and despite growing momentum, they still face major hurdles. So why should we back them? It's not just an ethical choice, but a strategic economic decision. Here's why, based on the latest report „Social Enterprises in Poland 2024” by the KLON/Jawor research team.

## What is a social enterprise?

A social enterprise is an organization that combines economic activity with a clear social mission. Since October 2022, this status has been formally recognized by Polish law (the Social Economy Act).

Social enterprises come in various legal forms, most often:

- Associations and foundations (45%)
- Non-profit companies (43%)
- Social cooperatives (12%)

Their core feature? They operate like businesses (92% run commercial activity), but profit isn't privatized. Instead, it's reinvested in the business or used to support their mission.



## The growing power of social enterprises in Poland

Since gaining legal recognition in late 2022, the number of registered social enterprises has risen steadily. As of December 2024, there were about 900 active social enterprises in Poland, and the number is growing by an average of 45 new entities per month.

They operate across diverse sectors:

- Social and healthcare services (23%)
- Food and hospitality (19%)
- Cleaning, maintenance, and municipal services (17%)
- Childcare and education (13%)
- Culture, tourism, and recreation (11%)
- Manufacturing (5%)

And while many focus on vulnerable communities, these aren't just charitable efforts. Many offer highly specialized business solutions that respond to real market demands.

## Why invest in social entrepreneurship?

### Real social impact

Social enterprises offer more than just economic value. 77% are involved in reintegration efforts, helping marginalized groups re-enter the workforce. 61% deliver social services. They employ around 13,000 people, with 61% from socially excluded groups. Notably, 73% of employees have stable, contract-based jobs – uncommon in the early startup world.

### Deep local roots

Most operate on a local (32%) or regional (45%) level, working closely with local governments (61%), communities (60%), and NGOs (58%). Regions like Podkarpackie, Lubelskie, and Kujawsko-Pomorskie lead the way, with over 5 social enterprises per 100,000 residents. These ventures help stimulate equitable regional development, especially in areas with high unemployment or lower living standards.

### Financial sustainability

Contrary to common myths, many social enterprises are economically viable: average annual revenues: 500K-1M PLN; one-third exceed 1M PLN annually; for comparison, the average for all social economy entities: 530K PLN

69% ended 2023 with a profit, reinvested into:

- Business growth (68%)
- Social or employment reintegration (49%)
- Covering past losses (24%)
- Community-oriented public benefit projects (21%)

### Growth potential & innovation

Social enterprises are eager to grow: 92% invested in learning and development last year; 78% plan to expand in the next two years. Their top priorities? Reaching new customers (63%); entering new business areas.



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## The challenges they face

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Supporting this sector also means recognizing what's holding it back:

### **Financial insecurity**

73% say unstable financing is their biggest challenge. Only 25% have reserves to operate for at least 3 months without income.

### **Bureaucratic overload**

69% report excessive red tape. Administrative and reporting burdens are often disproportionate to their size and capacity.

### **HR headaches**

664% struggle to recruit and retain staff. They often work with vulnerable populations and can't always offer competitive pay..

### **Low visibility**

61% say the public doesn't understand what they do. There's low awareness of the social economy model, which limits their ability to grow and attract clients.

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## How to support social enterprises more effectively

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Based on the report, here are four key areas where support can be improved:

### **Better funding infrastructure**

Multi-year contracts from local/national governments; flexible grants and low-interest loans; emergency support funds for crisis or growth stages.

### **Cut the bureaucracy**

Merge financial and social impact reporting; simplify reporting systems, streamline procedures tied to employment programs like Individual Reintegration Plans.

### **Upskill and professionalize**

Management and leadership training; workshops on fundraising, marketing, and working with public sector clients; hands-on business development consulting.

### **Promote and raise awareness**

Clear and engaging national campaigns; educate the public on how these businesses operate and who they support; position social enterprises as credible partners for municipalities and companies.



## Inspiring examples from Poland

Here are a few standout social enterprises listed in the Positive Impact Startups database:

- Ziola Siedleckie: a cooperative created for the deaf community, focusing on herb cultivation and artisanal crafts.
- Heca: green jobs driven by passion – this cooperative produces eco-friendly gift sets sourced from local social businesses.
- Manumania: a creative workshop producing custom gadgets, while helping people re-enter the job market.
- Wielobranżowa Spółdzielnia Socjalna ARTE: builds homes for single parents, runs a local store, and supports people facing tough life situations.
- Panato: a design-focused cooperative making custom eco bags and backpacks with local designers and sustainable materials.

These enterprises prove that social impact and financial stability can go hand in hand.

## A future-proof investment

Supporting social entrepreneurship isn't just about helping the vulnerable – it's about building a more inclusive and resilient economy. These businesses combine commercial thinking with deep social purpose. They offer jobs to those who might otherwise be left behind and tackle local challenges head-on.

Despite the obstacles, the sector is growing. But real progress demands coordinated action: financial, educational, promotional, and regulatory. Social entrepreneurship isn't charity – it's a powerful tool

for innovation and change. Backing social enterprises means investing in a better future – one that works for business, people, and the planet.

Based on the report „Social Enterprises in Poland 2024” by the KLON/Jawor Association, as part of the SAMO-ES project: “Self-organization of social enterprises as a response to social challenges.”

# How Warsaw supports positive impact startups

A conversation between **Anna Mroczek**, Head of Department at the Warsaw City Hall's Bureau of Economic Development, and **Paulina Falkenberg-Kwast & Magdalena Feliniak**



Warsaw has been building its reputation as one of Central and Eastern Europe's key innovation hubs for years. Thanks to a strong strategy for supporting entrepreneurship, the city offers startups not just a space to grow but real tools and programs.

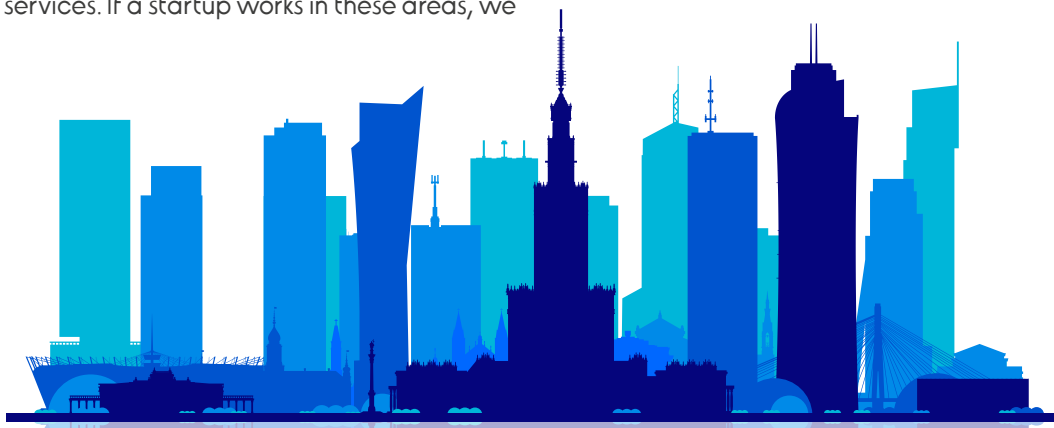


Do you take into account a startup's social or environmental mission when offering city support?

**Anna Mroczek:** Absolutely. Positive social and environmental impact is one of our most important criteria. Through our Warsaw Booster accelerator, we actively seek out startups addressing Warsaw's real challenges – solutions that actually improve quality of life for residents or help advance the city's green transformation.

We focus on areas like transport and mobility infrastructure, environmental protection, pollution reduction, sustainable energy, and improving access to public services. If a startup works in these areas, we

don't just welcome them – we need them. These are the kinds of ideas that truly respond to the problems modern cities face.







**What kind of support programs does the city offer for startups? What can young companies expect to find?**

We've built an ecosystem that doesn't just inspire – it actively supports startups, whether they're just starting out or looking to scale. It's not a collection of disconnected initiatives; it's a strategic network of tools, programs, and partnerships.

Our most recognized program is Warsaw Booster, a city-run accelerator that's been operating for over a decade. So far, more than 460 companies have benefited from it, receiving support in tech development, business strategy, and international

expansion. Each edition focuses on current city challenges, and we organize workshops and matchmaking sessions with city officials to explore potential partnerships.

For those at the very beginning of their journey, we run the Entrepreneurs' Information Point, offering one-on-one guidance on setting up and running a business. In 2024 alone, we held over 1,400 consultations, including for international founders. We're also big on education. #Academy\_Smolna is a skill-building space where last year we ran 830 hours of mentoring and consulting for over 430 participants. We also host a series of networking events called #Open\_Smolna..

Another key initiative is our Technology Reviews, which serve as a platform for dialogue between startups and city departments. These are opportunities for

innovators to pitch their solutions directly to the city. We've held 12 editions, with over 100 startups and 900 participants.

Plus, we offer real-life testing environments. We partner with programs like Urban Tech Hub and Startup Booster Poland, giving startups space to pilot their innovations in a real city context – impacting how Warsaw functions, in real time.

We also help startups go global, supporting their participation in events like Web Summit in Lisbon or Future Tech Fest in Düsseldorf. We feature Warsaw-based startups in publications like Startup Guide

Warsaw and run an English-language LinkedIn profile, Grow with Warsaw, to spotlight the local innovation scene.



### Let's talk money. Can startups count on financial support from the city?

Yes, in several ways. First, we connect startups with investors. Warsaw is home to the largest concentration of venture capital funds in Poland – around 100 active VC firms. We help startups get in front of them through networking events, accelerator programs, and promotional publications. Within Warsaw Booster, beyond mentoring and development, we also offer financial awards. The top three teams in each edition share a prize pool of 100,000 PLN. We're also a partner in grant projects like TK Startup Booster Poland, where startups can apply for grants of up to 400,000 PLN – a serious boost for tech development. The program is operated by Kielce Technology Park, with Warsaw acting as the innovation recipient.

And let's not forget infrastructure support. Startups can access preferential rental rates at city incubators like Smolna Entrepreneurship Centre and Targowa Creativity Centre. Smolna offers 40 desks in open

space, including free desks for Ukrainian founders. We've also set up free local coworking spaces in four districts: Bielany, Praga-Północ, Ursynów, and Wawer.



### What are the biggest challenges faced by the startups you work with?

Challenges vary depending on the startup's stage, but a few themes come up often. One major challenge is international expansion. For many startups, going global isn't a luxury – it's a necessity. But it raises tough questions: How do we build a go-to-market strategy? Where do we find first clients abroad? How do we connect with trustworthy partners and investors? That's why we focus so much on preparation for scaling – especially through programs like Warsaw Booster.

Access to funding is another recurring issue, especially early on. We help bridge that gap by connecting startups to VCs and supporting them through grant programs.

Another big one is testing products in real-world environments. Many startups lack the chance to trial their tech in actual use cases. That's why we're developing test-bed and pilot models, offering startups

a chance to experiment in real urban settings – with actual users. This not only validates their solution but can lead to long-term cooperation with the city.

Finally, we know tech isn't everything – business skills matter too. That's why we place a strong emphasis on competence development, with one-on-one mentoring in legal, accounting, and business areas via #Academy\_Smolna.





**Can you share examples of startups working with the city that have a positive social or environmental impact?**

One case we're particularly proud of is Water Sense, a recent Warsaw Booster winner. The city's Green Management Authority began testing their real-time water quality monitoring tool – a crucial innovation for protecting ecosystems, biodiversity, and public safety. Their solution allows for quick detection of pollution and changes in water chemistry. It lets us track the health of Warsaw's surface waters in real-time and react faster to issues like sewage leaks or toxic algal blooms.

Another example is Hotels Audit. Originally focused on guest satisfaction in the hotel sector, the company expanded – thanks to Warsaw Booster mentoring

– into cultural institutions. We helped pilot their tool at places like the Museum of Warsaw and Teatr Komedia. Today, they're working in six venues across the city.

These stories show how an innovation-friendly city can act as a "living lab" – testing fresh ideas while helping young businesses grow.

Other standout startups in the Warsaw Booster ecosystem include:

- Plan B Eco, which focuses on sustainable solutions
- ResqI, which supports schools in tackling peer bullying

Warsaw Booster continues to champion startups that combine business ambition with measurable social and environmental impact – and we're excited to see where that impact will take us next.





# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2024

- Astrotectonic [astroteq.ai](https://astroteq.ai)
- Biostra [biostra.pl](https://biostra.pl)
- Fresh Inset [freshinset.com](https://freshinset.com)
- Green Sequest [greensequest.earth](https://greensequest.earth)
- Waterly [waterly.eu](https://waterly.eu)
- Maas Loop [maasloop.com](https://maasloop.com)
- Sustainable Fashion Institute [sustainable-fashion-institute.com](https://sustainable-fashion-institute.com)
- TerGo [tergo.io](https://tergo.io)
- Fabryka Rozsady [fabrykarozsady.pl](https://fabrykarozsady.pl)
- Kuuler [kuuler.pl](https://kuuler.pl)
- Coffideas [coffideas.com](https://coffideas.com)
- Inclusive Barista [inclusivebarista.com](https://inclusivebarista.com)
- Miejska AquaFarma [aqfarm.eu](https://aqfarm.eu)
- Radio 357 [radio357.pl](https://radio357.pl)
- Użyj.to [uzyj.to](https://uzyj.to)
- Econverse [econverse.org](https://econverse.org)
- Omyu [omyu.pl](https://omyu.pl)
- Parenteen [parenteen.pl](https://parenteen.pl)
- Smart Kids Planet [smarkidsplanet.pl](https://smarkidsplanet.pl)
- Ecopolplast [ecoplastomer.eu](https://ecoplastomer.eu)
- Guru tempeh [guruferment.pl](https://guruferment.pl)
- Lutkala [utkala.com/pl](https://utkala.com/pl)
- Millek [millek.bio](https://millek.bio)
- Slappa [slappa.co](https://slappa.co)





# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2023

- Agazi [agazi.eu](https://agazi.eu)
- Clark [clarkk.pl](https://clarkk.pl)
- ecOlint [ecOlint.com](https://ecOlint.com)
- Figlisto [figlisto.pl](https://figlisto.pl)
- GiveAndGetHelp [giveandgethelp.com](https://giveandgethelp.com)
- Gleevery [gleevely.com](https://gleevely.com)
- Karmnik [karmnik.org](https://karmnik.org)
- Las vegans [las-vegans.pl](https://las-vegans.pl)
- Laska Nebeska [laskanebeska.pl](https://laskanebeska.pl)
- Mindgram [mindgram.com/pl](https://mindgram.com/pl)
- Planeat [planeat.pl](https://planeat.pl)
- Power Cob [powercob.com](https://powercob.com)
- PROTEINrise [proteinrise.com](https://proteinrise.com)
- RetenTech [retentech.pl](https://retentech.pl)
- Samo Dobro [samodobro.pl](https://samodobro.pl)
- SeaSoil [theseasoil.com](https://theseasoil.com)
- SERio [serioser.io](https://serioser.io)
- Sklep bez granic [sklepbezgranic.pl](https://sklepbezgranic.pl)
- Skriware [skriware.com](https://skriware.com)
- Solwena [solwena.com](https://solwena.com)
- System DOT [systemdot.pl](https://systemdot.pl)
- Torba-Borba [torba-borba.com](https://torba-borba.com)
- UHURA bionics [uhura.pl](https://uhura.pl)
- Urvis Bike [urvis.bike](https://urvis.bike)
- UVera [uvera.eu](https://uvera.eu)



# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2022

- Bez Ości – Vegan Fish [facebook.com/bezosci.veganfish](https://facebook.com/bezosci.veganfish)
- BreadPack [breadpack.pl](https://breadpack.pl)
- Calmsie [calmsie.ai](https://calmsie.ai)
- Co z tym seksem? [web.coztymseksemapp.pl](https://web.coztymseksemapp.pl)
- FibriTech [fibri.tech](https://fibri.tech)
- FoodBugs [foodbugs.pl](https://foodbugs.pl)
- Humati.co [humati.co](https://humati.co)
- Hydrum [hydrum.eu](https://hydrum.eu)
- Lumelabel [lumelabel.wixsite.com](https://lumelabel.wixsite.com)
- myEgg [myegg.pl](https://myegg.pl)
- Nanoseen [nanoseen.com](https://nanoseen.com)
- Orbify [orbify.com](https://orbify.com)
- Outriders [outride.rs](https://outride.rs)
- Plenti [plenti.app](https://plenti.app)
- Rebread [rebread.com](https://rebread.com)
- SafeKiddo [safekiddo.com](https://safekiddo.com)
- Slow Media Production [slowmediaproduction.com](https://slowmediaproduction.com)
- Swapp! [swapp.zone](https://swapp.zone)
- Wektoo [wektoo.com](https://wektoo.com)
- ZNIKA [znika.pl](https://znika.pl)



# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2021

- All Hands Agency [allhands.agency](https://allhands.agency)
- Alternation [the-alternation.com](https://the-alternation.com)
- Associated.apps [associatedapps.com](https://associatedapps.com)
- Bazar Miejski [bazarmiejski.com](https://bazarmiejski.com)
- Circular Scrap [circularscrap.com](https://circularscrap.com)
- Cool Beans [coolbeans.com.pl](https://coolbeans.com.pl)
- CoopTech Hub [hub.plz.pl](https://hub.plz.pl)
- Dotlenieni [dotlenieni.org](https://dotlenieni.org)
- eKodama [ekodama.pl](https://ekodama.pl)
- Heca [atoheca.pl](https://atoheca.pl)
- Microbe+ [microbe-plus.com/pl](https://microbe-plus.com/pl)
- Patronite [patronite.pl](https://patronite.pl)
- Plan Be Eco [planbe.eco](https://planbe.eco)
- Pożycz To [pozycz.to](https://pozycz.to)
- Serce Miasta [sercemiasta.waw.pl](https://sercemiasta.waw.pl)
- Słusznna Strawa [slusznnastrawa.org](https://slusznnastrawa.org)
- Sun Roof [sunroof.se](https://sunroof.se)
- Take!Cup [takecup.pl](https://takecup.pl)
- Tech To The Rescue [techtotherescue.org](https://techtotherescue.org)
- Wojna warzyw [wojnawarzyw.pl](https://wojnawarzyw.pl)
- Zodzysq [zodzysq.pl](https://zodzysq.pl)





# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT SCALEUPS 2020

- Elementy [elementywear.com](https://elementywear.com)
- HiProMine [hipromine.com](https://hipromine.com)
- SiDLY Care [sidly-care.eu](https://sidly-care.eu)
- Slowhop [slowhop.com](https://slowhop.com)
- Syntoil [syntoil.pl](https://syntoil.pl)
- Warsaw Genomics [warsawgenomics.pl](https://warsawgenomics.pl)

## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2020

- BACtrem [bactrem.pl](https://bactrem.pl)
- Barents [barents.pl](https://barents.pl)
- Cosmetomat [cosmetomat.pl](https://cosmetomat.pl)
- Krakowska Elektrownia [spolecznaelektrowniaspoleczna.pl](https://spolecznaelektrowniaspoleczna.pl)
- Kuchnia Konflikty [kuchniakonfliktu](https://kuchniakonfliktu)
- MakeGrowLab [makegrowlab.com](https://makegrowlab.com)
- Mamo Pracuj [mamopracuj.pl](https://mamopracuj.pl)
- Planet Heroes [planetheroes.pl](https://planetheroes.pl)
- Polishgreens [listnycud.pl](https://listnycud.pl)
- Pora na Pola [poranapola.pl](https://poranapola.pl)
- TupTupTup [tuptuptup.org.pl](https://tuptuptup.org.pl)
- Ubrania do oddania [ubraniadooddania.pl](https://ubraniadooddania.pl)
- Vege Smak [vegesmak.pl](https://vegesmak.pl)
- Your Kaya [yourkaya.com](https://yourkaya.com)





# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2019

- Airror [airror.pl](http://airror.pl)
- Bezmięsny Mięsny [bezmiesnymiesny.pl](http://bezmiesnymiesny.pl)
- Bio2materials [bio2materials.com](http://bio2materials.com)
- Cantino [cantino.pl](http://cantino.pl)
- EcoBean [ecobean.pl](http://ecobean.pl)
- Foodsi [foodsi.pl](http://foodsi.pl)
- Good Wood Poland [goodwoodpoland.pl](http://goodwoodpoland.pl)
- Jan Barba [janbarba.com](http://janbarba.com)
- Mydlarnia Cztery Szpaki [4szpaki.pl](http://4szpaki.pl)
- Nieteraz [nieraz.pl](http://nieraz.pl)
- Offee [offee.pl](http://offee.pl)
- RoślinnieJemy [roslinniejemy.org](http://roslinniejemy.org)
- Solace Housing [solace.house](http://solace.house)
- Some Wear Else [swelse](http://swelse)
- Wege Siostry [wegesiostry.pl](http://wegesiostry.pl)
- Woskowijki by Malu [woskowijki.pl](http://woskowijki.pl)



# Positive Impact Startups



## LAUREATES IN THE CATEGORY POSITIVE IMPACT STARTUPS 2018

- Biblioteka Ubrań [bibliotekaubran.pl](http://bibliotekaubran.pl)
- Bioseco [bioseco.com](http://bioseco.com)
- Deaf Respect [deafrespect.com](http://deafrespect.com)
- DEKOEKO [ekoeko.com](http://ekoeko.com)
- DrOmnibus [dromnibus.com](http://dromnibus.com)
- Earth-Heart [earth-heart.pl](http://earth-heart.pl)
- Gerere [gerere.com](http://gerere.com)
- HandyShower [handyshower.pl](http://handyshower.pl)
- Holoroad [holoroad.eu](http://holoroad.eu)
- iniJOB [inijob.com](http://inijob.com)
- KOKOworld [kokoworld.pl](http://kokoworld.pl)
- Kosmos dla dziewczynek [kosmosdladziewczynek.pl](http://kosmosdladziewczynek.pl)
- Leżę i Pracuję [lezeipracuje.pl](http://lezeipracuje.pl)
- LokalnyRolnik [lokalnyrolnik.pl](http://lokalnyrolnik.pl)
- Łąka [laka.org.pl](http://laka.org.pl)
- MAMA Pożyczka [mamapozyczna.pl](http://mamapozyczna.pl)
- Manumania [manumania.org](http://manumania.org)
- Nepalove [nepalove.com](http://nepalove.com)
- Panato [panato.org](http://panato.org)
- Planeta Kreatorów [Planeta-kreatorow](http://Planeta-kreatorow)
- Polska Witalna [polskawitalna.pl](http://polskawitalna.pl)
- Pszczelarium [sklep.pszczelarium.pl](http://sklep.pszczelarium.pl)
- REC.ON [rec-on.eu](http://rec-on.eu)
- Social Wolves [Socialwolves](http://Socialwolves)
- Use Bike [rentabike.usebike.pl](http://rentabike.usebike.pl)
- Vegi [vegi.eu](http://vegi.eu)
- Wióry leca [wioryleca.pl](http://wioryleca.pl)
- WoshWosh [woshwosh.pl](http://woshwosh.pl)
- Życie jest fajne [KlubokawiarniaZycieJestFajne](http://KlubokawiarniaZycieJestFajne)



