CCES 2025 Session Summary

Addressing the Gap: Innovative Collaboration to Advance the Circular Economy

Collaboration is a key enabler of a circular economy and is central to making meaningful progress at a pace needed for rapid development and adoption. This session profiled successful and innovative collaborations between sectors and their value chains, academia with research, design start-ups, and others that have partnered pre-competitively to co-create circular solutions for their industry and beyond. Panelists explored how collaboration across sectors, disciplines, and geographies is essential to realizing a functional and inclusive circular economy in Canada.

Speakers

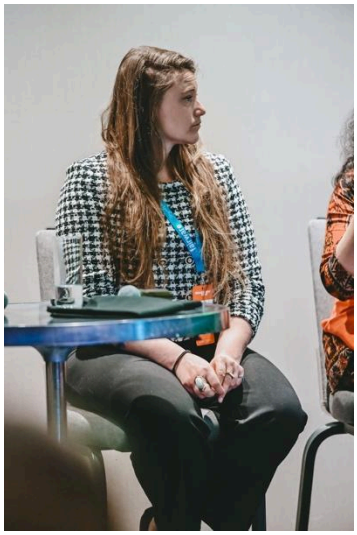
- **Shannon Lavalley**, Director, Circular Innovation Council
- **Shegufa Shetranjiwalla - Merchant**, Assistant Professor Memorial University of Newfoundland
- **Chloe Dubois**, Executive Director & Co-Founder, Ocean Legacy Foundation

SUMMARY

Dr. Shegufa Shetranjiwalla-Merchant (Memorial University) shared her interdisciplinary research on circularity in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. She emphasized that many existing circular models are urban-centric and ill-suited for the realities of smaller or isolated communities, which often lack basic waste management infrastructure. Her work calls for community-first, data-informed, inclusive approaches rooted in local knowledge and needs.

Shannon Lavalley (Circular Innovation Council) presented the Reuse Ottawa pilot as a case study in pre-competitive collaboration. The program brought together major grocery retailers, municipal and federal partners, and logistics providers to co-design a shared reuse system for food containers. The pilot demonstrated that cross-sector collaboration enables system-wide solutions that no single entity could achieve alone.

Chloé Dubois (Ocean Legacy Foundation) shared her decade-long effort to recover and repurpose marine plastics through a collaborative supply chain. Working with communities, governments, and manufacturers, her team has created durable goods from recovered plastics, while developing meaningful relationships with Indigenous partners and confronting gaps in manufacturing buy-in and end-market demand.



Session Highlights and Key Takeaways:

Collaboration must be authentic, early, and equitable
Effective partnerships start with shared values, co-developed principles, and transparent expectations. Each speaker reinforced that success is contingent on meaningful involvement from the outset—not after systems are already designed.

Top-down policy doesn't work in isolation
Both rural waste management and marine plastic recovery efforts show that systems imposed without local context, engagement, and infrastructure fail to take root.

Community engagement must guide the work
Both Dr. Merchant and Dubois emphasized that circular initiatives cannot be dropped into communities—they must be developed with, and for, the people who live there. Listening, learning, and investing time to build trust are foundational.

Data gaps hinder equity
In rural and northern regions, circular strategies can't be built without basic data on waste, infrastructure, and community priorities. Academic research can play a key role here.

Scaling requires clarity and replication tools
Whether through open-source toolkits, published frameworks, or regional champions, all panelists are thinking about how to make their models transferable and adaptable across geographies.

Circularity needs manufacturers at the table
Without willing manufacturers to process and use recycled content, circular systems stall. There is an urgent need for economic incentives and regulations that make circular design viable.

Compromise and co-ownership are necessary for progress
All three projects involved moments of letting go, of control, of ideas, or of assumptions. A consistent message was the need to find common ground, even when it meant adapting or evolving original visions.

Time, trust, and shared values matter
Every speaker emphasized that collaboration takes time to build relationships, align on principles, and adapt to local needs, shortcuts rarely succeed.

Conclusion: Bridging Gaps through Pre-Competitive Collaboration

As a closing session, “Closing the Gap” underscored a powerful truth: collaboration is not a nice-to-have, it’s the only way to build resilient circular systems. Whether aligning fierce competitors, uniting academic and rural perspectives, or co-designing with manufacturers and Indigenous partners, every initiative shared began with a willingness to work differently.

The session ended with a call to action: funders, governments, and business leaders must enable pre-competitive, systems-level collaboration by supporting trusted conveners, investing in shared infrastructure, and creating space for local voices to shape the path forward.