



DOCUMENTATION

Startups and Innovation: Labor Market Opportunities and Prospects for Young People

CONNECTIVE CITIES DIALOGUE EVENT FROM 30 JUNE TO 2 JULY 2026 IN BREMEN
KICK-OFF OF A NEW LEARNING PROCESS



25 experts

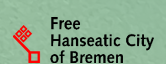


11 municipalities



7 countries

with:



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Introduction

Startups and entrepreneurship offer young people opportunities to secure their livelihoods and advance their careers, while also serving as crucial factors for the well-being of local communities and for local economic development.

Municipalities play a central role: They engage in networking with stakeholders, provide advice and support to founders, provide infrastructure and resources, and facilitate access to funding or contacts with investors. In short, they create a founder-friendly climate and ecosystem at the local level.

Some of the most exciting opportunities surrounding young startups and new businesses arise where economic development intersects with sustainable local development—for example, when these initiatives improve local waste management or strengthen food security in urban areas.

A new learning process by Connective Cities addresses this topic. It kicked off with an international dialogue event in Bremen, the highlights of which are summarized here. Further online formats tailored to the interests of municipalities, as well as study tours and a concluding online event, will follow.

“This event gave me a bird’s-eye view. It’s often hard to see what’s important when you’re too deeply involved in the projects.”

Era Bektashi, Neumarkt

Brief Overview of the Event

- 2.5 intensive working days at the Haus der Wissenschaft in the host municipality of Bremen—moderated by [Susanne Luithlen](#)
- Representatives from 11 municipalities in Germany, Namibia, North Macedonia, Zambia, Serbia, South Africa, and Rwanda, as well as two representatives from the private sector and the startup scene
- Opening remarks by Dr. Annette Lang, Department of International Cooperation and Development Cooperation, Bremen
- Video message from Hon. Sam Shafishuna Nujoma, Governor of the Khomas Capital Region, Namibia
- Evening reception at Bremen City Hall with welcoming remarks by State Councilor Kai Stührenberg
- Tours of the startup scenes in Bremen and Bremerhaven

Excerpts from the Welcoming Remarks

“The topic was chosen because getting people into work by providing financial and practical support to local initiatives is essential for a thriving economy—no matter where on our planet. We share this interest with our partner cities, Windhoek and Durban.”

Dr. Annette Lang, Department of International Cooperation and Development Cooperation, Bremen, Germany

“When a young Namibian starts a business, she doesn’t just create an income for herself. She creates jobs for others, dignity for her household, and confidence in her community. A region cannot develop while its young talent waits on the sidelines. (...) This is exactly where exchanges are so valuable. We learn faster together than alone.”

Hon. Sam Shafishuna Nujoma, Governor of the Khomas Capital Region, Namibia, in his video message

Keynotes

ENTREPRENEURIAL PROSPECTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. AN ACADEMIC ANGLE

Professor Dr. Jörg Freiling, Head of the [LEMEX Chair for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Startups, and Entrepreneurship at the University of Bremen](#), addressed the relationship between education and the demands of modern entrepreneurship.

The world that young people face today can be described using the VUCA concept: a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous state that is becoming increasingly acute. Despite the threatening overall backdrop of political disasters, the climate crisis, and rapid changes—for example, in the field of technology—many students approached the future with a positive and playful attitude.

An adequate education for this must consist of an interplay of research, learning, and the independent development of ideas. To this end, the University of Bremen, in close collaboration with Bremen-based companies, offers experimental fields and laboratory settings where the focus is on developing competencies, solution-oriented thinking, and out-of-the-box thinking. For example, students work on real-life challenges provided by companies or take their own research questions directly to the companies.

The goal of research and education must be to develop and convey a comprehensive understanding of the entire economic ecosystem as well as of startups. Students must be empowered to recognize entrepreneurial opportunities, mobilize people and resources, and contribute to the overall economic ecosystem. For innovation and sustainable startups, it is important to engage with systemic changes in society, such as megatrends like longevity, clean and affordable energy, or gigacities. In addition, local connections are emphasized, for example through alumni programs.

This form of education has been implemented since 2016 as part of the “future concepts bremen” project. Furthermore, the chair focuses on startups in the technology sector, on entrepreneurship among women, migrants, and refugees, and on pathways into the business world (starting a new business, corporate careers, and succession in family businesses).

EMPOWERING START-UPS IN WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA

Leonora Joodt, Section Head of SME Development and Promotion in Windhoek, outlined the local activities related to startups. The starting point for this city of 500,000 residents is characterized by a strong influx of young people from all regions of Namibia and a high unemployment rate. Self-employment and entrepreneurship are seen as key solutions.

In recent years, the city administration has significantly improved the political and regulatory framework for startups. Above all, it plays a strong role in coordinating the various stakeholders, consolidating information and services during the start-up phase and business development, as well as in the area of training. In addition, the city provides access to infrastructure and funding. The stated goal is to make startups and SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) competitive both nationally and internationally.

As a result, Windhoek has experienced strong economic growth in recent years, reflecting a nationwide trend. Economic diversification is evident, particularly in the retail and street vending sectors, the beauty and personal care industry, tourism, and the skilled trades and manufacturing sectors. Furthermore, Namibia is increasingly gaining attention as a hub for startups in the technology sector, digital transformation, and green energy.

Overall, the city is striving to provide low-barrier access and responsiveness for young entrepreneurs and is working to publicize success stories. A key player in this effort is the Bokamosa Entrepreneurial Center (see case studies).

“I often tell my students: You are the innovators in our society.”

Professor Dr. Jörg Freiling, University of Bremen

„Entrepreneurship is a compelling model, as it enables us to support young people in becoming job creators rather than job seekers.”

Leonora Joodt, Windhoek

Good Practices

The activities of the participating municipalities in support of startups and founders show many parallels. However, a closer look reveals that tailored responses to specific local challenges are needed and that each municipality has developed its own “unique selling point.”

BREMEN, GERMANY

Bremen’s flagship is its comprehensive, synergistically interconnected ecosystem for startups. The city maintains close contact with all relevant stakeholders from business, academia, and education. A key player is [Starthaus Bremen & Bremerhaven](#), a one-stop agency for advice, information, and networking that—as part of the [Development Bank for Bremen and Bremerhaven \(BAB\)](#)—also provides support with financing and funding. The Starthaus Women program specifically supports startups led by women. A second focus in Bremen is raising awareness among young people about self-employment and entrepreneurship at an early age. There are close collaborations with schools and the Teacher Training Institute, competitions for students, and close collaboration with the University of Bremen (see also the keynote address).

CHOMA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL, ZAMBIA

Choma combines youth entrepreneurship with the goal of building a sustainable community. It addresses high youth unemployment in the rapidly growing municipality as well as the issue of waste management. To this end, the municipality supported the establishment of a youth-led enterprise for the collection of household waste, known as the Makasiya Multipurpose Cooperative / Mighty Youth. A key focus is on supporting girls and women. Recycling and reuse lead to further entrepreneurial opportunities and sources of income. Key success factors include the young entrepreneurs’ sense of personal responsibility, their close ties to the community, and sustainable financing through contributions from the households they serve. The results include improved waste management and a more peaceful community.

“This project demonstrates how local governments can turn urban challenges into opportunities for sustainable development.”

Era Bektashi, Neumarkt Gladys Mufuzi, Choma

“Bremen stands out for its short distances—and not just in a geographical sense. We’ve consolidated everything effectively and offer low-threshold access to the network. Once you’re part of it, you know exactly where to find what kind of support.”

Ole Bast, Bremen



Visit of Starthaus Bremerhaven | Photo: Leonora Joodt



Multipurpose Cooperative/ Mighty Youth | Photo: Choma Municipal Council, Zambia

HEIDELBERG, GERMANY

Heidelberg is focusing on digitalization, among other things, in its startup support efforts. The goal is primarily to accelerate the initial startup phase—which in Germany involves a great deal of bureaucracy—and thus enable companies to enter the market efficiently. To this end, the city is developing a digital platform designed as a one-stop shop that offers comprehensive information and enables business formation 24/7. An AI-powered assistant is designed to guide prospective founders through the process. In addition, the platform aims to integrate other relevant stakeholders—such as the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, local banks, tax advisors, etc.—and their services. In addition to the technical implementation, the main challenges lie in the legal framework, such as data protection issues.



The Bokamoso Entrepreneurial Centre in Windhoek
Photo: Leonora Joodt



Research into innovative food production at the Northdene Agroecology Research and Development Centre
Photo: eThekweni Municipality

“You can’t always work from home. For your business to grow and meet market demand, you need a proper factory, for example.”

Nonkululeko Mthembu-Msomi, eThekweni

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA

The municipality of Windhoek supports startups and SMEs through the [Bokamoso Entrepreneurial Centre](#). Originally launched primarily as an affordable infrastructure facility and production site, the center now also focuses on helping companies scale up and enter national and international markets. The centre primarily supports companies in the manufacturing, skilled trades, and creative industries sectors, as well as those in the textile, cosmetics, and food industries. In addition, the centre promotes business concepts for resource efficiency and recycling that strengthen the circular economy in Windhoek. The Bokamoso Entrepreneurial Centre has continued to refine its profile in recent years and has produced remarkable success stories. Its influence extends to schools (Entrepreneurship Day) as well as the entire community (income security, financial independence for women, etc.).

ETHEKWINI MUNICIPALITY, SOUTH AFRICA

eThekweni combines the promotion of startups and SMEs with the issue of food security in its municipality of four million residents and the goal of reducing dependence on food imports. Access to land and production facilities for startups and SMEs was identified as a key problem. As a solution, the municipality established AgroParcs, where the municipality provides land and infrastructure at low lease and rental rates. Students are also involved in the project, working on innovations and prototypes to improve food production. In addition, the municipality is working to foster a supportive ecosystem for startups in the creative sector, including in the fields of apparel, fashion, and textiles, as well as furniture design and production. Production facilities are also offered here. To further support these companies, the municipality now sources its own needs from them.

MUNICH, GERMANY

Munich has the second-highest startup rate in Germany and offers a comprehensive support program for startups. A specific goal is to promote groups that have been underrepresented to date, particularly women and migrants starting their own businesses. There are four approaches to achieving this: (1) Special networking opportunities (e.g., roundtables) and target-group-oriented events (e.g., Munich's Phoenix Night for entrepreneurs with immigrant backgrounds). (2) Information and advice provided by Munich's Business Start-up Office. (3) Visibility through competitions (e.g., the LaMonachia Award for women). (4) Funding and grants: For example, as part of the [Munich Employment and Qualification Program \(MBQ\)](#), the city supports the "guide" project, which assists founders—and women in particular—throughout all stages of starting a business with training, seminars, and networking events.

NEUMARKT I. D. OBERPFALZ, GERMANY

Neumarkt's goal is to be attractive to startups and young people—even as a medium-sized city with approximately 40,000 residents—and to bring innovation to the city. With the [Makers' Home](#), the city has created a focal point for this, implemented by Dream(dri)ven gmbH. The program is built on three pillars: co-working and co-living spaces create a fertile environment for startups. Support is provided through tangible services such as infrastructure and a business address. Above all, however, the Makers' Home sees itself as a (residential) community where young founders support one another and benefit from networking. Through the digital platform Pioneer's Club, the startups have access to various startup programs and mentoring. Events also provide networking opportunities for them, connecting them with local businesses and the wider community. A key focus is on social enterprises dedicated to the common good and innovative business ideas.

PRIBOJ, SERBIA

Since the decline of major automotive companies in the 1990s, the municipality of Priboj has been undergoing a comprehensive process of economic transformation. High unemployment rates, the outflow of young people, the lack of diversification in the economic structure, and a shortage of investors characterize the situation. The city has developed various strategies for its economic revitalization: The most important move was the establishment of a free trade zone on a former large factory site, which helped attract new investors. In addition, the dual vocational training system was strengthened through close cooperation between local employers and secondary schools and vocational training centers, thereby reducing the gap between training and the needs of the economy.



Staff members of the Munich-based "guide" project | Photo: Marion Beckhäuser



Makers' Home as a (residential) community where young entrepreneurs support one another | Photo: Erich Spahn

Furthermore, the city is investing in the quality of life and cultural offerings to remain an attractive place for young people to live. Opportunities for startups and new business ventures lie in the green and digital sectors.

"This is the story of new hope for Priboj. (...) Our goals are to attract new investors and keep our young people in town."

Vuk Luković, Priboj



The Agakiro Centre supports young people from rural areas
Photo: Learn Work Develop (LWD), Rwanda

RWAMAGANA DISTRICT, RWANDA

The Rwamagana District has established the Agakiro Center, a startup and crafts center. The goal is to mobilize and train young people from rural areas—and women in particular—to pursue self-employment and entrepreneurship, and to create the necessary conditions for this.

Specifically, the center supports SMEs, craft businesses, and young entrepreneurs by providing production space and modern production infrastructure, as well as training and services for business development. It also assists with securing loans, gaining market access, and organising entrepreneurs into cooperatives.

The centre is funded by the national government and is part of the municipal economic development program. It is based on close institutional cooperation between the central government, local government, private investors, financial market actors, and the cooperatives and craft businesses themselves.



Fair for crafts and local food in Tetovo, North Macedonia
Photo: Municipality of Tetovo

TETOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA

Tetovo addresses the need for a central point of contact for founders and startups. Starting in the fall of 2026, the Business Infopoint Tetovo will provide reliable, centralized information in the form of a roadmap for starting a business. About half of the services will also be accessible digitally. The specific needs and gaps in the city's economic ecosystem were previously identified in collaboration with the South East European University (SEEU), the chambers of commerce, local businesses, and various public institutions.

In the future, mentoring for startups and advice on funding opportunities will be developed. In addition, a local data platform will be created to make economic development more predictable and facilitate municipal economic development efforts. The Infopoint's catchment area includes the municipality of Tetovo and, in particular, the surrounding rural municipalities.

DORTMUND, GERMANY

Dortmund offers a tailored program for entrepreneurs with an immigrant background. The [Center for Ethnic Economy \(ZEÖ\)](#), as part of the city's economic development agency, provides culturally sensitive and multilingual advice. This initiative is the city's response to the observation that people with an immigrant background face particular challenges in Germany's already highly bureaucratic startup process. The ZEÖ offers advice, training programs, and networking opportunities. Specifically, it provides support, for example, with issues related to the recognition of qualifications and degrees earned abroad, questions regarding residency status, and access to financing. All services are free of charge.

"We have redefined the target audience / beneficiaries in a different and more precise way and now provide advice to self-employed individuals with a migrant background."

Orhan Öcal, Dortmund

“We tell stories and share them so that others can see: This could be my story, too.”

Oliver Götz, Gründungswerft e.V

GRÜNDUNGSWERFT E.V.

Gründungswerft is an initiative by founders for founders, defining itself as a bottom-up initiative and community. Its goal is to bring startups in the largely rural northeastern region of Germany out of isolation and facilitate networking among them. Gründungswerft raises the profile of small startups and acts as a “bridge” between small businesses and investors.

UNITY

Unity is a leading software provider for interactive, immersive 2D and 3D content, such as video games, animations, and virtual reality content. Through public-private partnerships, the company is rolling out the [Unity Skills Development Program](#) worldwide. This program includes innovation and competence centers for startups and students. One example is a joint project with the Canadian government and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce that teaches stakeholders in the agricultural sector skills related to digital twins and smart agriculture (data-driven decision-making through real-time 3-D simulations, etc.).

Topics and Results

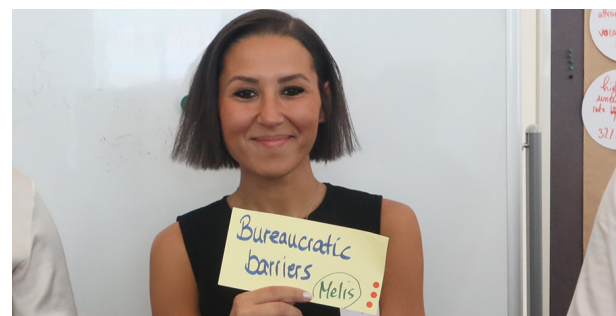
During the group work, peer-to-peer advice, and case studies, certain topics became more clearly defined. The key findings and proposed solutions are presented on the following pages.

The challenges faced by founders are similar across the board

- Lack of central points of contact: accessible information and advice (including digital options)
- Lack of awareness of available support services
- Access to peers, role models, and mentors
- Complex bureaucratic processes in the startup procedure
- Access to infrastructure (production facilities, land, etc.)
- Access to investors
- Scaling up and market access: local – national – international
- Developing one’s own entrepreneurial mindset
- Migrant founders: Language barriers (in Germany, for example, the bureaucracy requires applications to be in English); the business idea must be adapted to the needs of the host society; access to networks
- Women: coaching, networking, role models—as well as everything that everyone else needs

Peer-to-peer consultation based on selected challenges

Photo: Connective Cities



EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND THE ECONOMY

Many discussions centered on the question of adequate education and training for young people as the foundation for successful entrepreneurship. At the meta-level, a fundamental discrepancy was identified between the learning content and methods in the general education system and the needs of businesses and the economy—across countries (see also the keynote address by Prof. Dr. Freiling). In many places, the traditional education system is focused on memorizing facts and earning degrees. Entrepreneurship, however, requires skills such as a solution-oriented approach, initiative, creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, and the ability to weigh risks and recognize opportunities.

Possible Solutions

- A competency-based approach throughout the entire educational pathway, starting with early childhood education, and greater overall investment in high-quality education
- Integrating theoretical and practical training elements through close collaboration between educational institutions and companies: dual degree programs/apprenticeships, mandatory internships, working on real-world problems faced by companies, job-matching events/career fairs, student clubs, hackathons, competitions, scholarships/microfinancing/framework conditions for implementing startup ideas—combined with incentives such as academic credit
- Shaping the mindset of young people: entrepreneurship as a promising career path, not merely as a way out of unemployment or a second choice
- Collaborations between educational institutions, academia, and municipalities

TRAININGS

At the micro level, the content of professional development programs—such as those offered by startup incubators—was discussed. The needs here also depend on the target group. Training in the areas of management, financial management, business plan development, and job-related skills appears to be of particular interest. In addition, personalized talent coaching and, above all, opportunities to try out different career paths are important. However, the resources to offer suitable training are not available everywhere.

Possible Solutions

- Encourage local companies to provide training and internship programs (corporate social responsibility)
- Mobilize experienced entrepreneurs as volunteer mentors (e.g., retirees)
- Make career-related training in underrepresented fields more appealing (e.g., AI in agriculture)
- Keep an eye on suitability for entrepreneurship: “Not every (young) person is an entrepreneur.” Support programs for startups (accelerators), in particular, must have a clear profile and be selective in choosing which startups to support.
- Offer opportunities to experiment with various entrepreneurial ideas
- Place a strong focus on AI skills!

“I was particularly inspired by the South African project. There, a center was created that offers Workshops across a wide range of fields. There, young people can learn the skills they need for their plans and test whether they can—and want to—actually bring their ideas to life. This is absolutely crucial for startups: figuring out whether you’re personally suited for self-employment at all. I think something like that would be very interesting for Dortmund as well, and across Germany as a whole.”

Orhan Öcal, Dortmund



Presentation of the good practice from Choma, Zambia
Photo: Connective Cities

“We need to encourage young people not just to work for their own livelihood, but to create jobs for their local communities as well.”

Dumisani Nhlengethwa, eThekweni Municipality, South Africa

COORDINATION AND MOTIVATION OF STAKEHOLDERS

Coordinating the stakeholders of the respective local economic ecosystem and bringing together the various services is a key task for municipalities. This usually takes the form of one-stop services such as business incubators or digital information platforms. To achieve this, individual stakeholders must be motivated to contribute their information and services.

Possible Solutions

- As a municipality, first truly understand the perspectives of the individual stakeholders
- Establish an appropriate communication strategy and, in the long term, suitable communication structures
- Share success stories that highlight the contributions of stakeholders
- Offer real-life experiences in which stakeholders take on the founders' perspective

ADVICE AND SERVICES IN REMOTE AREAS

Rural municipalities or municipalities with rural catchment areas report that young people interested in starting a business there often have little or no access to support or infrastructure (e.g., WLAN).

Possible Solutions

- Utilize public-private partnerships, for example, to provide internet access
- Use school buildings (in the afternoons/evenings) for training and make them available to companies that offer training
- Set up a shuttle service to hubs in larger cities; provide startup founders with travel expense grants
- Mobile hub: A vehicle that brings services to remote regions at regular intervals (WLAN/hotspot, IT infrastructure/software, information, advice, training) and provides information about other available resources
- Raise awareness among policymakers and the private sector; encourage investment in rural areas

BUREAUCRATIC HURDLES / LANGUAGE BARRIERS

For startups, rapid market entry can be crucial. However, the initial steps in starting a business are often particularly time-consuming and complicated. Immigrant founders also face language barriers. As a rule, municipalities have little influence over the relevant regulations. Workaround solutions can at least provide some relief.

Possible Solutions

- Networking with peers and mentoring to navigate the bureaucratic jungle
- Raising awareness among stakeholders such as banks, etc. (e.g., by offering documents in various languages)
- Providing interpretation and translation services
- Collaborating with Welcome Centers and immigration authorities



Keynote speaker Leonora Joodt presents the good practice from Windhoek, Namibia | Photo: Connective Cities

“We in Germany might be able to learn which steps we can omit to make the process a little less bureaucratic.”

Ole Bast, Bremen

“Above all, I’m taking the methods from here with me. They’re excellent, and we can incorporate them into our support for our startups.”

Oliver Götz, Gründungswerft e.V.

Methodological takeaway: Peer-to-peer consultation

- Case-giver describes his or her problem and reports on previous attempts to find a solution (5 min)
- Peers ask clarifying questions (10 min)
- Peers discuss the problem and brainstorm possible solutions (case-giver acts as a passive listener) (25 min)
- The case-giver asks questions about what they’ve heard (5 min)
- The case-giver selects up to three promising proposed solutions (5 min)

Stops of the Field Trips

StartHaus Bremen und Bremerhaven (see good practices)

The café „Das Beet“ located in the green natural oasis „Zolli“ in Bremerhaven, is a startup founded by two students in the Bachelor’s program in Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Leadership (GIF). Starting a business is a mandatory part of the program.

hoi startup factory GmbH in Bremen offers systematic startup support. It engages in targeted networking with academia and industry and guides startups on their path to market readiness. The goal is to give founders access to the region’s exceptional concentration of universities, research institutes, and industrial companies and to further develop these into an innovation cluster.

Visionskultur is a grassroots hub for founders in Bremen. It sees itself first and foremost as a community and follows the motto “Founders support founders.” Its offerings include coaching, workshops, networking, matchmaking, community activities, events, and public relations. There are coworking spaces, a café, media stations, a recording studio, photo screens, a stage, and workshop rooms—all available free of charge for a very low membership fee.

Participants at the dialogue event on the steps of St Peter's Cathedral in Bremen | Photo: Katrin Riß



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Further information can be found here:
www.connective-cities.net/en

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