



HKH-Innovation Challenge for Entrepreneurs 2.0 (HKH-ICE 2.0)

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Cover Photo Credit: HKH-ICE 1.0 winner, Kingdom Essences, Bhutan

BACKGROUND

The Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) spanning Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan, constitutes one of the world's most critical socio-ecological systems. As the largest repository of ice outside the polar regions and a custodian of four global biodiversity hotspots, the HKH underpins water, energy, food, and ecological security far beyond its borders. It supports the lives and livelihoods of over 240 million people in mountain regions and sustains an additional 1.65 billion downstream through its ecosystem services, including water from ten major Asian river systems. Yet this vital region is now approaching a decisive threshold. Accelerating climate warming, glacier retreat, erratic rainfall, biodiversity loss, and growing socio-economic pressures are converging in ways that threaten the long-term viability of mountain ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. In many areas, these risks manifest as heightened water scarcity, declining agricultural productivity, ecosystem degradation, and rapid livelihood erosion, challenges that are magnified by limited market access, weak investment flows, and the marginalisation of youth and women entrepreneurs in the innovation landscape.

Despite these challenges, the HKH possesses extraordinary untapped potential. Its biological diversity, cultural knowledge systems, unique high-altitude value chains, and growing population constitute a strategic foundation for green, resilient, and regenerative economic pathways. Opportunities such as organic and climate-resilient agriculture, circular and forest-based enterprises, eco-tourism, bio-based innovations, and nature-based solutions remain underutilised due to chronic underinvestment and fragmented support systems. The urgency of the climate crisis, coupled with the pace of socio-economic transformation in the mountains, demands a new generation of locally rooted, technically sound, and market-ready innovations. Strengthening mountain entrepreneurship is no longer optional, it is central to safeguarding ecosystems, maintaining regional stability, and enabling inclusive climate resilience across the region. Beyond mitigating risks, harnessing the HKH region's unique assets can generate new economic opportunities, diversify rural incomes, and catalyse sustainable, community-driven growth.

The HKH-Innovation Challenge for Entrepreneurs (HKH-ICE) 2.0 responds to this imperative by catalysing technological, financial, and social innovations capable of addressing systemic constraints within mountain value chains and climate-vulnerable communities. By elevating solutions that integrate local knowledge with scientific, regenerative, and market-driven approaches, the Innovation Challenge aims to unlock scalable models that enhance resilience, reduce climate and economic risks, and generate long-term livelihood security.

Through HKH-ICE 2.0, GRP and ICIMOD seek to continue accelerating the pace of mountain innovation, address structural barriers to entrepreneur-led climate action, and mobilise targeted support for enterprises, with priority given to youth and women-led enterprises. The overarching goal is to shift the region from incremental adaptation toward transformative resilience, anchored in investment-ready, community-responsive, and ecologically grounded solutions.

About GRP and ICIMOD

The [Global Resilience Partnership \(GRP\)](#) advances resilience through identifying and scaling on the ground innovation, generating and sharing knowledge, and shaping policy. Resilience underpins sustainable development in an increasingly unpredictable world. We envisage an inclusive world in harmony with nature, that is better prepared to cope with

shocks, adapt to change, and transform – all within planetary boundaries. GRP is made up of 80+ organisations that have joined forces to work towards this vision.

The [International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development \(ICIMOD\)](#) is an intergovernmental knowledge and learning centre, dedicated to serving the people of the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region. Representing eight regional member countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan- ICIMOD works to improve livelihoods, protect mountain ecosystems, and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the HKH. By fostering regional cooperation and generating actionable knowledge, ICIMOD helps communities adapt to climate change, seize new opportunities, and build resilience. ICIMOD actively promotes Nature-based Solutions, conservation stewardship, and innovation in green livelihoods and enterprises. The organisation believes that targeted investments in climate resilience, innovative ideas, and robust policies can empower mountain communities and stakeholders to effectively address their challenges. To read more, click [here](#).

HKH-Innovation Challenge for Entrepreneurs (ICE) 2.0

The first round of [HKH-ICE](#) revealed a strong pipeline of promising innovations across the region and highlighted the significant barriers faced by early-stage mountain entrepreneurs—ranging from limited access to finance and technology to inadequate market linkages and fragmented support ecosystems. The success of the initial cohort demonstrated that targeted catalytic finance, structured mentorship, and regional networking can unlock scalable solutions that respond to both climate risks and livelihood needs.

The HKH-ICE 2.0 represents a renewed commitment by the GRP and ICIMOD to advance climate resilience and innovation across mountain economies. Building on the demonstrated results and lessons from the first phase, HKH-ICE 2.0 will give priority to youth- and women-led enterprises, recognising their central role in driving regenerative, inclusive, and market-responsive climate solutions in the region. HKH-ICE 2.0 has been designed to consolidate these gains and transition the Challenge Fund into a more robust, market-connected, and regionally anchored mechanism. This phase will support 12-15 enterprises, especially youth- and women-led enterprises, across [Bhutan, Bangladesh \(Chittagong Hill Tracts only\), India \(Indian Himalayan Region\) and Nepal](#), with a focus on innovations that scale and deliver climate-resilient, nature-based, and regenerative solutions that address real market demands. By strengthening entrepreneurial leadership, improving investment readiness, and deepening engagement with investors and private-sector platforms, this phase aims to accelerate the scaling of high-impact solutions within and beyond mountain value chains.

We are inviting proposals from for-profit organisations, local entrepreneurs, and innovators, with priority given to those that are Youth or Women-led, who are ready to bring forward innovative business solutions in the Hindu Kush Himalaya. Both experienced implementers as well as emerging entrepreneurs from [Bhutan, Bangladesh \(Chittagong Hill Tracts only\), India \(Indian Himalayan Region\) and Nepal](#) are encouraged to apply. Although the challenge is designed as a competition, the long-term purpose is not to pick winners, but to develop many scalable business solutions and initiatives to address the critical challenges faced by mountain ecosystems and communities.

The HKH-ICE 2.0 seeks scalable, innovative solutions that tackle ecological, market, and value chain challenges. Themes and sectors can include resilient agriculture, water security, and sustainable tourism - but are not limited to these examples. Proposals should focus on

enhancing resilience to those most vulnerable to (climate) shocks and stresses, promoting gender equity, and preserving biodiversity, while driving sustainable livelihoods and economic growth. This initiative prioritises locally led innovations that leverage the HKH region's natural and social capital in an ecologically sustainable manner.

The HKH-ICE 2.0 call for proposals is open from 15th December 2025 until 23:59 GMT on the 23rd January 2026 via GRP and ICIMOD's websites and social media. Applicants must submit their proposals by 23:59 GMT. The shortlisted Challenge winners will be contacted in February, and will receive tailored funding, mentorship, and support to scale their solutions ahead of a revised proposal submission due on the 31st March. .

We will rigorously assess all entries to the Challenge based on criteria including viability, innovativeness, scale of impact and equity. Final awardees will be selected and announced in early April and will receive prizes ranging from US\$5,000 to \$25,000 for 12 months of implementation. More details on eligibility, selection criteria, and timelines can be found in the Challenge FAQs (see Annex).

Challenge Implementation

Selected projects will receive customised support to maximise their potential for impact, scalability and further funding. The Challenge's winners will benefit from a programme of tailored mentoring, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), communications and leadership support to make their project more scalable and impactful. They will also be connected to potential investors and partners from across ICIMOD and GRP networks.

Mentoring and incubation

The finalists of the HKH -ICE will receive tailored mentoring support provided by GRP and ICIMOD. This mentoring phase will focus on refining their projects and ensuring they are well-prepared for successful implementation. From the finalists, **12-15 projects** will be awarded prizes between **US\$5,000-25,000**, which will support their scaling and implementation for 12 months between **1st May 2026 - 31st April 2027**. The finalist projects will continue to receive mentoring support throughout their implementation period and will be required to report financial and narrative semi-annual and annual progress.

The awarding of funding will be contingent upon the successful completion of the Leadership Academy and Due Diligence process. ICIMOD and GRP draw on a pool of experts and consultants to provide the support required. Throughout the incubation process, we use a framework that takes the projects through a Value Chain Driven Viability Analysis and a Resilience and Scaling assessment,¹ and then work with the initiative to concurrently develop and deliver a work plan and an action plan.

We use a proven framework to analyse and develop the relevant prescription for any given initiative. This framework has been distilled from several existing and overlapping business tools and models for mapping context, testing viability, customer appropriateness, and soundness of an idea. Throughout this process, there is a learning focus, examining what has been suboptimal in analysis, planning as well as execution.

¹ The Value Chain Driven Viability Analysis looks at the existing and potential viability of the solution within the frame of context, problem addressed and internal functions. The Resilience and Scaling assessment looks at what the potential for building resilience is as well as how scalable that model is.

Leadership Academy

The HKH Challenge places a strong emphasis on leadership development as a key factor in ensuring the successful implementation of the proposed solutions. Winners will participate in a Leadership Academy designed to help both individuals and groups navigate the complexities of their projects, as well as their personal and professional lives. This Academy will be based on executive management development practices from leading business schools, focusing on both conscious and subconscious dynamics that affect leadership. Through case studies, exercises, and real-life examples drawn from the participants themselves, the Academy will offer a unique learning experience that sharpens critical thinking, fosters teamwork under pressure, and develops the resilience needed for effective leadership in uncertain environments.

Resource/Investment Mobilisation

Part of the support package offered to winners is the facilitation of resources / investment mobilisation through ongoing networking activities with potential partners and investors. GRP and ICIMOD will help finalists prepare for a pitching event where they can present their ideas to potential funders, either in person or via video. Throughout the challenge, participants will receive support aimed at improving the viability of their projects, with a particular focus on understanding the core problems they aim to solve and refining the strategies to address these challenges. This preparation ensures that winners are well-equipped to present their projects and attract the necessary resources for scaling.

Communications support

A promotional campaign will be developed to support the Challenge and its objectives, using key communications channels and platforms likely to reach potential participants in the private sector, civil society and academia. There will also be communications support for the winners. Winners will be supported to promote their achievement through a social media toolkit that they themselves can deploy through their own channels. Over the time that the Innovation Challenge winners receive support, their stories and journeys will be integrated into overall GRP and ICIMOD communications.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) support

Monitoring, evaluation and learning support will be provided, including direct support through an online helpdesk. Throughout the mentoring process the assigned mentors and sector experts will fill in Mentoring memos. The learning distilled informs the mentoring process and will feed back into direct support to winners. Monitoring will be undertaken in accordance with GRP's [2024-2029 MEL Plan](#) and the [2024-2029 Indicator Guidance](#). This will facilitate effective tracking of progress and performance at both the output and outcome levels.

ANNEX: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

1. How do I apply?

Go to www.globalresiliencepartnership.org or www.icimod.org and fill in the proposal template. When you have completed it, submit it before the deadline. Make sure you read and respond to all the questions, and that you understand the eligibility and assessment criteria. Watch the [information webinar](#) to know more.

2. What are the competition timelines?

- The Challenge opens on **15th December 2025**.
- The deadline for submissions is **23rd January at 23:59 hrs (GMT)**. The Challenge will close at this time.
- Successful and unsuccessful applicants will be contacted **by mid-February 2026**
- Successful applicants will be provided support to further develop their projects during **mid-February - end of March 2026**, with revised proposal due on the 31st March.
- Winners will be announced and contracted **during April 2026**.
- Project implementation will take place between **1st May 2026 - 31st April 2027**.
- Mentoring, communications and MEL support will be provided during the implementation project.
- The in-person Leadership Academy will take place in Kathmandu, Nepal during the **last week of May**.

3. What are the eligibility criteria?

To be eligible an application must meet the following criteria:

- ✓ **Contribution to Climate Resilience :** The proposed solution must clearly strengthen climate resilience in vulnerable mountain communities and ecosystems within the HKH region. Solutions should demonstrate potential for nature-based, regenerative, or low-carbon innovation that responds to climate risks and supports long-term socio-ecological stability.
- ✓ **Youth- or Women-Led Enterprise :** Priority is given to youth- or women-led enterprises, whereby: Youth-led and women-led enterprises are organisations in which young people (aged 18–35) or women hold meaningful leadership and decision-making power. This usually includes majority ownership or control, a principal role in strategic and operational leadership, and clear involvement in designing and implementing the proposed innovation. For the purposes of this call, enterprises must demonstrate that youth or women leaders are central to governance, day-to-day management, and the direction of the project, not only nominally represented.
- ✓ **For-Profit Business Model:** Only for-profit organisations are eligible. Enterprises must demonstrate a viable or emerging business model with potential for market adoption, revenue generation, and long-term scalability.
- ✓ **Geographic Eligibility :** Enterprises must be legally registered and operational in one of the eligible HKH geographies: Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts only), India (Himalayan and adjoining mountain states only). Solutions should directly target mountain communities within these areas.
- ✓ **Demonstrated Innovation and Implementation Capacity :** The team must provide evidence of experience in developing or implementing innovative business solutions relevant to mountain ecosystems, such as climate-resilient agriculture, water security, ecosystem restoration, circular economy, clean energy, ecotourism, or related climate technologies. Early-stage enterprises with proof-of-concept or a minimum viable product are eligible.

- ✓ **Integration of Gender, Social Equity, Human Rights, and Biodiversity** : Proposals must articulate how the solution promotes gender equality and meaningful inclusion of women and youth; addresses equity and human rights considerations, and supports or safeguards biodiversity and ecosystem health.
- ✓ **“Do No Harm” Compliance** : The solution must not create or exacerbate risks to communities, ecosystems, or local economies. Applicants must demonstrate adherence to do-no-harm principles, ensuring that activities have no adverse environmental, social, or cultural impacts.

GRP and ICIMOD will notify all applicants about the results of the assessment phase. Non-selected ideas may still be considered for alternative promotion within the GRP and ICIMOD network (e.g., matchmaking with other partners better suited for supporting them).

4. What are eligible countries and regions?

Eligible countries are Bhutan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal. Please refer to the table below for specific regions that are eligible for implementation:

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Bangladesh | Chittagong Hill Tracts |
| Bhutan | Entire territory |
| India | Indian Himalayan Region |
| Nepal | Entire territory |

5. What are the assessment criteria?

Eligible concept notes will be assessed by two assessors according to a set of marking criteria, with justifications provided where necessary. Out of these up to 15 submissions will be selected as finalists, depending on the number and quality of the applications. Eligible submissions will be evaluated across these evaluation criteria (the maximum score is 100):

Evaluation criteria

Innovativeness (0-15)

How innovative is the proposed innovation? Innovation, for the purposes of this call, is defined as ideas that address an existing challenge in a manner that adds value, is sustainable and is practically implementable. Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15):

- The innovation is completely new and new to the sector – unheard of until this submission (15)
- The innovation is new on the continent and new to the sector on the continent – it exists elsewhere but has not been tested on the continent or context it is proposed for (10)
- The innovation is new in the country – it exists in other places and neighbouring countries, but not in the proposed country or context (5)
- It is not innovative by the above metrics (0)

Potential for impact (0-15)

Does the proposed solution show potential for improving the resilience of the most vulnerable people and places? How will the solution contribute to the transformation to resilient and sustainable mountain development? Does it show potential for long term impact? Either by itself or as part of something? Is the route to impact clearly described and realistic? Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15):

- Very strong conservation efforts backed by science and high potential for social impact (15)
- Medium conservation efforts and potential for social impact (10)
- Some potential for environmental conservation and social impact (5)
- No potential for environmental or social benefits (0)

Equity (0-15)

How does the project specifically address improving gender, equity and human rights? Is special consideration given to excluded groups and communities (women, girls, indigenous groups, people with disabilities, etc.) or low-income populations. Outline how women, children and other vulnerable groups will benefit. Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15):

- Gender transformative. Very strong benefits and involvement of marginalised groups (15)
- Gender sensitive. Attention to equity and integration of gender considerations (10)
- Some benefits for and involvement of excluded groups (5)
- No consideration for excluded and marginalised groups (0)

Scalability (0-15)

Is the project considered scalable? Does it have a potentially scalable model? Is the product or service in question likely to attract sufficient interest and demand among stakeholders? Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15.):

- Easily scalable and replicable (15)
- Potentially scalable and replicable (10)
- Low scalability and replicability (5)
- No scalability and replicability (0)

Profitability and Sustainability (0-15)

Is the project considered profitable? What is the **revenue model, fundraising track record, and estimated break-even point**? Does it have a clear path to becoming a sustainable solution and support for the sector? Does it have a clear exit strategy, can it connect with funders, what is the scope for policy engagement? At what monthly/annual sales volume do you expect to cover all your costs? If the proposal is pre-revenue: when do you realistically expect to reach break-even (month/year)? **Please share numerical estimates where possible/available.** Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15.):

- High sustainability and profitability potential for supporting the viable development of the sector (15)
- Good sustainability and profitability potential for supporting the viable development of the sector (10)
- Challenging sustainability and profitability potential for supporting the viable development of the sector (5)
- No sustainability and profitability potential for supporting the viable development of the sector (0)

Team Composition / Organisation (0-15)

Is the team composition relevant for developing the idea further? Do they have relevant experience, skill sets and in-depth knowledge? Do they have the right networks? Is there a clear ownership of the idea? Note: It is not necessary to have a full team envisaged for implementation at time of applying. Scoring as per below (continuous scale from 0-15):

- Strong resilience knowledge and relevant experience (15)
- Medium resilience knowledge and business experience (10)
- Low resilience knowledge or business experience (5)
- No resilience knowledge or business experience (0)

Risk (0-10)

What are the risks, both long and short term, to successful project implementation? How are these analysed and how will these be mitigated? Any project with a high risk of doing harm (environmental / social) is ineligible. (NB: Inverse scoring: 10 = low risk, 0 = high risk):

- Low risk (10)
- Medium risk (5)
- High risk (0)

6. How does the selection process work?

First, all applications are screened for eligibility. All eligible applications are then reviewed and assessed. Each eligible application is reviewed by two separate reviewers, one of which is a reference marker. The reference marker reviews all applications. If there is a difference in total marks on any eligible application between any two reviewers of 25 points or more that application is flagged for review and discussed by the assessors. The outcome of that review determines the final score of that application. The assessment review is evaluated against the assessment criteria, with a maximum of 100 points awarded. All applications with a score above 60 will be shortlisted. Out of these up to 20 submissions will be selected as finalists, at the discretion of the selection committee. The selection committee is composed of GRP and ICIMOD staff. The finalists will receive mentoring support to evolve and refine their project proposal, with 12-15 projects selected for funding and implementation.

7. What will the winners win?

The Challenge winners will receive a programme of tailored mentoring, communications and MEL support and will be connected to potential partners and/or investors. In addition to this there will be prizes ranging from USD 5,000 to 25,000 for winning projects to further develop and scale their solutions. This will be awarded for implementation and scaling over the 12 months.

8. Who is providing the mentoring and subject matter expertise?

We recognise that no one knows your innovation better than you do. Our mentors and subject matter experts are highly experienced in mentoring and coaching and are trained to help you further develop your idea. Each mentor has years of experience in this field and comes from diverse backgrounds, ranging from successful entrepreneurs with a proven track record of innovating and scaling, to academics and researchers. Importantly, we will also draw on regional expertise from the Hindu Kush Himalaya, engaging mentors who have a deep understanding of the local context. These regional experts will provide culturally relevant guidance, ensuring that your solutions are tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities in the region. The mentors will work together in a structured approach to deliver optimal support to each winner, combining their global and regional insights to enhance your project's success.

9. What do we expect from you?

If you are selected as a finalist (and hopefully winner!) and receive support, we expect you to fully engage with the process and the mentors assigned to you. If you have any questions or concerns, you can bring these up by sending a message to challenge@globalresiliencepartnership.org (including HKH Challenge in the subject line).

10. Will there be a chance to ask clarification questions?

You can send a message to challenge@globalresiliencepartnership.org to ask questions in advance. Additionally, we will be hosting a webinar to provide guidance and support, ensuring a smoother application process for all applicants.

11. Who do I contact for more information?

If you have further questions on the Challenge please contact us at: challenge@globalresiliencepartnership.org - we will do our best to respond to all inquiries within three working days.

12. What solutions will we consider?

Innovative solutions in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) context emphasise the conservation and sustainable management of the region's unique biodiversity and natural resources, providing critical ecosystem services while avoiding further degradation and restoring ecosystems when needed. It also promotes sustainable practices such as waste management and fosters a circular economy.

In the HKH, solutions should not only mitigate harm but actively contribute to climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem restoration. These solutions should help communities cope with, recover from, and thrive in the face of climate uncertainty. Examples include financial innovations for forest conservation, sustainable mountain agriculture, mountain niche products and services, community-led biodiversity protection, improved watershed management, and ecotourism models that balance economic benefits with ecological preservation.

Innovative and scalable for-profit initiatives that address ecological, market, and value chain challenges in the Hindu Kush Himalaya region are invited to apply. For example, initiatives can focus on (but are not limited to):

- **Resilient Agriculture Innovations for Nature:** Solutions that reduce the vulnerability of mountain agriculture to climate impacts, enhance biodiversity, improve rural incomes, and create market linkages for high-value niche products and non-timber forest products (NTFPs).
- **Water Security and Resilience:** Initiatives that address water scarcity, improve water management and services, and mitigate the effects of glacial melt, floods, droughts, and urbanisation.
- **Climate-Resilient Sustainable Tourism:** Models that promote sustainable ecotourism, benefiting local communities while preserving and restoring fragile mountain ecosystems.
- **Climate Risk and Community Resilience:** Solutions that reduce vulnerability to climate hazards in mountain regions through climate-resilient housing, improved risk-informed settlement planning, and inclusive support for climate-affected mobile or displaced populations.