

BRIEFING NOTE No. 100

Multi-stakeholder initiatives on garments and textiles in Germany and the Netherlands

TOWARDS ACHIEVING COLLECTIVE IMPACT?

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SUMMARY

Garments and textiles value chains offer opportunities for inclusive growth in many developing countries in Asia and increasingly also in Africa. They are faced, however, with many social and environmental sustainability challenges. This briefing note provides insights on national multi-stakeholder sector initiatives that have been developed in both Germany and the Netherlands to improve social and environmental conditions along the entire supply chain, and looks at the role of the EU in such a context.

The brief discusses the set-up and progress, the similarities and the differences of these initiatives. It highlights that these partnerships benefit from a high political level buy-in, which has helped them take off and move forward. It also discusses the relevance of a whole-of-government (different ministries with different portfolios working together) approach.

The German Partnership for Sustainable Textiles has a somewhat more formalised modus operandi, takes more time to agree on targets, principles and procedures, while the Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile (AGT) opted for a more flexible and more iterative approach, partly helped by the trust built through cooperation between stakeholders that preceded the creation of the AGT. While operating differently, both multi-stakeholder sector initiatives face challenges, because of the nature of the partnership itself: i.e. working together with entities with different interests, expectations and objectives.

Both the Textiles Partnership and the AGT seek to enhance cooperation across countries at the EU level, to create a more level playing field for businesses, thus avoiding the creation of a comparative advantage for companies not adhering to international social and environmental standards and make it easier for companies operating in different EU Member States to engage. Based on the Dutch and German experience and on the interests of stakeholders, the brief also looks at what could be the potential and the shape of this transnational cooperation.

1. Introduction

The textile and clothing sector employs approximately 75 million people worldwide. Many live in developing countries, mostly in Asia, but also increasingly in Africa. Women and girls make up close to 75% of the workforce (Stotz and Kane, 2015). The sector is evolving quickly and offers good opportunities for value creation, inclusive growth and women empowerment. However, there are also major sustainability challenges such as low wages, limitations of the freedom of association and collective bargaining, poor building safety and use of hazardous chemicals. The textile and clothing value chain, characterised by geographically dispersed production and multiple actors, makes tackling such challenges equally complex. At the same time, there is a growing recognition that there is a responsibility for importers, brands and retailers in Europe to be aware of, and to address, social and environmental issues along the value chain.

Companies cannot tackle these issues on their own. In that spirit, **national multi-stakeholder sector initiatives have been developed in both Germany and the Netherlands, to improve social and environmental conditions along the entire supply chain.** The German Partnership for Sustainable Textiles (from here on “Textiles Partnership”) and the Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile (AGT) bring together companies, business associations, trade unions, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the German and Dutch government respectively and, in the case of Germany, standards organisations. Each stakeholder group has distinct roles to play, with companies having for example to ensure proper due diligence; trade unions and CSOs to hold them accountable and work with them; and the government to contribute to an enabling policy environment.

In both countries, more Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) addressing sustainability issues in a specific value chain exist. In Germany, this includes the Sustainable Cocoa Forum, the Roundtable Human Rights in Tourism, the Forum for Sustainable Palm Oil and the Action Alliance for Sustainable Bananas. In the Netherlands, national sectoral multi-stakeholder initiatives are in place on banking, gold, sustainable forestry, vegetable protein and a pilot has been launched for the procurement of natural stone. More are in the process of being developed (Change in Context, 2018).

Many - in Germany, the Netherlands and well beyond - are looking with interest at these initiatives. Furthermore, there is a call by some to upscale them to the EU level. **This briefing note therefore provides insights on MSIs, based on the examples of the Textiles Partnership and the AGT and looks at the role of the EU in such a context.** The analysis is based on desk research and a select number of interviews.

2. Origins

In Germany, the Textile Partnership was established in October 2014, in response to the tragic accidents in textile factories, particularly Rana Plaza in April 2013. It was initiated by the German Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Dr. Gerd Müller. In fact, interviewees indicate that **the Minister has played an important role as a driver of the Textiles Partnership.** This high-level backing contributed to convincing companies and other stakeholders to join.

In the Netherlands, the AGT was established in July 2016. This followed on a recommendation from the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) to conclude multi-stakeholder agreements to strengthen international responsible business conduct, and was spearheaded by the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Lilianne Ploumen. **The AGT was the first of the series of value chain-specific MSIs to be established, particularly as it could build on existing private sector collaboration,** notably the 2013 joint action plan for structural social and environmental improvements in the textile and clothing sector (Modint, Inretail and VGT, 2013). Furthermore, some companies, CSOs and others had some experience of working together in other contexts, such as through the Fair Wear Foundation. Interviewees indicate that **this considerably contributed to the level of trust between parties,** which takes time to build.

In conclusion, while in both countries, the Minister with the development cooperation portfolio has played an important role, it is worth noting that it requires a **whole-of-government approach.** In the case of Germany, the German Government is a member of the Textiles Partnership, represented by not only BMZ, but also the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), which also sits on the steering committee,

and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB). In the case of the Netherlands, the AGT has been signed by not only Minister Ploumen, but also the Secretary of State for Infrastructure and Environment as well as the Secretary of State for Economic Affairs. Secondly, these partnerships benefit from a high (political) level buy-in, which has helped them take off and move forward. In this sense, these initiatives have been led by the public sector - though the latter's role in the MSIs seems to shift from a leader/driver to more of a supporter/facilitator when the MSI develops (see sections below). Last but not least, these MSIs do not take place in a vacuum - in some cases, collaborations already took place between CSOs, businesses, trade unions etc. as shown in the Dutch example. This in turn helps build trust and legitimacy around MSIs, which are key ingredients that need to be maintained as MSIs develop.

3. Set-up

Members of the Textiles Partnership and the AGT agree on overall and more specific goals to be achieved. For instance, one of the Textiles Partnership standards to which the members commit is that “companies shall ensure that all workers have access to drinking water” and the AGT parties jointly aim for “at least a living wage in the production or supply chain by 2020” (Textiles Partnership 2014; AGT, 2016). Both MSIs are aligned with - and should help apply - international frameworks such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human.

Due diligence is a key element of both the Textiles Partnership and the AGT. Companies are expected to conduct a due diligence process and to annually prepare a “roadmap and progress report” or an “action plan” as part of this process.¹ In Germany, parties have agreed that all roadmaps have to be published as of 2018, while in the Netherlands, the action plans are only to be seen - and reviewed - by the AGT Secretariat. The review of the roadmaps/action plans is conducted by independent external experts in the German case, while this task is performed by the AGT Secretariat, in the Dutch case. Joining these two MSIs is voluntary, but once a member, this process is mandatory.

Other activities include capacity building (e.g. training, tools) and joint projects in which members are working together to tackle specific local problems in the producer countries, possibly in collaboration with other actors beyond the agreement, to ensure their effectiveness.

A more comprehensive overview of basic characteristics of the Textiles Partnership and the AGT is presented in the table below. Some of these characteristics are discussed in more detail in the next sections.

Table 1: The Textiles Partnership and the AGT compared

	Textiles Partnership (Germany)	AGT (Netherlands)
Due diligence	Mandatory mechanism for all members : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual cycle - Roadmap (~ action plan) & progress report - Mandatory timeframes and volume targets 	Mandatory mechanism for all AGT companies : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual cycle - Questionnaire - Action plan (~ roadmap) - From 2017: disclosure of production locations (CMT), published in aggregated list - From 2018: + materials used - From 2019: + production locations further up the supply chain
Verification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Third party desk review & plausibility check of the roadmaps and the progress reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - AGT Secretariat (second party) reviews the action plans (desk review and on-site discussions)

¹ In the case of Germany, other stakeholder groups are also expected to develop individual roadmaps and progress reports. In the Netherlands, it only concerns companies.

Complaints and disputes	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independent complaints and disputes committee appointed by the different parties for: - Disputes settlement between secretariat/parties/companies part of the AGT - Complaints of those experiencing a negative impact
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publication of member roadmaps and progress reports (mandatory from 2018/2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disclosure of production locations at an aggregated level - From the third year, the company communicates publically (content to be decided)
Capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secretariat offers webinars, training, tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secretariat and parties offer training, coaching and tools
Joint projects in partner countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes, called 'Partnership Initiatives' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes, called 'collective projects'
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secretariat managed by GIZ - Steering committee with two representatives per stakeholder group - Expert groups on thematic topics - BMZ finances the Secretariat until at least 2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secretariat managed by the SER - Steering committee with two representatives per stakeholder group - Thematic working groups - Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the SER finance the Secretariat until at least 2018²
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Steering Committee can suggest additions to scope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Content of the agreement is fixed for five years (until July 2021); Steering Committee decides how the existing agreement is implemented
Withdrawing from the initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Companies can withdraw anytime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Companies can withdraw only after two years from the signing date
Enforcement mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exclusion from the Partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exclusion from the AGT

Source: FAQ Associated Membership and author's own compilation

4. Due diligence legislation

Several countries have developed mandatory due diligence and transparency legislation.³ That is **not the case in Germany and the Netherlands**, so the Textiles Partnership and the AGT are not set up to support companies to abide by such legislation.

However, in the Netherlands, the government has indicated from the outset that it will consider other measures, if progress related to the AGT and other MSIs is not satisfactory. The coalition agreement of

² Total costs to execute the AGT for a period of five years have been estimated at approximately six million euro. This includes such expenses as: staff and housing of the secretariat; operationalisation of the complaints and disputes mechanism; chairperson of the steering committee; communication; mid-term review and evaluation. The AGT parties have agreed to explore possibilities of financing the AGT in the longer term through a sector-wide levy or collective contribution (AGT, 2016).

³ For example, in the UK, the Modern Slavery Act came into force in 2015, which obliges large companies to produce annually a slavery and human trafficking statement, setting out what steps they have taken to ensure that slavery and human trafficking is not taking place in its business and supply chains. France adopted the 'Loi de Vigilance' in 2017, applicable to companies as of 2018, which sets the requirement for large companies in France to develop and publish a due diligence plan and implementation report annually, which covers human rights, health, security and environmental concerns (Change in Context, 2018).

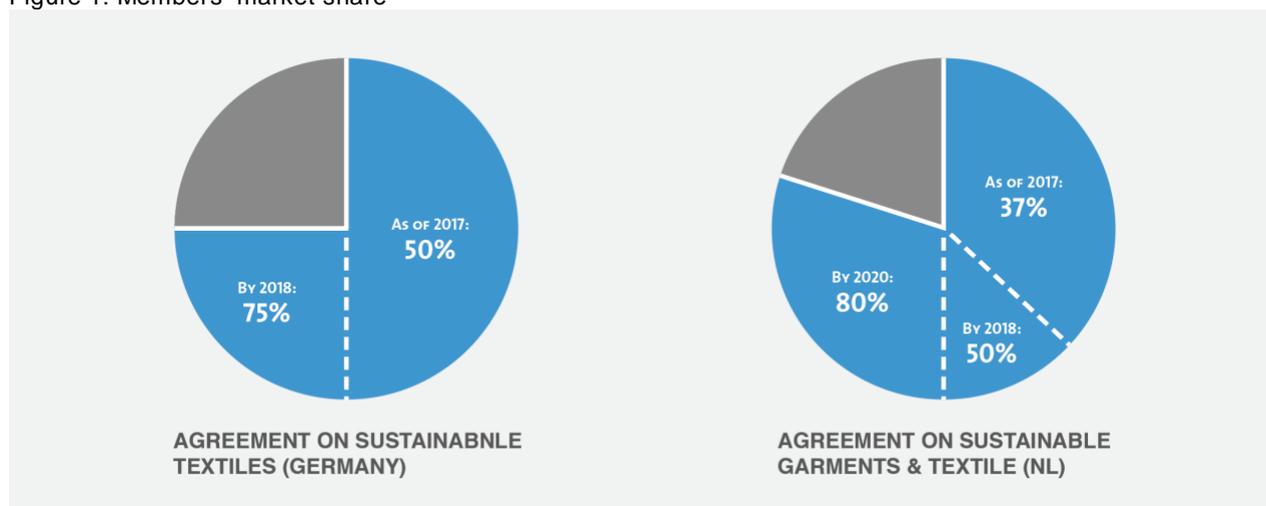
October 2017 specifies that the current government will continue the value chain MSIs approach at least until October 2019 and will consider then if / what complementary measures are needed, including legally binding ones such as due diligence legislation (VVD, CDA, D66 and CU. 2017). This can be seen as a push for companies and other partners to make the MSIs a success.

In Germany, the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights adopted in 2016, indicates that it expects companies to exercise due diligence and that legislation will be considered if less than 50% of large companies do so by 2020 (Change in Context, 2018). The government will start tracking progress as of 2018. As the Textiles Partnership preceded the National Action Plan, possible due diligence legislation, seems not to have played a role in companies' decision to join initially. Interviewees indicated that one of the possible contributing factors explaining why the AGT is moving somewhat quicker than the Partnerships Agreement (see Section 6 below) is the stronger Dutch government stance from the outset on possible additional measures such as due diligence legislation in case multi-stakeholder cooperation doesn't deliver.

5. Market share

Both agreements cover a considerable part of the garments and textiles market in their respective countries. Members of the **Textiles Partnership cover about half of the German textile market**⁴ (Textiles Partnership, 2018a) and this stands at **approximately 37% of the Dutch market for the AGT** (Tweede Kamer, 2018a).⁵ **They still have a considerable way to go to reach their 2018 target**, which respectively stands at 75% and 50% - and the Netherlands targeting a further growth to 80% in 2020.

Figure 1: Members' market share



Source: ECDPM

When looking at the dynamics, it can be noted that in Germany, the Textiles Partnership at some point covered nearly 60% of the German textile market. The most recent annual report of the partnership (2018a) notes that 44 members failed to submit a roadmap and left the partnership, either by request or of their own accord. CSOs have also stepped out. In the case of the Netherlands, members can only withdraw two years after the signing date, so withdrawal has not been an issue so far, but membership has more or less stabilised recently. These are points of attention for both initiatives.

Members have left for various reasons. Interviewees noted that some companies have left for heavy administrative burden and that CSOs have left the partnership out of dissatisfaction with progress. In the case of the Netherlands, it has been noted that particularly larger companies headquartered outside of the Netherlands fail to join. In fact, Dutch companies jointly only serve about 50% of the Dutch fashion and clothing market, so reaching the 80% target will inevitably have to involve companies headquartered beyond

⁴ This is the share in terms of turnover in relation to the 100% top-selling companies in the German textile retail industry.

⁵ As of the end of 2017, the Textiles Partnership had 98 company members and 149 members in total (Textiles Partnership, 2018). The AGT had 65 company members and 76 participating parties in total (incl. three branche organisations, five CSOs, two trade unions and the government).

Dutch borders. This is one of the reasons for the AGT to sign a cooperation agreement with the Textiles Partnership (see Section 7 below).

6. Progress made

In the Netherlands, **all company members of the AGT have developed their first due diligence action plans**, which have been reviewed by the Secretariat. We lack insights in the level of ambition, as they are only seen by the Secretariat. However, the AGT annual report (2017) indicates that, logically, there are major differences between companies. AGT companies are far from a homogeneous group, with some having had a Corporate Social Responsibility policy for many years, while others are more new to engaging on social and environmental concerns along the value chain. Other deliverables include the publication of an **aggregated list of production locations** (featuring 2802 production locations, illustrating the complexity of the value chain) and a sustainable materials guide. Based on the list, with an intermediary role of the Secretariat that has insights in which companies source where, six issues have been raised by CSOs and resolved (Tweede Kamer, 2018a). The envisaged **complaints and disputes mechanism** has been put in place, tasked to deal with complaints of those experiencing a negative impact, as well as to settle disputes between businesses and the AGT Secretariat or between parties of the AGT. One collective project on combating child labour has started (AGT, 2018) and **training programmes and workshops have been organised**, including on due diligence, living wage and freedom of association.

Unexpectedly, views differ on the extent to which this progress after 1.5 years is satisfactory. Nevertheless, even the most critical interviewee indicated that “even small progress is progress” and that it is a step in the right direction. Criticism relates for example to the AGT goals not being SMART enough, lack of transparency on companies’ action plans even within the steering committee, and the production list being aggregated instead of one-on-one transparency; and engagement with stakeholders in sourcing countries that deserves to be strengthened.

As in the Netherlands, the members of the Textiles Partnership in Germany submitted their **first roadmaps** in 2017. While publication is only mandatory as of 2018, 40 members published their first roadmap anyway on a voluntary basis, of which half are companies. The latest annual report of the Textiles Partnership gives some more insights in the content of the roadmaps than the AGT’s first annual report does. For example, it states that “45 companies within the Textiles Partnership already buy sustainable cotton. Within this group, an average of 17% of the cotton procured is now sustainable. 31 companies have set themselves the target of increasing the proportion of sustainable natural fibres they use by 2018”. The level of ambition and quality inevitably differs between the members, as in the Dutch case. The annual report notes that “not all members were able to submit a fully plausible roadmap”. **Three partnership initiatives were launched in 2017**, notably in the area of chemicals and environmental management; improving labour standards in Tamil Nadu; and water management in Pakistan. **Webinars** have been held on a range of topics, including remedies and complaints mechanisms, living wages, and business and procurement practices. **Business coaching on social impact** has taken place and **guidelines** have been published on topics such as risk analysis, policy and the inventory of natural fibres.

Criticism heard relates for example to the absence of a list of Textiles Partnership members’ production location - even if some individual members do publish their production locations. Furthermore, learning tools would not provide sufficient in-depth learning for advanced companies, which illustrates the challenging task of serving a very divergent group of companies. Some feel that negotiations between parties, even within the divergent group of companies, take a lot of time and effort, sometimes with an inclusive end, while they had hoped for faster collective strides towards real progress in sourcing countries. A lack of trust has been mentioned as a core contributing factor, also leading to quite formalised and long procedures. **It is hoped that Textiles Partnership collaboration, while holding each other accountable, further enhances trust over time.**

While an impact assessment goes well beyond the scope of this paper, both MSIs seem to have had little impact on people and the environment on the ground in sourcing countries to show at this stage. It is important to note that it’s early days for such results to be expected. MSIs, even if effective, take time to produce results. In this spirit, the AGT explicitly aims for improvements on the ground within three to five years only. In fact, one of the interviewees indicated that the difference in expectations about the pace of

progress towards impact, both between AGT members and beyond, is one of the largest challenges of the AGT.

In short, progress has been made, but the Textiles Partnership and the AGT still have a long way to go to deliver on their promises. **The AGT so far seems to have moved somewhat quicker**, with for example the first action plans produced in a shorter time frame, an aggregate production list published and a complaints and disputes mechanism in place, which is not the case for the Textiles Partnerships. However, **the Textiles Partnership goes deeper when it comes to transparency on roadmaps and progress reports**, which will all be published. **The Textiles Partnership seems to have gone for a more formalised approach, taking more time to agree on targets, principles and procedures, while the AGT opted for a more flexible, more iterative, approach**, partly facilitated by the trust built through cooperation between stakeholders that preceded the AGT. In any case, for both MSIs, the way ahead will inevitably be a gradual, adaptive process. The challenging task lies with the parties - current and future members - to effectively use the MSIs as catalysts of positive change and jointly move towards the common goals in the coming years.

7. Cross-country collaboration and role of the EU

Both the Textiles Partnership and the AGT seek to invest in international cooperation, bilaterally with other countries, at European level and beyond. They want to place the subject of multi-stakeholder collaboration in the garments and textile sector firmly on the agenda within the EU and to promote it.

As a first step, the Textiles Partnership and the AGT have recently agreed on strategic cooperation. Member companies of one initiative can join the other initiative under simplified conditions as 'associated member'. Furthermore, through joint projects in production countries and collaborating with local stakeholders, they seek to increase their joint leverage on the ground. It is presented as an important step towards creating a level playing field in Europe (Textiles Partnership, 2018b).

Indeed, an important reason they strive for a European approach is that it creates **a more extensive level playing field** avoiding a comparative advantage for companies not adhering to the international social and environmental standards as promoted by the Textiles Partnership and the AGT. As noted earlier, it also **makes it easier for multinationals to engage**, as they are often operating across EU borders. Furthermore, European-wide approaches have the potential to **allow over 500 million customers in the EU to gain easier access to products stemming from better working conditions and less environmental damage**. Finally, joining forces at EU-level can provide **more leverage to influence suppliers** to improve production practices, and encourage **and support governments from sourcing countries** to put in place an enabling policy environment (van Seters, 2017).

At the same time, others question the value of upscaling such MSI to the EU level. Since we don't know yet what the impact of the Textiles Partnership and AGT - and other MSIs at national level - will be, they think it is too early to consider a similar type of MSI at EU level at this stage. Furthermore, the **lowest common denominator** in the EU may imply that a European MSI will be far from ambitious and risks being mainly a talking shop. Another issue is **costs**, as facilitation of MSIs requires resources and some question whether they provide good value for EU taxpayers money, in comparison to other approaches (van Seters, 2017).

However, the validity of the pros and cons really depends on the shape such promotion of multi-stakeholder collaboration at EU level takes. This can imply:

- sharing lessons between member states on MSIs and possible other approaches to promote responsible business conduct;
- harmonising MSI methodologies and facilitating mutual recognition, provided more EU Member States come on board;
- coordinating and supporting some of the specific activities and goals pursued by the Textiles Partnership and the AGT, through for example development cooperation, consumer awareness raising and company trainings;
- a full-fledged garments and textile MSI at EU level, with joint goals and commitments, similar to the Textiles Partnership and AGT approaches.

In any case, the level of ambition and shape such multi-stakeholder cooperation for more sustainable textile and garments value chains at EU level takes will depend on stakeholder interests. So far, a strong push for ambitious EU action in that regard is lacking. Even if it has found its way in Council Conclusions (e.g. Council of the EU, 2017), **only a small group of EU Member States insists on MSIs**, and on stepping up EU action to strengthen international responsible business conduct more broadly. The **European Parliament insists on due diligence legislation, and pays little attention to MSIs** (European Parliament, 2017). **Many CSOs have adopted the same strategy, for fear that MSIs will delay the introduction of EU due diligence legislation**. While some sustainability front-runner businesses are interested in an EU approach, there is so far **not a strong push from businesses either**. Interest from stakeholders at EU level seems to somewhat increase in the context of the SDGs, but more buy-in will be needed for this agenda to move forward.

The European Commission did launch consultations in 2014 for an 'EU Flagship Initiative' for the garment sector. This seemed originally conceived as an ambitious initiative involving several Directorate-Generals (DGs), with strong focus on encouraging better coordination, collaboration, dialogue and exchange between stakeholders. However, after a long process, the Commission abandoned the 'flagship initiative' title and presented an EU development cooperation package for sustainable garment value chains (European Commission, 2017). **Development cooperation is indeed an important tool to support more sustainable practices in sourcing countries and the EU can play an important role in stepping up and coordinating efforts**, including with the Textiles Partnership and AGT. Importantly, however, **EU efforts should go beyond development cooperation**. While some other DGs already contribute towards more sustainable textiles value chains (e.g. the Product Environmental Footprint pilot and EU Ecolabel, spearheaded by DG Environment), a coherent and ambitious Commission-wide approach seems still lacking. Potentially, the EU's approach to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), led by Vice-President Timmermans, can address this. Multi-stakeholder collaboration is part and parcel of the SDGs. Testing and promoting MSIs in different ways, forms and at different levels, building on experiences in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere, **will require leadership from EU institutions and stakeholder claiming it**.

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