

RIVER CLEANUP

Annual report 2025



RIVER
CLEANUP



RIVER
CLEANUP
Clean locally. celebrate globally.

RIVER
CLEANUP
Clean locally. celebrate globally.

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Plastic pollution is everywhere: from the depths of the ocean to the highest mountain peaks, and even within every cell in our bodies.

In 2025, an estimated 127 billion kg of plastic entered the environment: land, air, and water combined. Without bold global action, that number could soar to 280 billion kg by 2040, the equivalent of dumping a garbage truck full of plastic waste every single second.

In August 2025, representatives from 180 countries met in Geneva to negotiate a global treaty to tackle the plastic crisis, addressing the entire life cycle of plastic, from production to waste management. Unfortunately, no agreement was reached, allowing annual plastic production to rise by 52% by 2040 (from 450 to 680 billion kg), growing twice as fast as waste management capacity.

This leaves many asking: Does it still matter? Why bother? Can I really make a difference? Our answer is clear: Yes, you can! And now is the time to accelerate. We've moved beyond the era of small measures: it's time to step up our game.

River Cleanup started with a simple 10-minute cleanup challenge. It opened my eyes and inspired me to dedicate my life to making rivers plastic-free. Since then, we've mobilized more than 350,000 people in 102 countries and developed the scalable Clean River Model to empower local changemakers worldwide. By cleaning what's already there and preventing new waste from entering our waterways, we turn hands-on action into lasting systemic change.

I'm deeply grateful for the continued support of our partners and happy to see so many new allies joining our mission to make 100 rivers plastic-free by 2030.

Together for clean rivers!

Thomas de Groote
Founder & CEO





THE PLASTIC POLLUTION CRISIS

When we look only at the ocean surface, an estimated 250 million kilograms of plastic can be seen floating at any given time. Each year, an additional 0.8 to 2.7 billion kilograms of plastic enter the ocean via rivers, with several million tonnes more leaking from coastal areas. These flows are the visible end of a largely land-based problem. Mismanaged plastic waste escapes into thousands of rivers, drains, and waterways, which then transport it downstream to the sea.

When we zoom out beyond the ocean and look at the full plastic system, the scale becomes even clearer. Breaking the Plastic Wave shows that 127 billion kilograms of plastic pollute the environment every year, most of it on land, in rivers, and in coastal waters. Tens of millions of tonnes are also openly burned, creating additional risks for ecosystems, climate, and human health.

Rivers play a critical role in this crisis, acting as major transport routes for plastic pollution. Research shows that up to 22 billion kilograms of plastic enter the aquatic environment each year, much of it carried by rivers before ever reaching the ocean.

At the same time, global plastic production has surpassed 450 billion kilograms annually and continues to rise. Yet less than 10 percent of plastic waste is recycled worldwide. Waste management systems cannot keep pace with the volume of plastic produced, leaving vast amounts to be burned, landfilled, or lost to nature.

Plastic pollution has now been documented across all ecosystems on Earth. It is found in oceans and rivers, along coastlines and farmland, in cities and rural areas, and even in remote mountain regions. Scientists have detected plastic particles in polar ice and Antarctic snow, underscoring how far this pollution travels.

What makes plastic attractive for everyday use, its durability and resistance to degradation, also makes it persistent in the environment. Plastic does not disappear. Instead, it breaks down into smaller fragments known as microplastics, which have been found in water, soil, air, and food. These particles move through food chains, affecting wildlife and raising growing concerns for human health.

If current trends continue, some projections suggest that the weight of plastic in the ocean could approach or even exceed the weight of fish by 2050, though these estimates carry significant uncertainty. What is clear is that without a fundamental shift in how plastic is produced, used, and managed, the risks to ecosystems, economies, and communities will continue to escalate.

Yet this future is not inevitable. By stopping plastic before it reaches rivers and by restoring polluted waterways, we can significantly reduce leakage into nature and protect rivers as vital lifelines for people and ecosystems.





VISION

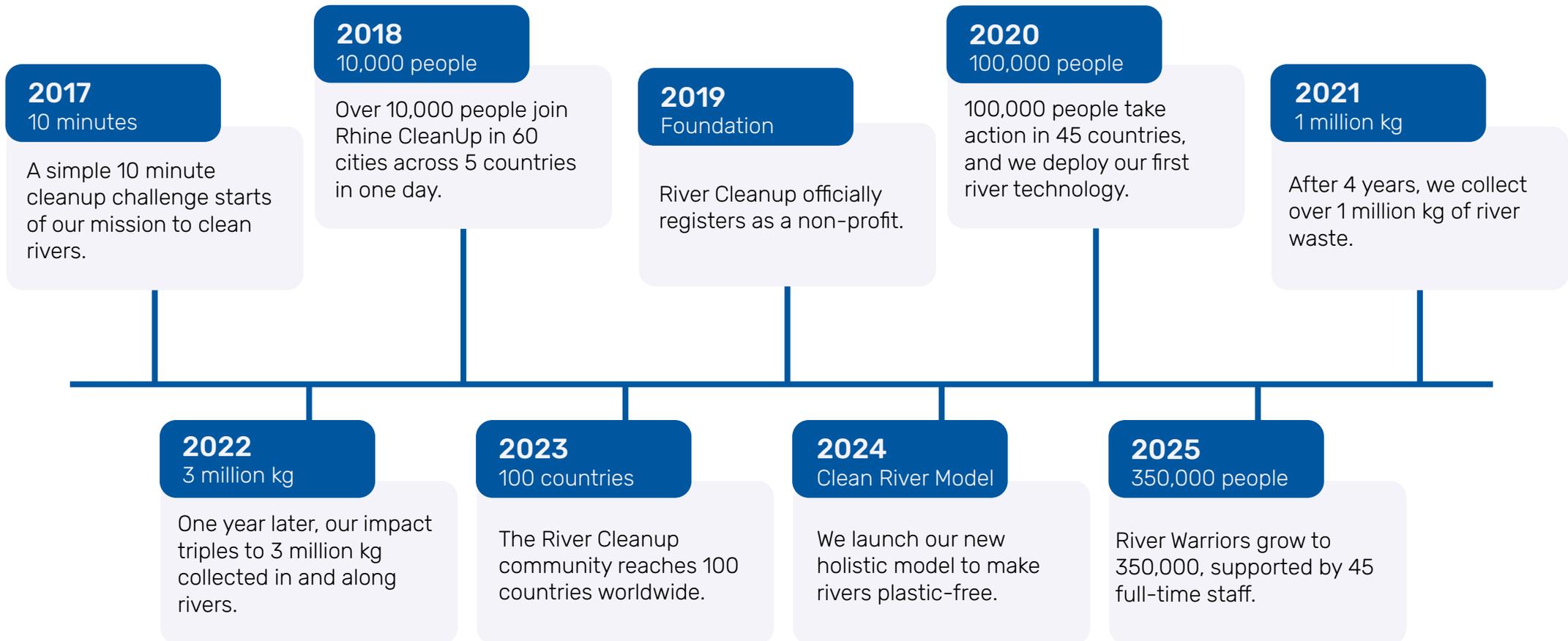
Plastic-free rivers.

MISSION

River Cleanup is a global network organization on a mission to clean rivers by empowering people, preventing pollution, and accelerating change.



TIMELINE





Afghanistan	Bolivia	Colombia	Eq. Guinea	Hungary	Kenya	Mozambique	Poland	Singapore	The Netherlands
Albania	Brazil	Costa Rica	Ethiopia	Iceland	Lebanon	Namibia	Portugal	Slovakia	The Philippines
Argentina	Bulgaria	Cote d'Ivoire	Finland	India	Liberia	Nepal	Puerto Rico	South Africa	Togo
Australia	Burundi	Croatia	France	Indonesia	Lithuania	New Zealand	Romania	South Korea	Trinidad & Tobago
Austria	Cambodia	Cuba	Gambia	Iran	Luxembourg	Nigeria	Russia	South Sudan	Tunisia
Bangladesh	Cameroon	Czechia	Germany	Ireland	Madagascar	North Macedonia	Rwanda	Spain	Ukraine
Belarus	Canada	DR Congo	Ghana	Italy	Malawi	Oman	Saudi Arabia	Sri Lanka	United Kingdom
Belgium	Cayman Islands	Denmark	Greece	Japan	Malaysia	Pakistan	Senegal	Sweden	United States
Benin	Chile	Egypt	Guinea-Bissau	Jamaica	Mexico	Panama	Serbia	Switzerland	Venezuela
Bhutan	China	El Salvador	Haiti	Kazakhstan	Morocco	Peru	Sierra Leone	Tanzania	Zambia
									Zimbabwe

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

TOTAL SINCE 2019

3 action zones

3,928,231 kg total

2,819,956 kg plastic

359,021 people

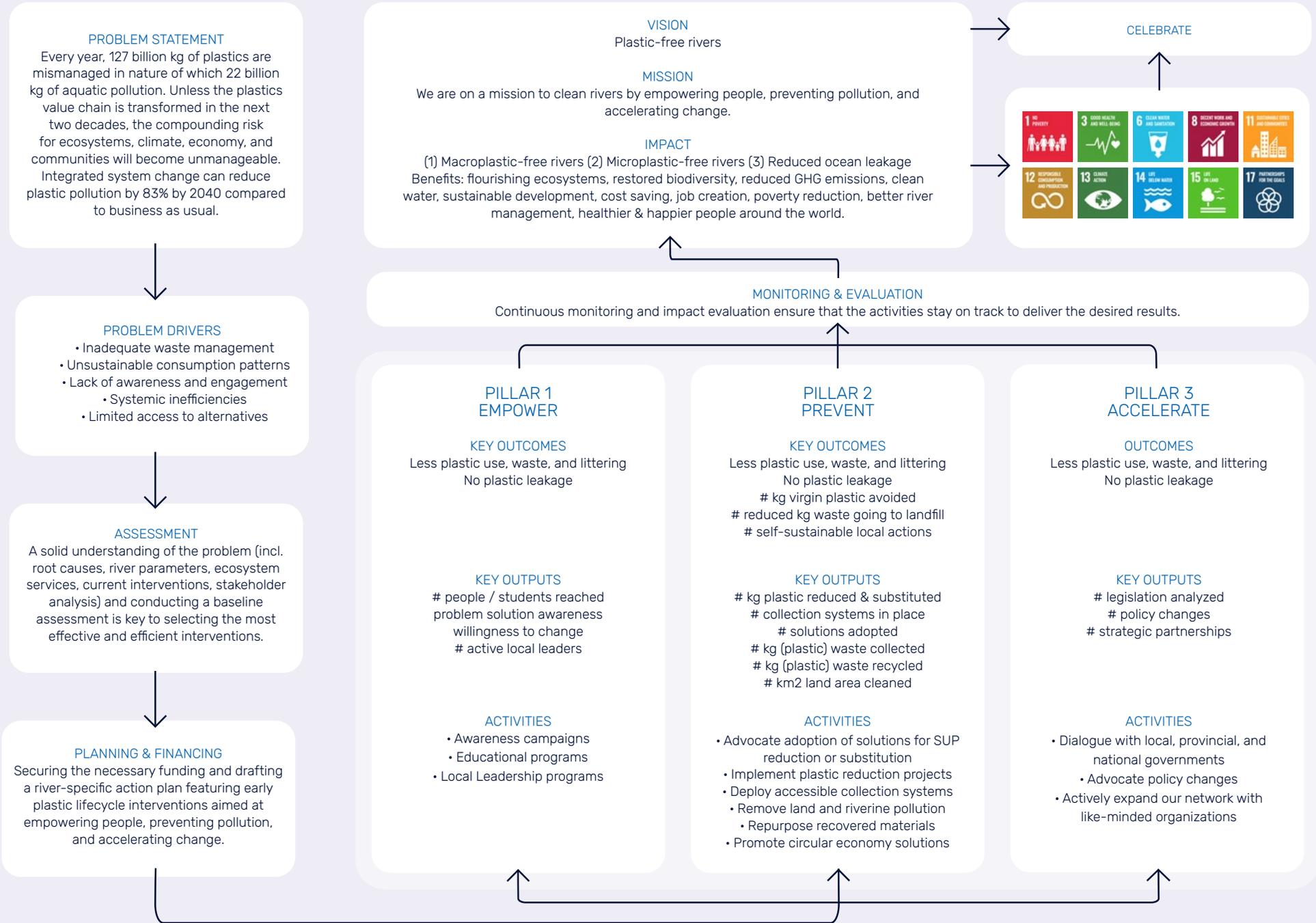
102 countries

250 schools





THEORY OF CHANGE



CLEAN RIVER MODEL

We developed the Clean River Model, a holistic theory of change and hands-on approach that is specifically tailored to address the multifaceted issue of river plastic pollution. It's a structured framework based on our experience, best practices, and academic research. It's designed to be adaptable and scalable, making it suitable for different contexts and regions.

The model consists of strategic interventions in the plastic lifecycle. It is organized around 3 integrated pillars, and 3 enablers:



PILLARS

EMPOWER PEOPLE

The Empower pillar aims to cultivate a sense of responsibility and active participation among individuals, schools, and communities toward avoiding plastic pollution. It focuses on increasing awareness of the causes and consequences of plastic waste, empowering people to become ambassadors, and activating communities to take action for a cleaner environment. Through awareness campaigns, educational programs, and the empowerment of local leaders, this pillar builds a community driven movement toward plastic free rivers.

PREVENT POLLUTION

The Prevent pillar aims to reduce single-use plastics by adopting sustainable alternatives, implementing plastic reduction projects, and sharing knowledge & best practices. It focuses on preventing plastic waste from entering nature by deploying accessible collection systems and removing riverine pollution. We recycle and repurpose recovered materials at their highest value and promote circular economy solutions.

ACCELERATE CHANGE

This pillar aims to accelerate change by collecting and analyzing data, providing insights, and informing authorities on sources of river pollution. We propose short-term remediations, promote structural solutions, and advocate policy change. We actively engage and collaborate within a network of like-minded organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit.

ENABLERS

ASSESSMENT

The assessment establishes a comprehensive baseline, guiding the Clean River Model's interventions by examining plastic pollution through legal, socio-economic, cultural, security, and environmental lenses. It ensures that solutions are informed, data-driven, and tailored to local conditions.

PLANNING & FINANCING

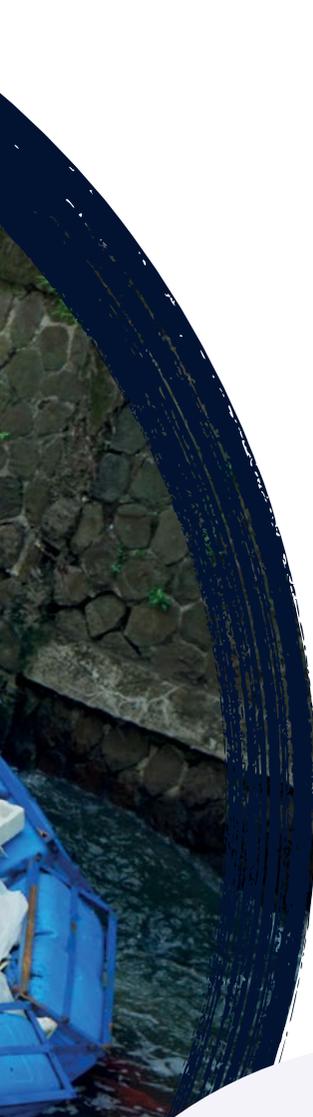
We develop a detailed, actionable plan and secure the necessary funding for its implementation. Based on insights from the assessment, the action plan outlines specific interventions for preventing plastic pollution and conducting cleanup operations.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

This enabler focuses on tracking the progress and effectiveness of the Clean River Model interventions by regularly monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs) and evaluating outcomes against established baselines.

INDONESIA





Indonesia remains one of River Cleanup's most important focus countries. The rivers flowing through Bandung feed into the **Citarum**, one of the most polluted rivers in the world, making the region a critical location for testing and scaling effective solutions. Over recent years, local projects and surrounding communities have continued to grow in strength and impact.

In 2024, River Cleanup launched the **Clean River Model** in the Cikakak action zone. Throughout 2025, this pilot was further expanded in a structured and

phased way, strengthening activities across all pillars of the model and laying the groundwork for long-term, systemic change.

Empower

To increase awareness in the action zone, the River Cleanup team in Bandung continued daily cleanup activities at river hotspots and across the wider area. **World Cleanup Day** in September was celebrated through multiple cleanup events. Outreach activities throughout the year included radio shows, podcasts, and a public exhibition highlighting plastic pollution and practical solutions.

In schools and communities, the **Plastic Clever Schools** program was launched in partnership with Common Seas. The program raises awareness, reduces plastic use in schools, promotes waste sorting, and supports schools in developing action plans tailored to

local challenges. For younger children, Saturday River School sessions used play-based learning to build understanding and encourage positive habits at home.

Engagement with local leadership remains essential for lasting impact. The team continues to work closely with village and religious leaders, as well as women's groups and community organizations, recognizing the central role women often play in household waste sorting and disposal.

Prevent

Preventive actions were strengthened in 2025 through targeted activities and pilot initiatives. **Reduce-and-substitute actions** were promoted through **zero waste events** attended by hundreds of people, where no single use plastics were used.



"We appreciate and support the River Cleanup activities and educational initiatives on waste management and environmental awareness and the active role of residents in protecting the river ecosystem. This has proven effective in increasing public awareness especially among younger generations. Their partnership with the One Six waste picker Community is a positive example of collaboration between communities, residents, and the local government, led by River Cleanup, which has made a tangible contribution to maintaining environmental cleanliness and sustainability."

- **Fahmi Hafizah Noviyanti**, S.IP (Secretary of Sub-district/Kelurahan Nyengseret, Cikakak River)

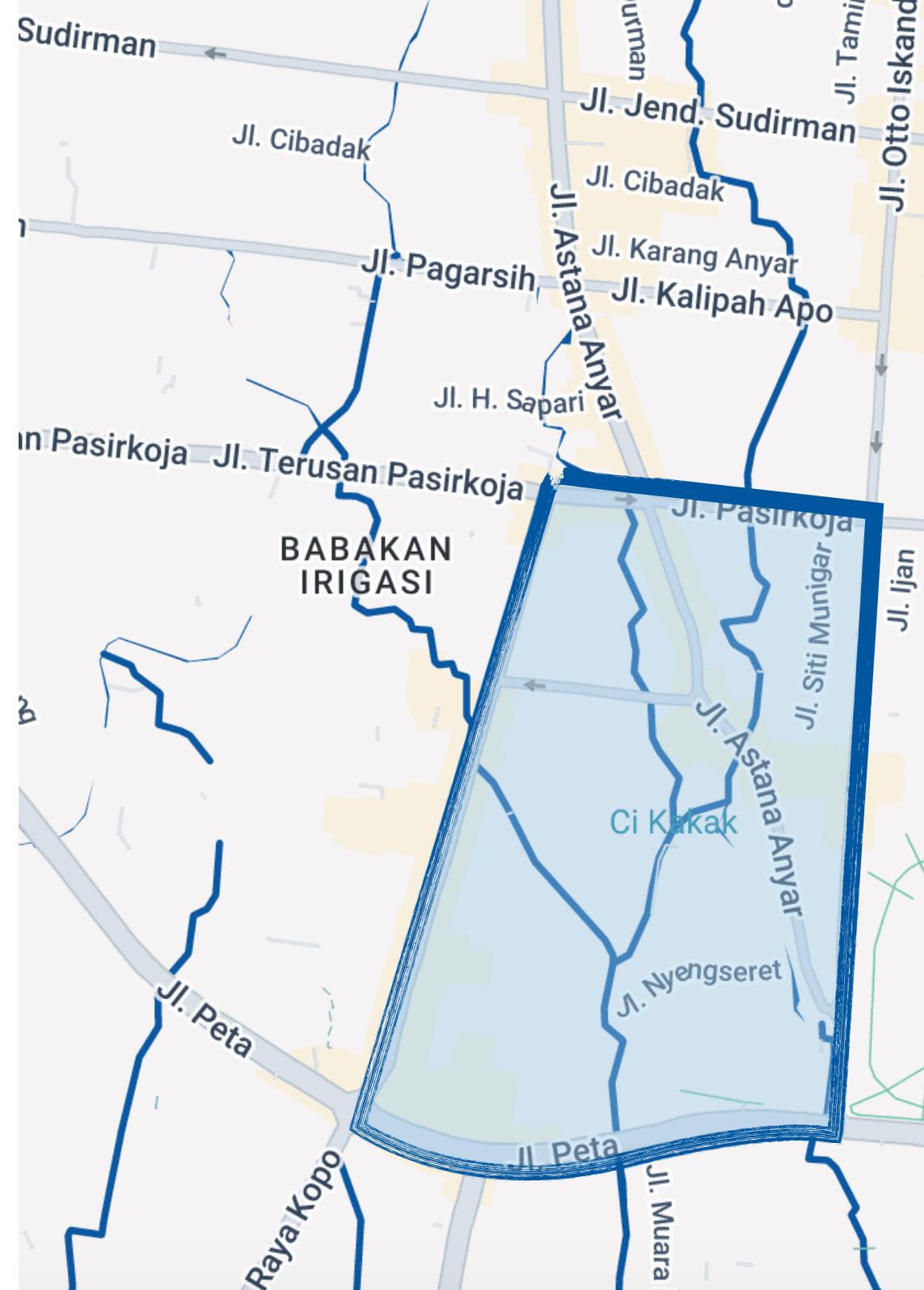


Preventive collection activities remain a core component of the work. In 2025, pilot preventive waste collection initiatives were launched and will become fully operational in 2026. Partnerships with local waste pickers supported sorting at the source, while mismanaged waste areas were identified, cleaned, and developed to prevent further accumulation.

Ecobins in schools and public spaces continue to play an important awareness role within the action zone. A new **trash barrier** installed in 2025 enabled the team to intercept additional waste before it flows downstream. The **Material Recovery Facility (MRF)** supports the circular economy by ensuring collected waste is sorted, baled, and sent to recyclers, with residual waste converted into energy.

Accelerate

Accelerate activities were embedded throughout the year. Engagement with government officials supported advocacy and policy development around waste management, from meetings with the Mayor of Bandung to ongoing working sessions with local leaders. River Cleanup also strengthened its network of partner organizations, improving community engagement and household communication.



INDONESIA IMPACT

2025 TOTALS

134,000 kg total

128,000 kg plastic

6,700 people

2,076 students

10 schools

5 partners

26 EcoBins (5 installed in 2025)

4 trash barriers (2 installed in 2025)





Cameroon is a key focus country for River Cleanup, with the Wouri River ranking among the most polluted rivers in Africa. Each year, an estimated **5,291,000 kg of plastic** flows through the river, posing a serious threat to ecosystems and communities downstream. This scale of pollution makes Cameroon a critical location for testing and advancing long term solutions.

Throughout 2024, community actions and the River Cleanup school program continued to grow. More than **12,000 students** from **15 schools** participated, learning about plastic pollution and practical ways to reduce it. Two winning

schools received funding to develop their own sustainable initiatives, including green gardens and improved waste management systems on campus.

Building off of 2024, community engagement remained strong throughout 2025. River Cleanup Days, World Cleanup Day, and regular cleanup actions brought people together around a shared goal. In total, **3,800 River Warriors** took part in **149 cleanup actions** across the year.

The local River Cleanup team invested significant effort in defining the future action zones where the next phase of the Clean River Model would be implemented. Building on this momentum, **River Cleanup Cameroon** was **officially registered** in early **2025**, marking an important milestone for the program. This formal registration

enabled the setup of a fully functioning **Material Recovery Facility (MRF)** and supported the gradual scaling of waste collection activities. Over the course of the year, the local team expanded from a small core group to a dedicated team of 16 staff members, strengthening operational capacity across all activities.

Empower

In line with the Clean River Model, the Empower pillar was strengthened through ongoing awareness raising activities, including regular **River Cleanup Days**, the popular **10 Minute Challenge**, and **World Cleanup Day**. The team also identified 10 schools to participate in the **Plastic Clever Schools** program in 2026, laying the groundwork for continued education and behaviour change. Engagement with local leaders and government representatives helped build support for ongoing and future activities.

"I sincerely thank River Cleanup for our strong collaboration in recycling plastic, especially bottles. This partnership has made a visible difference in our community. Plastic bottles are rarely littered, and residents now use the provided bins and collection points. Beyond protecting the environment, it has also raised awareness and encouraged responsible plastic waste management. Despite some challenges, the results show that concrete actions can truly transform communities."

- **Valéry Ekwala**, wastepreneurs/waste picker



Prevent

Preventive actions continued to scale throughout 2025. **Fifteen EcoBins** outside the action zone remained operational in 2025, supporting waste sorting and awareness. Within the action zone, River Cleanup partnered with local waste pickers to introduce preventive household waste collection. Daily river cleanups continued, while mismanaged waste areas were identified and cleaned to reduce further leakage into nature.

As part of the circular economy approach, the **Material Recovery Facility (MRF)** was established and equipped with baling machines. Partnerships with recycling off-takers were strengthened to support the recycling of plastic, glass, metal, and footwear, increasing the amount of waste diverted from landfill and the environment.

Accelerate

The Accelerate pillar was reinforced through ongoing **dialogue** with **government officials** and **community elders**. These engagements focused on advocating for stronger public support for responsible waste management. At the same time, River Cleanup continued to build alliances with like-minded organizations to strengthen collective advocacy and amplify impact.



CAMEROON IMPACT

2025 TOTALS

106,000 kg total

97,000 kg plastic

3,800 people

3 partners

19 EcoBins (5 installed in 2025)

15 schools





BELGIUM

Belgium remains at the heart of River Cleanup's activities and innovation. Throughout the past year, **River Cleanup Belgium** continued to translate commitment into measurable impact. Together with citizens, schools, and corporate partners, we organised cleanups across rivers and waterways, **removing thousands of kilograms of waste** from nature while engaging **hundreds of volunteers** in hands-on environmental action.

Beyond cleanups, River Cleanup Belgium strengthened its role as a trusted partner for companies seeking meaningful sustainability initiatives. Well structured corporate cleanup events combined tangible environmental impact with team engagement and education, contributing directly to cleaner rivers and increased awareness around waste prevention.

In collaboration with project partners **VITO** and **VLIZ**, River Cleanup continued its contribution to the **INSPIRE project**. With the municipality of **Temse** as a focal point, the project actively involved local communities and schools. In 2025, monitoring activities were completed alongside community cleanups, strengthening the local evidence base around river pollution while maintaining strong public engagement.



BELGIUM IMPACT

2025 TOTALS

25,264 kg total

7,145 kg plastic

6,232 people

19 schools

25 partners

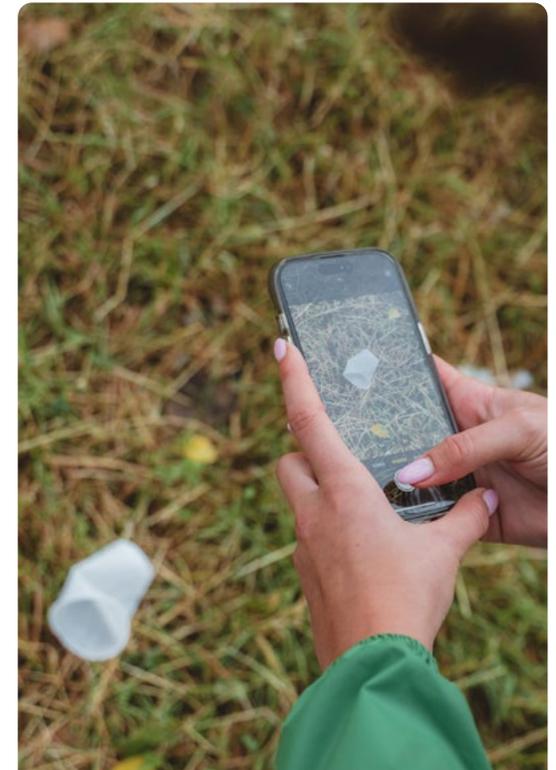
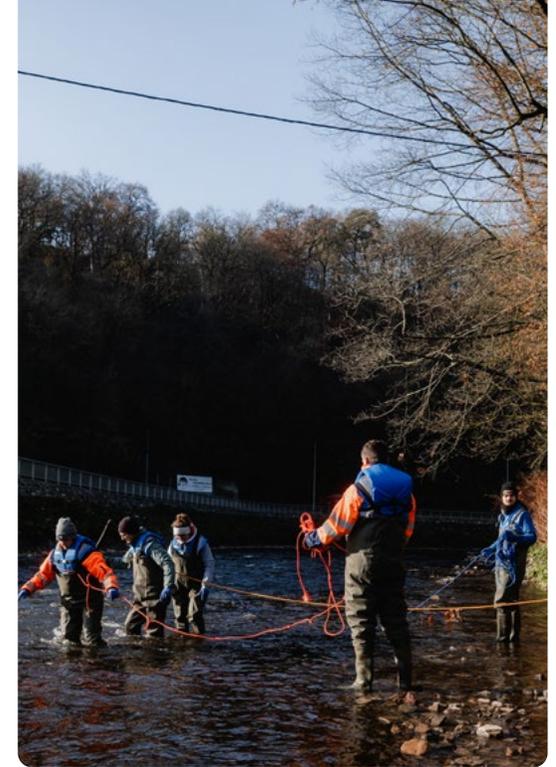




PROJECTS

River Cleanup laid important groundwork for future resilience through investments in operational readiness and long-term capacity. Preparatory work continued on the River Cleanup Response Unit, a rapid-response initiative designed to mobilize cleanup actions following floods and extreme weather events. This initiative addresses the increasing challenge of waste dispersion linked to climate-related crises and enhances River Cleanup's capacity to respond effectively to future incidents.

In parallel, innovation and data-driven approaches remained a priority. Through the River Watchers project and the continued development of drone-based monitoring, River Cleanup further strengthened its ability to map, analyze, and understand river pollution. These tools support more targeted interventions and ensure that cleanup activities are guided by reliable, evidence-based insights.





RECOGNITION & INFLUENCE

Recognition in 2025 was led by global acknowledgment of River Cleanup's leadership and long-term vision. Our founder, Thomas de Groote, was selected as a 2025 Ashoka Fellow, joining a global network of 4.000 social entrepreneurs working on systems change. Ashoka provides long-term strategic support and access to a powerful community of peers, reinforcing River Cleanup's role as a catalyst for scalable, structural solutions to plastic pollution.

We are also honored to see River Cleanup and our community receive growing recognition across entrepreneurship, innovation, and public engagement. Thomas was selected as one of three finalists for the Vlerick Venture Award and as one of the top ten finalists of the Global Rolex Award, chosen from more than 300 pre-selected organizations.

He was invited to deliver the keynote address at the Trends Impact Awards, where he shared River Cleanup's vision for scaling a purpose-driven organization in complex and challenging contexts. In his address, Thomas also called on individuals, communities, and partners to step up and accelerate their own impact, emphasizing that systemic change requires collective responsibility and action. These invitations marked an important milestone and signaled that impact-driven models can grow

in both ambition and credibility.

River Cleanup also received the MERLIN Innovation Award in the Service of the Year category. MERLIN is an EU-funded initiative that connects partners across Europe to accelerate the restoration of freshwater ecosystems by scaling practical and replicable solutions. The jury recognized River Cleanup's innovative approach and commitment to tackling plastic pollution, reflecting the ambition and impact of the Clean River Model.

Featured in:



Recognition in 2025 also extended to emerging leadership within our global network. Lucien, country lead of River Cleanup Cameroon, was selected to join the Zero Waste Academy 2025 cohort, organized by Africa for Zero Waste. The program supports African environmental leaders in developing community-driven zero waste solutions through practical training, peer collaboration, and locally tailored action plans. Lucien's participation strengthens local capacity in Cameroon and contributes valuable insights to River Cleanup's work on prevention and circular solutions.

Not all progress is measured through awards alone. In 2025, after three years of negotiations, world leaders failed to reach agreement on a global treaty to end plastic pollution, with progress slowed by opposition from oil-producing countries and intensive petrochemical lobbying. River Cleanup was present in Geneva as a civil society stakeholder. Our colleague Arno Doggen followed the negotiations closely and provided context to Belgian media, including VRT NWS, ecoTips, and La Libre Belgique.

Negotiations are expected to continue in 2026. River Cleanup will remain actively engaged, advocating for a treaty that limits virgin plastic production, protects rivers, and safeguards human and environmental health.





MEET THE TEAM

CAMEROON

- Alavar: Cleanup Crew Lead
- Larissa Tsemo: Operations Officer
- Emile Douala: Cleanup Crew
- Mirelle Yejeuande Kanyimi: Sorting Crew
- Samy Trésor Kohol: Machine Crew
- Rodrigue Manassa: Machine Crew
- Neige-Belvia Rendeckotto Ngagny: Sorting Crew
- Diane Tikeng: Edu & Community Engagement Officer
- Jospin Timothee Togoumoko: Cleanup Crew
- Cédric Tsala Mbida: Cleanup Crew
- Rufus Yangoufflo: Cleanup Crew
- Marchia Yibiri: Sorting Crew
- Lucien Yoppa: Country Lead Cameroon
- Pius Gallin Youngue: Cleanup Crew
- Ulrich Juan Zoayang Nguethie: Cleanup Crew

BELGIUM

- Florian Bausart: Field Officer
- Hanne Collette: Education Coordinator
- Aurélie Cordier: Press & PR Consultant
- Patrick Deberdt: Material & Logistics
- Nicolas de Gheldere: Country Lead Belgium
- Christian de Groote: Bookkeeping
- Thomas de Groote: Founder & CEO
- RJ De Smedt: MarComms Sr Manager
- Arno Doggen: Head of Development

INDONESIA

- Alip Abdul Kamal: Cleanup Crew
- Wanto Agung: Cleanup Crew
- Muhammad Anugrah Basysyar: Country Lead
- Anwari Aripin: Cleanup Crew
- Muhammad Choerul Anam: Cleanup Crew
- Almira Dhiya Alifa: Brand Auditor & Action Coordinator
- Muhammad Farhan Fajryan: Tech & Operation Coordinator
- Dedi Hermawan: Driver
- Muhammad Indra Maulana: Cleanup Crew
- Candra Irawan: Cleanup Crew
- Firman Maulana: Education Coordinator
- Reina Nenti Nurdini: Fin, Admin & Partnership Coordinator
- Yevir Nur Fadila: Brand Auditor & Assessment
- Ridwan Rinaldi: Cleanup Crew
- Agus Sukaryat: Action Zone Coordinator
- Muhammad Yasser Alaydaru: Co-Captain
- Rubiyanto: Cleanup Crew



PUBLIC REACH

2025 TOTALS

FACEBOOK
24,963

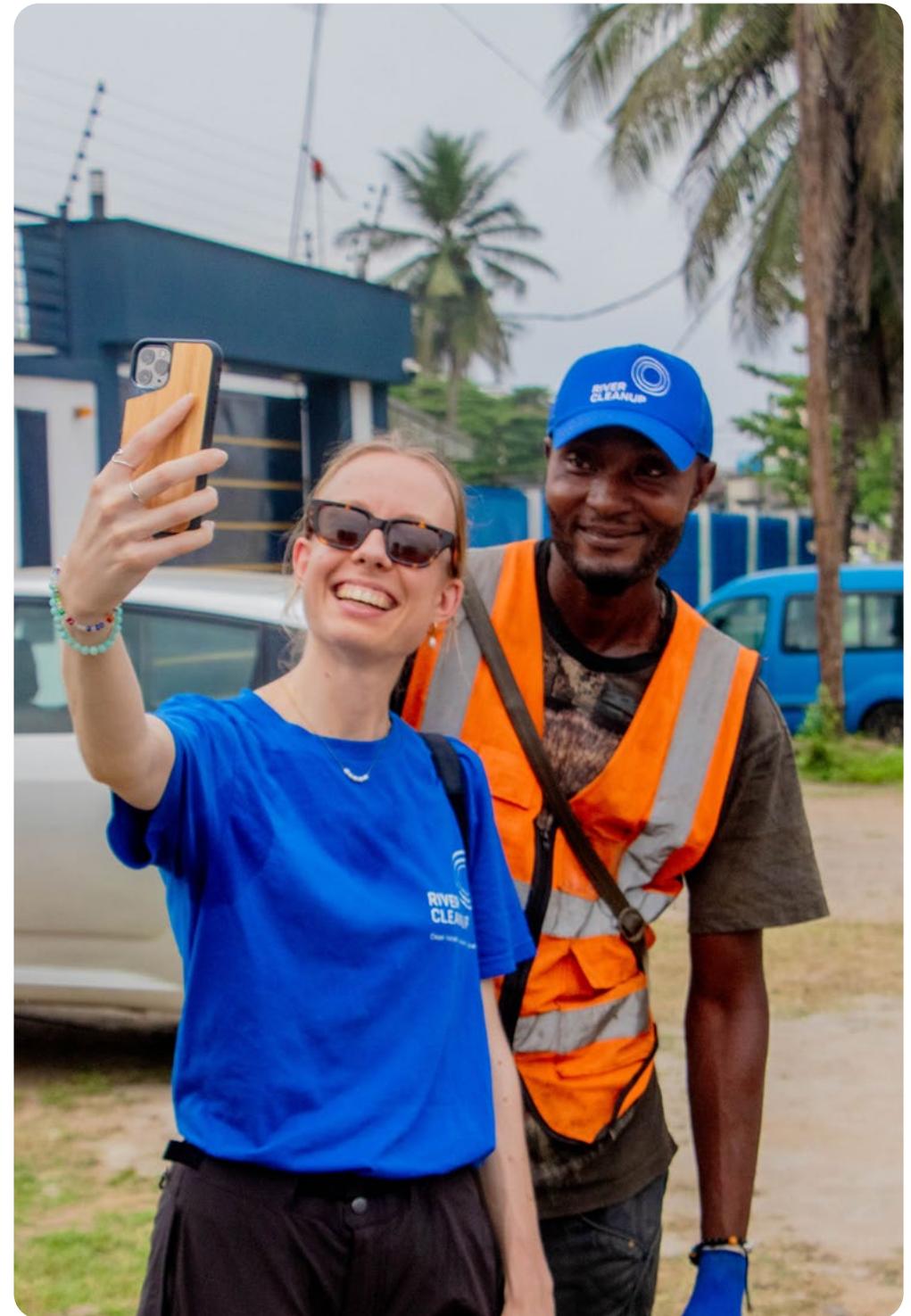
INSTAGRAM
32,394

LINKEDIN
7,396

WEBSITE VISITS
80,706

NUMBER OF PRESS PUBLICATIONS
247

OVERALL REACH
69 million views & impressions



LE SOIR

vrt max
Journal

KOMPAS id

CNN

RTL

HET LAATSTE NIEUWS

vtm

tendances
Trends



LOOKING AHEAD

We are proud of what we achieved in 2025. The year delivered strong results while also allowing us to set clear priorities for the next phase of our work. In 2026, we will focus on the following key milestones:

- Validating the Clean River Model in Indonesia and Cameroon, with local adaptations to ensure relevance across different social, environmental, and governance contexts.
- Launching River Cleanup India, expanding our global presence to a new priority region.
- Continuing the Plastic Clever Schools program in Indonesia, launching it in Cameroon, and completing the program in Belgium.
- Wrapping up the INSPIRE project, concluding community engagement and monitoring activities while consolidating learnings for future initiatives.
- Actively engaging foundations and major donors to strengthen and diversify our funding base. We look ahead with confidence and determination.

With continued collaboration, innovation, and commitment, we will keep building momentum toward our mission.

Together for clean rivers.



MISSION 2030

Mission 2030 is River Cleanup's long-term roadmap to transform the Clean River Model from a proven approach in a limited number of action zones into a globally scalable solution. Our ambition is to contribute to 100 cleaner, plastic-free rivers by 2030 and 1,000 by 2050.

In practical terms, Mission 2030 means moving from validation to scale. By 2027, we aim to have a first wave of new action zones up and running in priority countries such as India, the Philippines, Ghana, and others, building on our ongoing work in Belgium, Indonesia, and Cameroon. For each river, we follow a consistent trajectory:

- Assess and select the river
- Co-create an action plan with local partners
- Implement the Clean River Model across its three pillars (empower, prevent, accelerate)
- Mature and scale once results and business cases are validated.



Mission 2030 also looks inward. Achieving scale requires a strong and resilient organization. The roadmap therefore sets clear expectations for River Cleanup's own growth in governance, financing, and operational capacity. This includes developing secondary revenue models, strengthening program support, and making better use of the data and impact insights generated across our projects.

Mission 2030 provides a clear and actionable pathway to turn our vision of plastic-free rivers into reality, with defined milestones, roles, and investment needs for the coming decade.

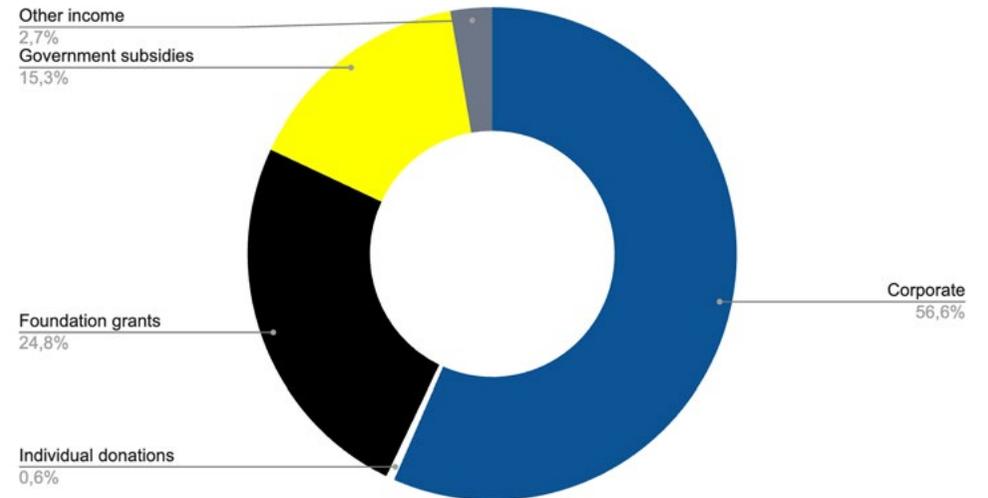


FINANCIALS

2025 TOTALS

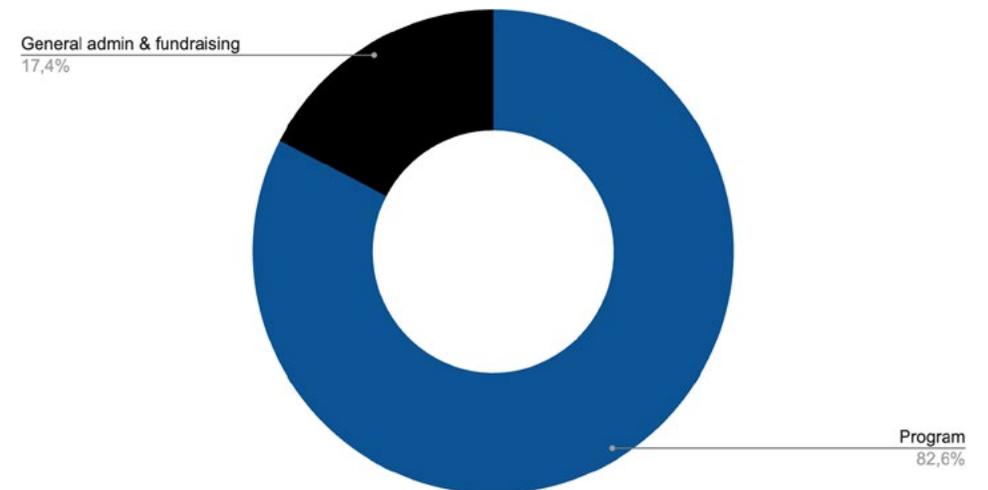
INCOME

Philanthropy & sponsoring	€ 1.545.568,56
• Corporate	€ 1.066.731,76
• Individual donations	€ 10.528,69
• Foundation grants	€ 468.308,11
Government subsidies	€ 288.336,00
Other income	€ 51.775,78
Total	€ 1.885.680,34



INVESTMENTS

Program	€ 1.306.954,83
General admin & fundraising	€ 275.538,94
Total	€ 1.582.493,77



THANK YOU FOR MAKING IMPACT WITH US!

Thank you to all our corporate partners and supporters, institutional donors, supporting foundations, individual donors, and River Warriors.

Special thanks to our 2025 official partners:

MISSION PARTNER

NAIAD FOUNDATION KEYTRADE BANK

IMPACT PARTNERS

AXA DELHAIZE multimasters group by S&SIC VW A.S. Adventure sumup® European Union flag JCDecaux zoetis

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

accenture The Water Purifier national lottery Foundation ENGIE brussels airport Fund pwc BOMA Aquafin

We also extend our sincerest gratitude to all individuals and organizations not individually mentioned here who supported River Cleanup in 2025. Your commitment to plastic-free rivers is essential and deeply appreciated.

Want to support us?



Hans Lenders
Head of Partnerships & Philanthropy
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Want to support our work? Discover how



Together for clean rivers