

Finding the perfect fit.

A study on the effectiveness of voluntary environmental programs with a case study on the Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile

Master Thesis (30 ECTS)

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Summary

This study aimed to understand how Voluntary Environmental Programs (VEPs) can be enhanced in their level of effectiveness to create an impact on the ground. VEPs are used to foster environmental action within the field of (trans)national environmental governance. Nevertheless, scholars are uncertain which design type of VEP can effectively change firms' behavior towards the aimed direction. One challenge is to attract participants to the agreement, called *uptake*, (and have them commit to and comply with the rules), another is to set the strict commitments, called *stringency*, to a level that would guarantee the VEPs effectiveness. Previous studies have indicated an inherent tension between stringency and the uptake of a program leading to an ineffective voluntary program. Therefore, it is essential to analyze how this trade-off, with suitable strategies, can be resolved to create a voluntary program as effective as aimed to be. The study's scope was on assessing the first two levels of effectiveness: *output* and *outcome*.

This study's methodological approach was a case study on a VEP: the Dutch Agreement of Sustainable Garments and Textile (AGT). This case study was chosen due to the existing trade-off between stringency and uptake. This study had the aim to develop recommendations on how the AGT can be improved in its effectiveness from 2021 onwards. A theoretical framework was developed with indicators that influence the level of effectiveness. Desk research and nineteen interviews were conducted with participants in-and outside the scope of the AGT. The interviews were coded in line with the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA). The results have shown that the level of stringency was scaled as lenient – neutral, and the uptake of the program was scaled as very inclusive, which showed a conflicting result with the actual uptake. Strategies to implement a tier-system of sustainability, intensifying the AGT program, and creating an additional governance structure with the Dutch Government as an orchestrator, were considered the most effective solutions to solve the trade-off between stringency and uptake. Future research is required to expand the theoretical framework to deepen the second level outcome (especially the effect per participant) and examine the third level *impact*. When the theoretical framework is expanded, it will increase the full understanding of which variables are influencing the level of effectiveness of voluntary programs.

Preface

Writing this master thesis during the coronacrisis was challenging. Working full-time at home during the pandemic was a new, unknown reality for me and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, it became visible that after the Rana Plaza clothing factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, it is still urgent to rethink the current textile industry and move forwards against a sustainable textile industry for all related actors. The pandemic gave the topic of the thesis more relevance than before, which worked as a hugely stimulating and inspirational factor to develop a relevant thesis.

Many thanks to the interview respondents of this case study. They have spent their valuable time during the coronacrisis, helping me with the thesis, which I highly value. These respondents gave valuable and new insights.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my supervisor dr. Frank van Laerhoven for his support, new insights, thinking out of the box, and useful suggestions. I have considered the online meetings as essential for me to continue the thesis during the pandemic. And lastly, I want to thank my partner, Willem, who has always helped and supported me during the process.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	8
1.1 Problem description.....	8
1.2 The rise of the VEP	8
1.3 The trade-off.....	8
1.4 The Dutch Textile Sector.....	9
2. Conceptual research design.....	12
2.1 Research objective	12
2.2 Research question	12
2.3 Research framework	12
2.4 Relevance	13
2.4.1 Scientific relevance.....	13
2.4.2 Societal relevance.....	13
3. Theory	14
3.1 Levels of effectiveness	14
3.2 Output	14
3.2.1 Design features	14
3.2.2 Quality of the audit mechanism	15
3.3 Outcome	15
3.3.1 Actors involved	15
3.3.2 Effect per participant.....	16
3.4 Strategies for addressing the trade-off	16
3.4.1 Direct approach to solve the trade-off.....	18
3.4.2 Indirect approach to solve the trade-off.....	19
4. Methods.....	21
4.1 Sample case selection	21
4.2 Operationalization of the conditions	21
4.3 Data collection.....	24
4.3.1 Desk research	24
4.3.2 Interviews.....	24
4.4 Analysis	24
4.5 Validity, reliability and representativity.....	25
5. Results	26
5.1 Output	26
5.1.1 Scope rules.....	26
5.1.2 BAU-baseline.....	27
5.1.3 Existing regulation and legislation.....	27

5.1.4	<i>Enforcement of the rules</i>	28
5.1.5	<i>Documenting and monitoring</i>	29
5.2	<i>Outcome</i>	30
5.2.1	<i>Position role</i>	30
5.2.2	<i>The government</i>	30
5.2.3	<i>Sector representatives</i>	30
5.2.4	<i>Access to decision-making venues and procedures</i>	31
5.2.5	<i>Exclusive participation benefits for participants</i>	31
5.2.6	<i>Effect per participant</i>	31
5.3	<i>Strategies for addressing the trade-off</i>	35
5.3.1	<i>Rewarding top players</i>	35
5.3.2	<i>Improving the relevance of the program for laggards</i>	35
5.3.2	<i>Reducing the complexity of the program</i>	36
5.3.4	<i>Orchestration</i>	36
5.3.4.1	<i>Directive orchestration</i>	37
5.3.4.2	<i>Facilitative orchestration</i>	38
5.4	<i>The coronacrisis</i>	38
6.	Discussion	40
6.1	<i>Conflicting result in literature versus reality</i>	40
6.2	<i>Contribution to the academic debate</i>	40
6.3	<i>Limitations</i>	41
6.3.1	<i>Internal and External Validity</i>	41
6.3.2	<i>Reliability</i>	41
6.3.3	<i>Representativity</i>	42
6.4	<i>Theoretical implications</i>	42
6.5	<i>Recommendations for AGT 2.0</i>	42
6.5.1	<i>Orchestration as a new additional governance structure</i>	43
6.5.2	<i>Intensifying the AGT</i>	43
6.5.3	<i>Creating more transparency</i>	44
6.5.4	<i>Knowing and Showing</i>	44
7.	Conclusion	45
	References	47

List of figures and tables

Figure 1	Research framework	12
Figure 2	Finding the perfect balance between stringency and uptake	17
Figure 3	Theoretical framework	20
Table 1	Explanation of situations 1,2,3 and, 4 of figure 2	17
Table 2	Operationalization of the conditions and strategies	22
Table 3	Results of the case study on the AGT summarized	32

Abbreviations

AGT	Agreement Sustainable Garments and Textile
GTA	Grounded Theory Approach
IRBC	International Responsible Business Conduct
MSI	Multi-stakeholder Initiative
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
UNGP	United Nations Guiding Principles on Businesses and Human Rights
VEP	Voluntary Environmental Programs

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem description

Voluntary Environmental Programs (VEP) are an increasingly popular policy instrument to foster environmental action within the field of (trans)national environmental governance (van der Heijden, 2020). They can be seen as rule systems, codes, and, agreements that parties voluntarily commit to, and that have the aim to encourage parties to mitigate their unsustainable behavior (Potoski & Prakash, 2013; Lee, Jung & Hwang, 2016). As VEPs are not part of formal laws and legislation, they cannot be enforced by the state. This makes the instrument flexible and less rigid in use, in contrast with traditional, formal legal instruments (van der Heijden, 2020). Because of this, VEPs are prominently used as instruments within sectors such as the fish, food, and apparel industry, to address the complex environmental problems (Potoski & Prakash, 2013; van der Heijden, 2020). Despite the acclaimed advantage of VEPs, scholars are uncertain if this policy instrument can effectively change firms' behavior since some VEPs are even contribute to *less* sustainable behavior (van der Heijden 2012; 2020).

1.2 The rise of the VEP

VEPs became more popular since the 1990s when the traditional form of mandatory regulation became disfavored as a policy instrument (Borck & Coglianese, 2009; Potoski & Prakash, 2013). Traditional regulations such as 'command-and-control' were developed within the environmental governance to dictate the behavior of companies (Borck & Coglianese, 2009). However, this instrument was often criticized for its rigid, costly, and inflexible character (Darnall & Sides, 2008; Potoski & Prakash, 2013). The critiques have led to a regulatory reform that created space for developing alternative policy instruments with a more innovative and cheaper character, such as VEPs (Borck & Coglianese, 2009; Potoski & Prakash, 2013).

VEPs are characterized by the involvement of a wide variety of actors, such as trade organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and international intergovernmental organizations (Potoski & Prakash, 2013). According to Potoski & Prakash (2013), a VEP can, in theory, be effective when the rules are stringent. Stringency indicates the level of strict prescriptions within a program or standard that parties should comply with (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013). Additionally, it is essential that monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are included in the agreement to ensure that the committed companies are complying with the stringent rules..

1.3 The trade-off

As previously mentioned, it remains uncertain whether a VEP can achieve its desired objectives. Moreover, it is unclear which design type of voluntary programs can enhance a substantial change in performance (Koehler, 2007). Previous research by Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) has shown that the commitment of participants to a certain standard or program, also called *uptake*, seems to be inversely related to the stringency of the standard or program. The uptake of the program is referring to the total amount of members that have committed to a program. A stringent standard is associated with rather limited uptake of the target group. A lenient standard could lead to a higher level of participation. However, the problem with stringency is that the overall effectiveness of the program is low for both stringent and lenient programs in combination with the associated uptake (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013). This trade-off is also acknowledged by Borck & Coglianese (2009), who addresses the tension created by competing challenges in a VEP. One challenge is to attract participants to the agreement

(and have them commit to and comply with the rules), another is to set the commitments to a level that would guarantee the VEPs effectiveness.

Despite the advantages of a VEP, there is an inherent tension between stringency and the uptake of a program leading to an ineffective voluntary program. Borck & Coglianesse (2009) emphasized in their study that designing a VEP as effective as possible is seen as a pressing policy question. Nowadays, this is still an unresolved policy problem. Therefore, it is important to analyze how this trade-off barrier can be resolved to create a voluntary program as effective as aimed to be. Before addressing the research objective of this study, a case study will be first presented to illustrate the issue and the inherent tension between stringency and uptake.

1.4 The Dutch Textile Sector

The tension created by the trade-off between stringency and uptake can also be recognized within the Dutch International Responsible Business Conduct (IRBC) Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile (AGT) (SER, 2016). The AGT is a voluntary based multilateral covenant designed for five years, launched by the Dutch government in 2016 (SER, 2016; Duval & Partiti, 2018). The AGT can be seen as a VEP concerning its aim, its stakeholder engagement, and its existing trade-off. The central aim of the AGT is encouraging committed parties to critically analyze their international supply chain, to achieve substantial progress within the supply chains by improving the social working conditions within the textile-producing countries and, to protect the environment and the animal welfare which are experiencing adverse impacts due to the garment production (SER, 2016). This holistic approach of the AGT makes it a unique multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI). The MSI character of the AGT has the advantage to collectively addressing the problems. Joining forces and developing joint activities are part of the core strengths of the AGT.

The AGT consists of the Dutch government, NGOs, trade unions, sector associations, and Dutch textile companies (SER, 2016). Furthermore, the AGT consists of an AGT Secretariat, the Steering Committee, and the Disputes and Complaints Committee (SER, 2016). One of the ambitions of the AGT is to have at least eighty percent of the Dutch clothing market share committed to the program by 2020 (SER, 2016). Companies committed to the AGT are expected to perform a proper due diligence process based on international guidelines by conducting a risk analysis in their supply chain (SER, 2016; SER, 2018a). These guidelines are the United Nations Guiding Principles on Businesses and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment and Footwear Sector Guidelines (SER, 2016). The findings of the due diligence process need to be written down in an annual plan with future targets, and companies are responsible for the monitoring of the effectiveness of their planned actions (SER, 2016). The secretariat is the actor that determines if these annual plans meet the minimum requirements (SER, 2018a).

In November 2019, an independent organization, Avance Impact, completed a mid-term review (MTR) to analyze the overall process and to provide recommendations (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). The main finding was that, within the companies involved, the agreement is effective in raising awareness among companies about the aimed transition towards a more sustainable industry (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Nevertheless, only fifty percent of the Dutch clothing companies support the AGT, which shows that the agreement did not achieve its aimed market share of eighty percent by 2020 (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019).

Furthermore, the declaration received several critical remarks by two independent non-profit organizations SOMO and SKC (Theuws & Overeem, 2016; SKC, 2016). These social organizations are committed to the pursuit of a transparent and fair textile industry (SKC, n.d.; SOMO, n.d.). Until 2015, both organizations have been closely involved throughout the negotiations of the AGT but have chosen not to join the declaration (Theuws & Overeem, 2016; SKC, 2016). The reason for this is that they were disappointed about the AGT because of the lack of concrete goals, the absence of independent audits, and expressed their concerns about the missing role of local stakeholders (SKC, 2016; Theuws & Overeem, 2016). Above that, SOMO also pointed out that the AGT Secretariat is only carrying out random verification of the annual plans submitted by the firms. This might not give a real insight into the situation of the textile industry (Theuws & Overeem, 2016). Nevertheless, despite the fact that both organizations are not committed to the AGT, they closely follow the developments of the declaration (SKC, 2016). In 2019, both SOMO and SKC commented that the transparency of the documents provided by the AGT is very limited (Overeem, 2019). Furthermore, both organizations hold that, despite knowledge of the risks and harmful practices within the textile industry, very limited progress was made by the committed participants (Overeem, 2019). This means that actions should be taken faster based on existing knowledge. In their latest report about the due diligence reporting of individual companies, they concluded that the overall reporting was in accordance with international guidelines (SKC & SOMO, 2020). The report suggested several recommendations, most importantly that: 1) companies should develop more concrete and time-bound plans to add more depth to their due diligence progress, 2) more transparency about their annual plans, and 3) more diligent engagement between companies and relevant stakeholder groups (SKC & SOMO, 2020). Despite the critical remarks on the AGT given, both organizations emphasized that they see an added value in MSIs such as the AGT. Therefore, they have concluded the need for strengthening the MSI.

In sum, by presenting this example, it can be seen that the earlier mentioned tension created by a trade-off between stringency and uptake, partially exists in the AGT. The uptake of the program is lagging behind its aimed targets, and the goals are disputed for not ambitious or concrete enough. Furthermore, the AGT is designed for five years and can only be extended by a unanimous decision from the committed parties in 2021 (SER, 2016). For these reasons, the AGT is a suitable case study to evaluate how the agreement can be improved in its effectiveness by assessing how the tension created by the trade-off between stringency and uptake can be solved. Furthermore, due to the coming decision moment in 2021, the present study has the aim to develop recommendations on how the AGT can be improved in its effectiveness if the declaration will be extended.

1.5 The coronacrisis and the consequence for the international textile supply chains

The coronacrisis is a pandemic that has been rapidly spreading across all nations since December 2019 and causes devastating societal and economic impact (United Nations, 2020). Due to the coronacrisis, developed market economies were put on lockdown, resulting in unprecedented challenges for the textile industries (Martinez-Pardo, Seara, Razvi & Kibbey, 2020). Due to the lockdowns, garment stores needed to close, and the demand in apparel was sinking (Anner, 2020). The (inter)national garment retailers, such as Primark, ASOS, Acardia (Topshop), and C&A, responded to the pandemic by collectively canceling, reducing or postponing completed or nearly completed orders (HRW, 2020; Kelly, 2020; WRC, 2020). As a result of these massive cancellations and lockdowns, thousands of factories in the producing countries have been shut down, which impacts the life of the garment workers who have lost their jobs, disastrously (Kelly, 2020; Anner, 2020). Most retailers have benefitted from Western government bailouts to help them economically. However, these benefits were not shared with those who are feeling the extreme burden, such as the factory workers who are most of the time, not

getting any financial support (Anner, 2020). Reports of the Human Rights Watch (2020) and the director of the Center for Global Workers' Rights (2020) have mentioned that retailers are refusing to take financial responsibility for the already used raw materials or production costs when canceling the orders.

The pandemic has exposed that the international ready-made garment (RMG) supply chains are still embedded with unequal power relations where the retailers have the power to decide to cancel which results in an extreme burden for producing countries (Theuws & Overeem, 2020; Meenakshi, 2020; Afmori et al., 2020). In response to the pandemic, a lot of statements were released about how to act during the pandemic. One of the statements was launched by twelve international organizations (including the AGT) with a call for conducting responsible business in the garment industry (Afmori et al., 2020). Concerning the AGT, committed parties have agreed to the international guidelines that they collectively are going to find solutions for complex problems within their supply chain (SER, 2016). However, since the outbreak of COVID-19 several committed parties of the AGT have decided to cancel their orders (Demkes, 2020). These reactions are in contrast with the declaration of collectively finding solutions for complex problems within the textile industry.

Questions arise about how the garment industry needs to move forward, who is accountable, and, who is taking responsibility for the disastrous impacts in the producing countries. The pandemic has shown that it is urgent to define a responsible approach for the garment industry and to rethink the current unsustainable supply chain and its system (Anner, 2020). The AGT and its holistic approach could contribute to such systematic change if the program can be improved in effectiveness to make a real contribution. Therefore, the aim of this study, to provide recommendations on how the AGT can be enhanced in its effectiveness, has gained more relevance than ever.

2. Conceptual research design

2.1 Research objective

The research objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of VEPs. Moreover, this study also had a specific focus on how to improve the AGT in its effectiveness. For these reasons, this study's scope was to examine how the AGT can be improved in its overall effectiveness by analyzing which conditions contributed to the inherent tension created by the trade-off between stringency and uptake. Next, it was deemed necessary to examine how this trade-off could be solved with specific strategies to enhance a voluntary program's overall impact. Due to the coming decision moment in 2021 about the continuation of the AGT, recommendations were developed. Next, the results of this study were adding upon the scientific debate. Moreover, this study reflected on the idea of whether and when a VEP is effective.

2.2 Research question

In order to achieve the objective of this study, the following research question has been defined:

How can the effectiveness of a Voluntary Environmental Program be improved?

The related sub-questions were as follows:

1. How is the AGT as a voluntary environmental program constructed?
2. How can the trade-off between stringency and uptake in the AGT be addressed?
3. Which recommendations can be made in order to improve the effectiveness of the AGT from 2021 onwards?

2.3 Research framework

Figure 1 is representing the steps which were taken within this study:

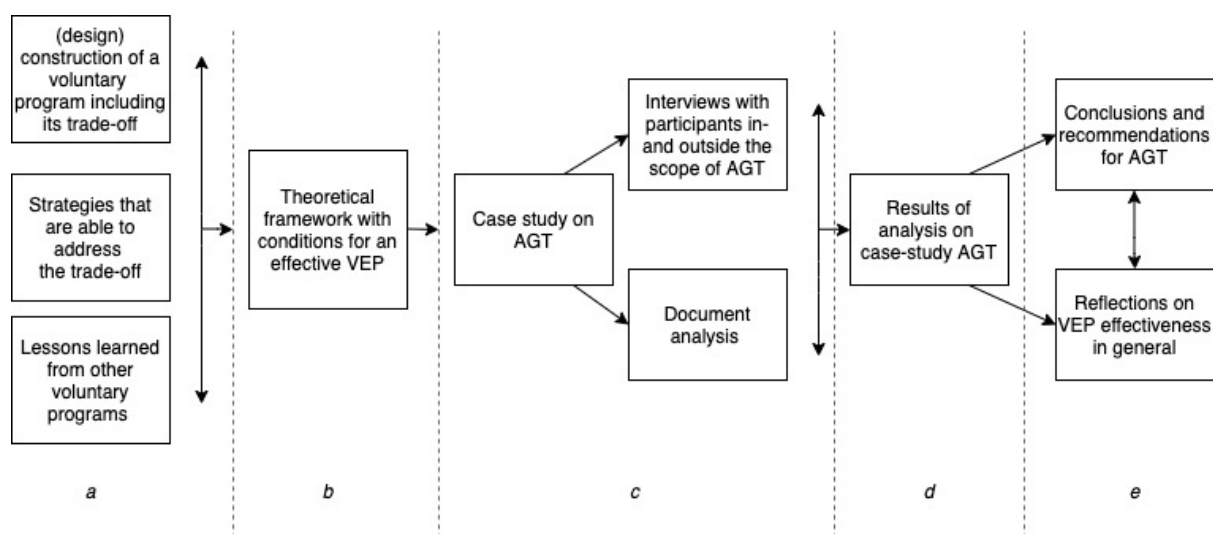


Figure 1: Research framework

First, in block a, conditions contributing to the construction of a voluntary program have been derived from the scientific literature. Further, strategies were evaluated that could be capable of coping with the trade-off between stringency and uptake. Furthermore, lessons learned from other voluntary programs within the field of transnational environmental governance were collected. In block b, the derived conditions were transformed into a theoretical framework and were operationalized into measurable indicators. In block c, a case study on the AGT was conducted with nineteen interviews and document analysis. Further, in block d, the results of the case study were analyzed. In block e, the data analysis results were transformed in recommendations for the AGT from 2021 onwards. And last, the results were also used to reflect on the effectiveness of VEPs in general.

2.4 Relevance

2.4.1 Scientific relevance

Previous studies by Borek & Coglianesi (2009) and by Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) have researched the existing trade-off within the field of VEPs and its complexity of how to solve the tension created by the trade-off between stringency and uptake to achieve an impact. Most studies researched sectors such as fish, soy, and palm oil (Okereke & Stacewicz, 2018). According to the literature review in the scope of this study, research undertaken to investigate the effectiveness of VEPs within the textile industry is limited. Furthermore, most studies have discussed the trade-off between stringency and uptake, but how to address this trade-off is still an unsolved question in previous studies. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the scientific debate by examining how the trade-off is constructed on a detailed level. Furthermore, more importantly, how this trade-off can be solved to improve the effectiveness of a voluntary program.

2.4.2 Societal relevance

The global fashion industry has been accused of having an unsustainable supply chain that could potentially account for 25 percent of the world's carbon budget by 2050 if the industry continues their business as usual (Buchel, Roorda, Schipper & Loorbach, 2018; Butler, 2019). Therefore, there has been an increase in sustainable initiatives to revise the supply chains and to foster the transition towards a more sustainable industry (BCH, SAC & Higg Co, 2020). Moreover, the coronavirus outbreak, which led to a disastrous impact on all levels, has stressed out, even more, the need for a transition towards a sustainable textile industry (OECD, 2020). The AGT aims to contribute to this transition, however, the trade-off between stringency and uptake is currently hindering the progress (SER, 2019). Thus, this study aimed to gain more knowledge on how the AGT can be improved in its effectiveness. By analyzing its trade-off and providing possible strategies that can resolve the tension, recommendations can be made to encourage the AGT to effectively contribute to the aimed transition, which is since the pandemic more urgent than ever.

3. Theory

The earlier discussed trade-off between stringency and uptake within the AGT was the focus of this study. Several scholars defined a voluntary program its effectiveness as a function of two factors: the number of participants and the average effect per participant (Borck & Coglianesi, 2009; Coglianesi & Nash, 2016). The function is easily understandable by breaking down effectiveness in two parts. However, the function does not go in detail where the earlier mentioned trade-off between stringency and uptake is taken place. Without revealing where this inherent tension is created, a specific solution cannot be defined. For these reasons, this study wanted to assess the effectiveness of voluntary programs from a different angle. The following paragraphs give an overview of how levels of effectiveness, the related indicators, and the strategies that are assumed to be suitable to address the trade-offs, are understood within the scope of this study.

3.1 Levels of effectiveness

Effectiveness can be defined as “*the level of success of institutional performance towards some objective that motivated its establishment*” (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013, p. 125). In this line of reasoning, the objective in the field of VEPs can be understood as improving the environmental behavior of committed firms. Previous studies have used the following distinction to analyze effectiveness: output, outcome, and impact (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; Jastram & Klingenberg, 2018). This classification system will be used as a starting point to develop a theoretical framework.

The level **output** is referring to the program characteristics such as norms and standards (Jastram & Klingenberg, 2018). The second level **outcome** can be defined as the measurable behavioral changes caused by the output level of the committed parties. The final stage is **impact**, which is the actual improvement in the defined problem area. The levels of outcome and impact are more difficult to measure in comparison to output (Szulecki, Pattberg & Biermann, 2011). The reason behind this is that it is difficult to reveal which behavioral changes are the direct result of the VEP (Borck & Coglianesi, 2009). Therefore, this study has only focused on assessing a voluntary program its output and has observed the potential results of the level outcome. The level impact was, however, not addressed within this study.

3.2 Output

The level output is referring to the program and its characteristics. The main aspect of this level is **stringency**, which refers to the extent to which the program or standard provides ambitious, strict, and detailed prescriptions that the committed parties must follow and implement (Kalfagianni & Fuchs, 2011; Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; van der Heijden, 2020). Stringency can be understood as well-defined rules for environmental and/or social conduct (Kalfagianni & Fuchs, 2011). Several conditions come under stringency, and these are clustered into the following categories *design features* and *quality of audit mechanisms*. These conditions can be seen as indications of stringency.

3.2.1 Design features

The first condition of the category design features is called the **scope rules** within a program (Darnall & Sides, 2008). According to Hall & Hysing (2019), this entails that all participants must have a common understanding of what the issues are that should be dealt with. The participants should be informed on what plans and actions are required to achieve the desired goals. It is assumed by Darnall

& Sides (2008) that ambitious and challenging goals may foster environmental performance. Furthermore, van der Heijden (2020) holds that it is also important to construct clear targets by making **use of existing regulation and legislation**. Using these could serve as a baseline when developing quantifiable targets. Koehler (2007) adds to this that evaluating the **business as usual** (BAU) scenario per firm would be useful as a comparative baseline to address if changes per participant are made based on their current performance. In other words, the BAU would represent the current status quo of a firm before committing to a voluntary program. I related this condition to stringency because it can be seen as a precondition for developing clear and tailor-made targets.

3.2.2 *Quality of the audit mechanism*

Van der Heijden (2020) holds that the **enforcement of the program rules** is an important condition to ensure that parties comply with the designed rules. In line with reasoning, Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) have mentioned in their study that monitoring should be conducted by program administrators or by an external third-party, to assess if the participants are complying with the designed rules. Adding upon this, Darnall & Sides (2008) and van der Heijden (2020) mentioned that only relying on self-enforcement by the participants is not sufficient and could lead to greenwashing or free riders. Furthermore, sanctions in terms of fines or penalties could potentially contribute to the enforcement of the program rules when given by non-compliant behavior (Koehler, 2007; Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; van der Heijden, 2020). Another condition is documenting the **monitoring (process)**. The study of Darnall & Sides (2008) has shown that when the monitoring process is published in the public domain that this may increase the performance of the participants. It is assumed that strong audit mechanisms are likely to provide incentives for encouraging firms to comply with the designed rules.

3.3 *Outcome*

The second level, outcome, refers to the change in participants' behavior caused by a governance initiative (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; Jastram & Klingenberg, 2018). The main indication of this level is the **program uptake**. Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) mentioned in their study that the uptake could be assessed based on membership type and size. This means that different sizes of companies need to be attracted to the program to create a relevant market share. Furthermore, these authors also explained that when a program includes the rule-takers, which are assumed as the highest polluters, it may lead to a substantial environmental improvement (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013). Besides the committed enterprises, van der Heijden (2020) described in his study that a variety of *actors involved* within a program contributes to the uptake and is therefore considered the next category.

3.3.1 *Actors involved*

As previously described by Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) and van der Heijden (2020), several actors' involvement is assumed to positively influence the change in behavior of the committed parties. Van der Heijden (2020) holds that it is important to define each actor's **position role**, including its responsibilities. Hall & Hysing (2019) reasoned that a homogeneous group of actors sharing the same visions is more likely to act in a collectively way than a heterogeneous group of actors. However, a voluntary program is mainly involved with different actors in various roles, so the question arises if collective action can be achieved with a heterogeneous group of actors. Nevertheless, the study of Hall & Hysing (2019) also emphasized the importance of including a wide variety of (critical) actors within the program. They mentioned that a heterogeneous group will broaden the shared perspectives and may lead to an inspiring dialogue between all participants.

Further, according to van der Heijden (2020), is it important to include the **government** within a program. A key example used by van der Heijden (2020) to support this point is that the involvement of the government may provide legitimacy to the program. The study of Lee et al. (2016) adds upon this that the government could act as a neutral actor to enhance the collaboration between the different actors. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2016) also explained that a government-supervised program is more successful in stimulating companies to support the program than a program that excludes the government. Next, the studies of Fransen (2012) and van der Heijden (2020) showed the importance of involving **sector representatives** within a program. They discussed that despite the government's important role, the government might lack in providing specific knowledge about the objective. Therefore, the two studies discussed that sector related actors such as NGOs could fulfill this lack of knowledge by providing their expertise to the program (Fransen, 2012; van der Heijden, 2020). Further, Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) and Hall & Hysing (2019) mentioned in their studies that committed parties (e.g. state actors, enterprises, and sector representatives) should be allowed to have open **access to decision-making venues and procedures**. The reasons given for this are that the group of actors are the ones that will be affected by the decisions made. Next, Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) holds that providing access to such participants will form the basis for effective governance in terms that it increases the program's accountability and legitimacy. And last, access to decision-making venues may lead to higher acceptance and compliance with the rules. Another condition from the category actors involved is **exclusive participation benefits**. Borck & Coglianese (2009) described in their study that providing exclusive participation benefits will encourage the committed firms to fully support the program. Hall & Hysing (2019) and van der Heijden (2020) gave examples of such benefits such as providing subsidies to firms or providing them exclusive access to information. Van der Heijden (2020) holds that a program with the inclusions of exclusive participation benefits will positively stimulate the performance of the program.

The study of Fransen (2012) concluded that when a program aims to include a wide variety of diverse actors, it can be considered more legitimate. However, the study of Hall & Hysing (2019) demonstrated that there are case studies with negative experiences with the inclusion of actors such as NGOs and labor unions. According to Hall & Hysing (2019), the explanation for these negative experiences was due to the overruling capacity of these actors within the dialogue. From these results, it is important to overcome this problem by creating a balanced dialogue between all participants, by equally integrating the different perspectives and motives.

3.3.2 Effect per participant

Another condition that is contributing to the outcome, is **effect per participant** (Borck & Coglianese, 2009). Borck & Coglianese (2009) and Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) referred this condition to the level of compliance of the parties with the provided rules, which is required to achieve the desired behavioral change. Borck & Coglianese (2009) holds, however, that this condition is difficult to measure within a study since it is challenging to define which observed changes are the direct result of a voluntary program. Also, it might be difficult to assess the level of progress since reports are potentially confidential and not shared in public.

3.4 Strategies for addressing the trade-off

The previous paragraphs have discussed the construction of voluntary programs, and these results delivered insight into the trade-off between stringency and uptake and its underlying conditions. The

next step within this study was to evaluate potential strategies that were considered adequate to address the trade-off between stringency and uptake. Prakash & Potoski (2007) hold that the challenge of voluntary programs lies in achieving a balance between, on the one hand, designing a stringent program and on the other hand, attracting enough participants to achieve a high uptake. To illustrate this, the following illustrative figure and table have been created (see figure 2 and table 1):

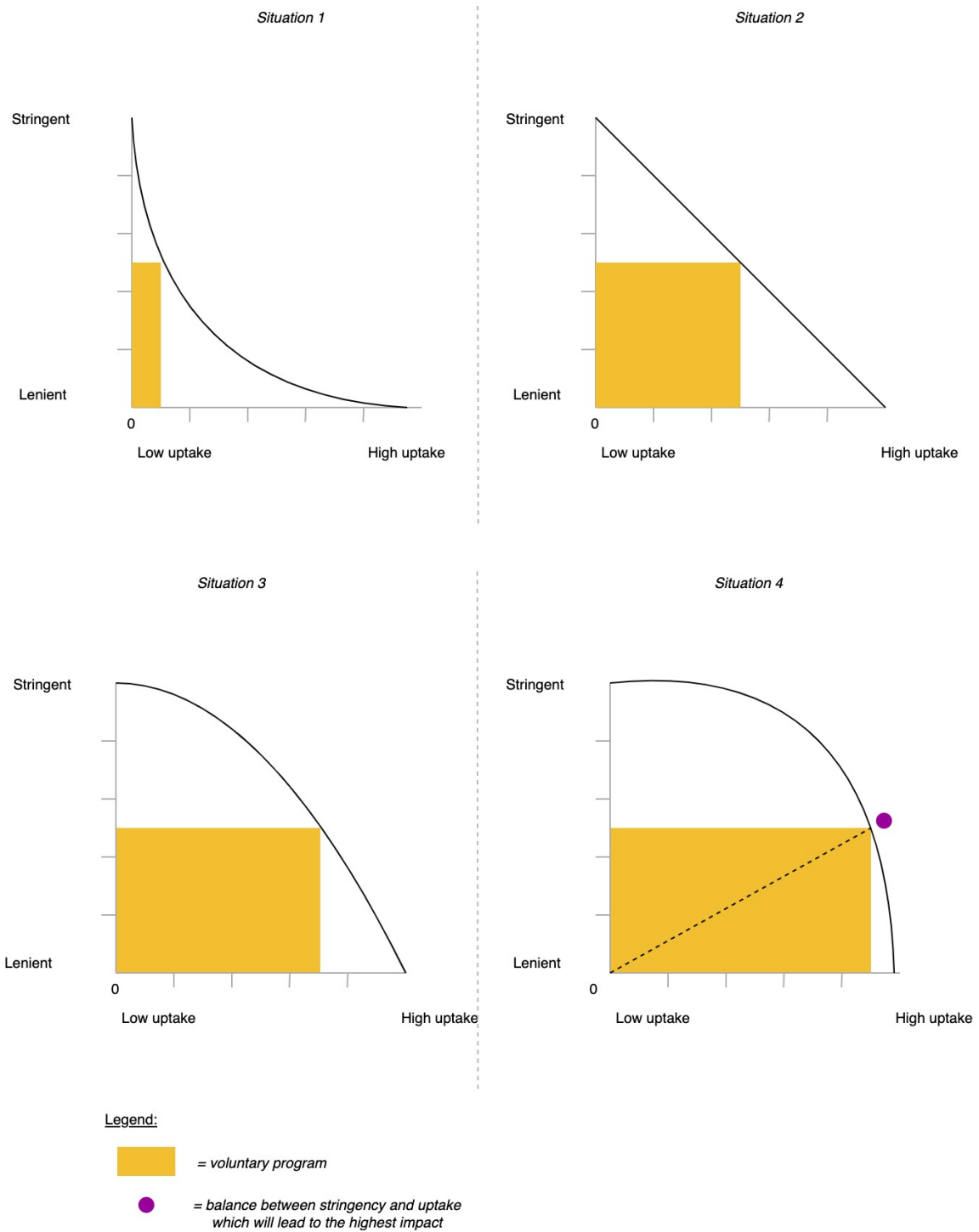


Figure 2: the illustrative figure is presenting the challenge of finding the perfect balance between stringency and uptake to achieve the highest possible impact. The explanation of this figure can be found in table 1.

Table 1: An explanation of situations 1,2,3 and, 4 of figure 2

Situation	Explanation
1	This situation shows that a stringent program will not attract not enough participants. This is presenting the earlier mentioned trade-off where a stringent program results in low uptake. Without implementing strategies to solve this trade-off, the agreement will not achieve its desired result.
2	This situation shows a linear curve where stringency is proportionate to uptake. This results in that more participants are willing to join the program. This will increase the impact of the program.
3	In situation 3, higher uptake of the program is visible in comparison to situation 2. This can be the result of a program that offers, for example, certain incentives to participants. Due to these incentives, participants are more willing to join the program. This will result in a higher overall impact.
4	The last situation presents the ideal situation, where situation 3 is optimized. Situation 4 shows a certain level of stringency in combination with a high number of participants that are joining the program. This situation can be achieved when the trade-off (of situation 1) is solved. This will lead to the highest impact.

Figure 2 and Table 1 show that it is essential to assess how situation 4 can be achieved by implementing a strategy to solve the trade-off. Previous studies from Cashore (2010) and Barry et al. (2012) have highlighted how similar situations such as situation four can be achieved. These authors have conducted extensive research on voluntary standards within the field of commodities. Furthermore, they have discussed the same inherent tension between developing stringent standards and attracting enough enterprises. As mentioned before, Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013) emphasized that a stringent program is associated with rather limited uptake, and a lenient standard is associated with higher uptake of participants. However, in both forms, the overall impact remains low. Cashore (2010) addresses the same conundrum, and he has identified strategies to address this conundrum with two main approaches: the **direct and the indirect approach**. In short, Cashore (2010) holds that the direct approach is about influencing participants in- and outside the scope of the program. Next, the indirect approach is about creating synergies between the committed participants (Cashore, 2010). The direct and indirect approaches have underlying strategies and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.4.1 Direct approach to solve the trade-off

The direct approach is about influencing participants in- and outside the scope of the program and consists of several strategies: rewarding top players, improving the relevance for laggards and, reducing the complexity of the program.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of **rewarding top participants**, who are performing as desired by the program (Koehler, 2007; Barry et al. 2010; Cashore, 2010; van der Heijden, 2020). Koehler (2007) and Cashore (2010) both assumed that rewarding the best environmental performers, instead of punishing the worst performers, could have a positive effect on other companies by creating a race to the top.

Next, the implementation of a tier-system of sustainability within a voluntary program has been pointed out by Bush, Toonen, Oosterveer & Mol (2013) as effective to **improve the relevance for laggards** that are reluctant to sign the declaration. They mentioned that such a tier-system should entail multiple ‘degrees’ of sustainability targets representing different levels of performance (Bush et al. 2013). This differentiation of levels could stimulate laggards, who are currently unable to achieve the highest performance level, towards a higher environmental performance by introducing several performance levels. So, the differentiation of targets could potentially influence the behavior of the committed parties. Furthermore, van der Heijden (2020) holds that “*a one-size-fits-all program will not yield the desired results in attracting participants*” (p. 59). Therefore, this strategy could have a positive influence on achieving a higher performance level and a higher uptake of a program.

The next strategy pointed out by van der Heijden (2020), is aimed at **reducing the complexity of the program**. This involves the provision of clear communication amongst the committed parties about the program’s targets and ambitions. Van der Heijden (2020) explained in his study that this strategy could also influence actors outside the scope of a program by building a strong diffusion network. This network entails strong communication about an innovation (e.g. program) that is essential to its diffusion. To build a strong diffusion network, aspects as frequency, communication channel, the size and the identity (homogeneous or heterogeneous) of the prospective actors, and the involvement by a government agency are important to incorporate (van der Heijden, 2020). According to van der Heijden (2020), the stronger this network is, the more likely an innovation will achieve its goal in providing clarity and attracting participants. A small pool of homogenous committed parties and prospective actors are more likely to influence in comparison to a heterogeneous group of actors. However, since a VEP is more likely to contain a heterogeneous group of actors, it is important to target these different types of actors by using different communication strategies (van der Heijden, 2020). A dense diffusion network is important for the program to get accepted by the prospective actors.

3.4.2 Indirect approach to solve the trade-off

Regarding the indirect approach, Lister (2015) explained this approach by pointing out the importance of creating synergies between the committed parties which is considered to positively influence the behavior of the participants. Lister (2015) holds that due to the heterogeneity character of a voluntary program, it is essential to coordinate various visions. A strategy that is considered by several studies to be adequate to enhance collaboration is orchestration (Hale & Roger, 2014; Lister, Poulsen & Ponte, 2015; Abbott, 2017). Abbot & Snidal (2009) hold that this soft governance mode is designed to support, empower, and steer the behavior of committed participants within a voluntary initiative to enhance their impact on the desired result. Above that, according to Lister (2015) and Abbott (2017), an orchestrator needs to have several capabilities such as legitimacy to become accepted as a leader. Furthermore, they also mentioned that an orchestrator also needs to have financial and technical resources to steer the group of like-minded actors towards a new form of behavior (Lister, 2015; Abbott, 2017). Abbott (2017) claimed that it is deemed necessary that an orchestrator has a strong relationship with the actors. The role of an orchestrator is typically fulfilled by an international organization or a government (Lister et al., 2015). Collaboration within orchestration is essential and “*allows actors to pursue complementary goals and combine complementary competencies*” (Abbott & Snidal, 2007, p. 526).

According to Abbott & Snidal (2009), there are there two types of orchestration: directive and facilitative orchestration. **Directive orchestration** entails that an orchestrator tries to incorporate (private) voluntary initiatives within its regulatory frameworks to steer the participants in desired directions (Abbott & Snidal, 2009; Lister et al., 2015). The second type, **facilitative orchestration**, is

providing the committed participants with financial or technical support (Abbott & Snidal, 2009; Lister et al., 2015).

To create a clear overview of all derived indicators and strategies, the following theoretical framework (figure 3) has been developed:

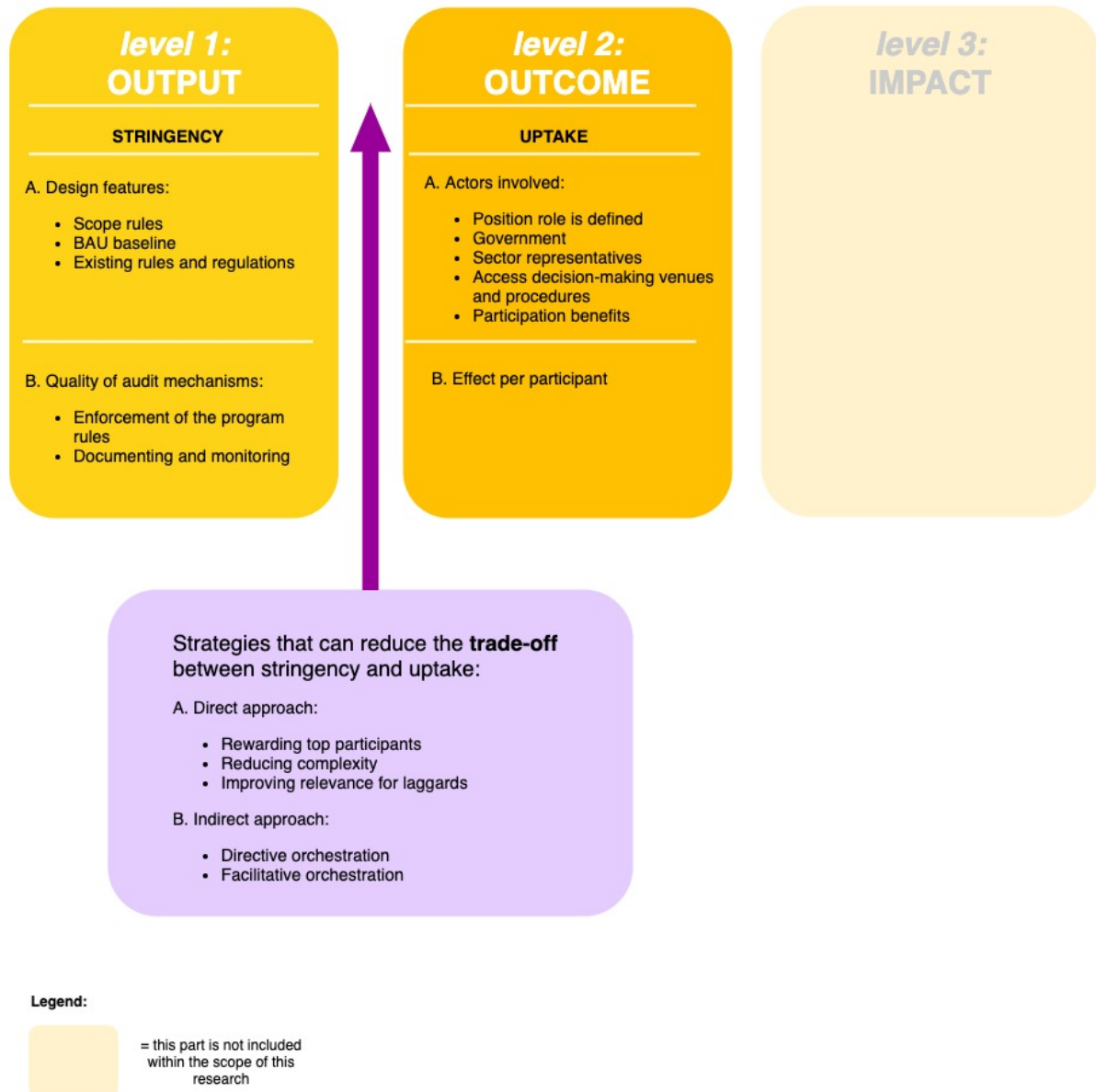


Figure 3: The theoretical framework is representing the three levels of effectiveness as a causal chain. The last level impact is not included within the scope of this research. The purple arrow is indicating the tension between stringency and uptake. Furthermore, the purple box indicates the strategies that are assumed to be capable of addressing the trade-off.

4. Methods

The research strategy of this study was qualitative of nature with mixed methods consisting of desk research and one single case study that was analyzed with the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA). This combination of strategies was assumed to be useful for gaining a holistic perspective on voluntary agreements and to develop recommendations for the specific case study¹. The first section of this chapter will outline the sample case selection. After that, an overview will be given of the operationalization of the indicators. Within the third section, the data collection will be explained. Next, the data collection will be explained, and in the last section, the research design will be discussed in terms of validity, reliability, and representativity.

4.1 Sample case selection

This study aimed to understand the effectiveness of voluntary programs by conducting a specific single case study. As earlier explained, in the introduction, I have selected the AGT as the case study since it is the perfect vehicle of a voluntary program that suffers from the existing trade-off between stringency and uptake. The uptake of the declaration is lagging behind its aimed targets, and the goals are disputed as being not ambitious or concrete enough. Due to the pandemic, it became evident that there is an urgent need for responsible business approaches such as the AGT. Therefore, the declaration is examined in its trade-off, and strategies are assessed to find out how the AGT can be improved in its effectiveness to contribute successfully towards a transition to more sustainable textile industry.

4.2 Operationalization of the conditions

In the theory chapter, a theoretical framework (see figure 3) was established with conditions that were contributing to the trade-off and strategies that were considered adequate to address the trade-off. I have operationalized these conditions and strategies into measurable indicators (see table 2 on the following pages). Furthermore, the table contains a scale to define how the AGT is currently performing. The operationalization and the scale were mainly based on the articles of Kalfagianni & Pattberg (2013), van der Heijden (2020) and, Abbott & Snidal (2009).

¹ Initially, a third research strategy, conducting surveys, was added to the mixed methods. However, due to the coronacrisis, I have decided to focus only on desk research and increase the interview sample.

Table 2: Operationalization of the conditions and strategies. The level impact was not included within the scope of this research.

Aspect	Condition	Indicators	Scaling
<i>Stringency (Output)</i>	Design features	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Scope rules: The program is ambitious and has a clear problem definition, well-defined objectives, has defined which detailed actions should be taken. The participants are informed about these scope roles to create a common understanding. 2. BAU baseline: The program includes an individual BAU-scenario per firm which serves as a baseline. Based on this baseline, tailor-made targets will be developed. 3. Existing regulation and legislation: The program makes use of the existence of formal (inter)national rules and legislation within the field of the program. 	<p>Very stringent = all five indicators are fulfilled.</p> <p>Stringent = four indicators are fulfilled, with (1) as a requirement.</p> <p>neutral = three indicators are fulfilled, with (1) as a requirement.</p>
	Quality of the audit mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Enforcement of rules: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The program has a program administrator or a third-party auditor to monitor the progress of the program. Relying on self-monitoring alone is not sufficient. b. The program obligates the participants to comply 100% with the program. c. Fines and/or sanctions (excluding a participant from the program) needs to be given when companies are showing non-compliant behavior. 5. Documenting monitoring: The monitoring process and results should be documented and, they should be made publicly available, to create transparency. 	<p>Lenient = two or three indicators are fulfilled.</p> <p>Very lenient = one or none indicators are fulfilled.</p>
<i>Uptake (outcome)</i>	Actors involved	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Position role: The program has clearly defined the heterogeneous group of actors and related responsibilities. 2. Government: The program includes the government as a neutral actor to enhance collaboration between the actors. 3. Sector representatives: The program is involved with sector-related stakeholders, such as labor unions, trade organizations, and civil society organizations. They provide expert knowledge in the dialogue. 4. Access to decision-making venues and procedures: The program has open access to decision-making venues and procedures for committed participants (i.e. representatives of enterprises, state actors and, sector representatives). The program should create a balanced dialogue between the participants. 5. Exclusive participation benefits for participants: The program offers exclusive benefits to the firms in terms of financial support when implementing the rules and/or exclusive access to knowledge sharing with experts. 	<p>Very inclusive = all five indicators are fulfilled.</p> <p>Inclusive = four indicators are fulfilled.</p> <p>Neutral = two or three indicators are fulfilled.</p> <p>Non-inclusive = one indicator fulfilled</p>
	<i>Effect per participant</i>	The participant has been able to change it is behavior aligned with the targets and actions. This condition can within the scope of this research, only be measured with information retrieved from conducted interviews.	Due to confidential information, only general claims about the effect per participant can be made

Table 2: The operationalization of the conditions. The level impact was not included within the scope of this research.

<i>Conditions for addressing the trade-off</i>		
Approaches	Strategies	Indicators
Direct approach	Rewarding top players	The program rewards top participants by publishing their best practices to create a race to the top.
	Improving the relevance of the program for laggards	The program is introducing a tier-system of sustainability with several performance levels, which could stimulate the laggards by aiming for achieving one of the developed performance levels. Furthermore, by providing differentiation of levels it could attract prospective participants.
	Reducing the complexity of the program	The program provides clear communication about the program content, including the targets so that it is easily understandable for all committed parties. The program provides support (support via NGOs/branch organizations which are the specific knowledge providers) to the participants when needed e.g. support in defining the risk analysis and with the due diligence practices. Furthermore, the program has a dense diffusion network to attract new participants by using different strategies to communicate about the voluntary program.
Indirect approach	Orchestration: the government or another independent organization is fulfilling the role of the orchestrator within the AGT. The orchestrator is increasing the collaboration between the various actors and is creating new synergies which are positively influencing the performance of the participants.	Directive orchestration: the orchestrator has the goal to incorporate the voluntary initiative within its regulatory framework after 2021.
		Facilitative orchestration: the orchestrator provides financial (e.g. subsidies), and/ or technical supports to the committed parties.

4.3 Data collection

I have collected data through a combination of desk research and interviews with relevant actors in- and outside the scope of the agreement.

4.3.1 Desk research

At first, I have conducted desk research reviewing grey literature on the AGT. This entailed a document analysis of over 130 documents, including official policy documents, the MTR, annual reports, statements, and the online newsletter, all provided by the AGT. Additionally, I also have analyzed documents that are aligned to the OECD guidelines and joint statements. I have considered this form of analysis as necessary to get an in-depth insight into the AGT.

4.3.2 Interviews

In a second step, I have conducted interviews to get additional insights into the AGT besides the document analysis. I have used the theoretical framework and desk research results as the basis for developing semi-structured interviews. This was especially useful for the condition ‘effect per participant’, I was not able to assess this condition based on desk research. This was because the objectives that the committed parties are required to submit, to the AGT secretariat, are confidential and not publicly available. I have developed and transcribed the interviews in Dutch, and I have translated these results in English. The questions that I had developed were not standardized because some questions were replaced during the process when an interview had revealed new relevant information. I found this strategy highly useful since I have conducted the interviews during the pandemic, which had allowed me to update the set of questions to the new circumstances.

The sample selection contained a total of nineteen interviews. From this total number, I have conducted twelve interviews with enterprises committed to the AGT, which varied in size of businesses, type of product, sourcing countries, and time of signing the declaration. Further, I have conducted interviews with the AGT Secretariat, actors that were part of the Steering Group, including three NGOs such as Four Paws and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, I have interviewed two other non-committed stakeholders, SOMO, and another Dutch Civil Society Organisation working on human rights in the garment sector. The results of the interviews were anonymously used in this study.

Between March 2020 and May 2020, I have conducted the interviews online via the software Zoom, Skype, and by phone. Before starting the interview, I informed every participant about the aim of the study, about the anonymization of information, and I asked for verbal consent, including the recording of the interview. The majority of the interviews had a duration of 35-50 minutes, with one exception of twenty minutes and one exception of an interview that was filled in by e-mail by a participant. The duration depended on the time available of the respondent. If the interview had a duration of twenty minutes, then only the most essential questions were asked.

4.4 Analysis

After finishing the collected data, I have used two coding stages of the GTA to analyze the qualitative data (Bryman, 2012). This approach was “*designed to develop a well-integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study*” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990,

p.5). In line with this reasoning, I have considered the earlier mentioned trade-off as the central phenomenon. The GTA allowed me to discover relevant conditions.

When starting the data analysis, I have coded all collected data in the software program NVivo, which is a fundamental process within the GTA (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I have followed the stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Bryman, 2012). The first coding phase was a process of breaking down the conducted data and transforming these into categories (Bryman, 2012). Since I had already developed a theoretical framework, I tweaked the first open coding phase by using the framework and its conditions as the basis for the codes. Within the second coding phase, I have examined relationships and patterns between the codes to discover which codes were related to each other. Furthermore, within the phase of selective coding, I have created a storyline by discovering which codes could be considered as core codes (Bryman, 2012).

4.5 Validity, reliability and representativity

According to Yin (2014), there are several criteria adequate to assess the quality of the chosen case study design. The first test is about internal validity, which entails if a study has chosen the correct data-collection and data analysis to establish and assess a causal relationship (Yin, 2014). The aim of this study can be seen as a causal mechanism where it is necessary to define which indicators influence the level of effectiveness. The chosen data collection allowed me to examine which indicators could be seen as the independent variables influencing the dependent variable, namely the effectiveness of a program. Next, the external validity of this study entails whether results are generalizable to other settings or fields (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014). I have conducted one case study, which might decrease the generalizability of the results. Nevertheless, I have chosen for in-depth research rather than breadth research to get a full understanding of the case. The reliability of this study entails whether the data collection procedures and analytic procedures are repeatable, and if this will yield the same results (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014) is the aim of this test to minimize biases within a study. With the GTA, I have tried to develop within objective manner codes and categories based on the data collection. These were in line with the scientific literature to overcome the subjectivity of the researcher. Furthermore, the representativity concerning the sample selection of the interviews is assumed to be adequate since it represents the MSI character of the AGT.

5. Results

The results of this study are based on the case study AGT. The case study was assessed to answer the first two sub-questions about the construction of voluntary programs and, under which conditions the existing trade-off could be addressed. The outline of this section follows the theoretical framework structure, starting with the level output, followed by the level outcome. Moreover, last, direct and indirect strategies are evaluated. Because of the complexity of the results, each section will start with a summary of the indicator, followed by the results. The results are summarized in Table 3.

5.1 Output

The first level, output, was conceptualized as the condition stringency. Previous studies have defined stringency as the extent to which the program provided ambitious, strict and detailed prescriptions that the committed parties must follow and implement (Kalfagianni & Fuchs, 2011; Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; van der Heijden, 2020). I have operationalized stringency in five indicators that will be explained within the following sections.

5.1.1 Scope rules

The first indicator that I have used to evaluate the level of stringency was the nature of the program's *scope rules*. This indicator was evaluated with the following points: if the program is ambitious, has a clear problem definition, well-defined objectives, and if the program has defined which detailed actions should be taken. The participants should be informed about these scope rules to create a common understanding.

The AGT's official policy document is providing a clear problem definition and well-defined objectives (SER, 2016). Nevertheless, the interviews' results have shown that there is a discrepancy between the respondents in how they experience the level of ambitiousness, the prescribed actions, and how well-informed they were about the scope rules. In more detail, the AGT has defined an ambition to make substantial progress for people, animal welfare, and the environment since these subjects experience adverse impacts due to the textile production (SER, 2016). Furthermore, the AGT has also set an ambitious goal to achieve an uptake of eighty percent of the market share in 2020 (SER, 2016). Some² respondents stated that the AGT Secretariat had a too determined focus at the start of the declaration to achieve this market share goal. Because of that, the interviewees described that the focus of informing the participants about the scope rules was given less attention. Next, the interview results demonstrated that all respondents acknowledged the importance of the agreement and the ambition of making a real impact within the field. However, the majority of the respondents mentioned that achieving this goal within five years was overambitious.

When evaluating the program's objectives, the declaration has defined which objectives are obligated for enterprises to deliver every year during their due diligence process, such as an action plan (SER, 2018b). The nine themes³, defined by the sector, are a fundamental premise within the AGT and committed enterprises are expected to incorporate these themes within their due diligence policy,

² Within this study, percentages will not be presented about the respondent's answers since the denominator varies in each interview due to a changing set of questions.

³ The nine themes of the AGT: discrimination and gender, child labor, forced labor, freedom of association, a living wage, safety and health in the workplace, water pollution and use of chemicals, water, and energy and, animal welfare.

including developing concrete goals and actions (SER, 2016). If a company is not able to address all the nine themes, then this company is allowed to prioritize the themes (SER, 2016; SER, 2018b). The AGT guides prioritization by offering an approach to the themes and a step-by-step plan (SER, 2016). The interview results showed that all respondents were positive about the holistic approach of the AGT. Nevertheless, the respondents mentioned that the emphasis lies on social themes. Regarding the obligated objectives, the majority of the respondents mentioned that these were considered as a push mechanism to improve their behavior. Nonetheless, the objectives are by some respondents experienced as an administrative burden. Moreover, several respondents explained that there was a lack of understanding among participants on what the actual commitment of the objectives entailed, including the detailed actions that should be taken by the firms. From the official policy document, it becomes clear that the respondents are self-responsible to identify SMART formulated goals based on their prioritization (SER, 2016). However, the findings of the interviews have emphasized that there is a need for more guidance on these tasks besides the already provided support. Regarding the communication, the participants were informed about the procedures of the AGT during an intake interview with the AGT Secretariat (SER, 2018b). Regardless of this intake, the interview results have shown that companies with less experience with doing responsible business, still missed some detailed instructions about transforming the objectives into a new business ideology.

5.1.2 BAU-baseline

The second indicator I used to evaluate the level of stringency within the AGT was the use of business as usual (BAU). The operationalization of this indicator was that a program should include an individual BAU-scenario per firm, which serves as a baseline. Based on this baseline, tailor-made targets will be developed.

From the official policy documents, it becomes clear that the intake interview of AGT has a dual purpose: explaining the declaration and its procedures and, gaining knowledge about the current status of the enterprise and its operation process (SER, 2016). The results of the intake are used by the AGT Secretariat to make an initial estimation about the potential risks of a firm within their due diligence (SER, 2016). This initial estimation is in line with the idea of developing a BAU-scenario. Besides this estimation, the firms are also self-responsible to develop their qualitative and quantifiable objectives. From the interviews, it became clear that some firms developed their baseline at the start of the declaration, which helped them to define future targets. However, other respondents stated that they were struggling to develop such a baseline, and subsequently design future targets. The reason for that is that these struggling respondents indicated to be less experienced within the field of responsible business and with performing due diligence. They could, therefore, use guidance when defining the tailor-made targets.

5.1.3 Existing regulation and legislation

The third indicator that was used to evaluate the level of stringency was about existing regulation and legislation. I assessed if the program makes use of the existence of formal (inter)national rules and legislation within the field of the program.

Concerning this indicator, from the document analysis, it became evident that the AGT and its assessment criteria are based upon several international guidelines (SER, 2016a; SER, 2018b). Besides these international guidelines, the AGT added even an extra theme about animal welfare within their approach since this was not explicitly included within the international guidelines. The committed

companies are obligated to develop their due diligence process by following the international guidelines (SER, 2018b). All respondents considered the international guidelines as an adequate framework and backbone to align their practices with.

5.1.4 Enforcement of the rules

I have evaluated the fourth indicator in terms of the enforcement of rules, i.e. its inclusion of a program administrator or third-party auditor, to what extent a program obligates participants' full compliance and, whether fines and/or sanctions are in place within a program in case firms do not comply with the program rules. The AGT appeared to be comprehensive at first sight with the inclusion of a program administrator, with minimum requirements of the compliance level and the existence of fines and sanctions mechanism such as a Complaints and Dispute Committee. Nevertheless, when going into detail, deficiencies were found.

Within the AGT, the secretariat fulfills the role of program administrator (SER, 2016). The secretariat has a dual role in monitoring the process and as an assessor (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Furthermore, the secretariat is also providing firm guidance by developing their action plans (SER, 2019). The secretariat consists of several account managers, and every firm got one account manager assigned that can support them. Concerning the program administrator, the interview results have shown that the AGT Secretariat is seen as the key figure within the declaration. The majority of the interviewees were positive about the relationship they have established with their account manager. Nevertheless, the respondents disagreed about the level of expertise among the account managers. While several respondents considered the level of expertise within the AGT Secretariat as high enough to make an adequate assessment, other respondents expressed their serious concerns about the lack of expert knowledge of some account managers on how the textile industry operates in the real world. Another critique that was given was that some firms got multiple account managers assigned over time, which was hindering building a long-term relationship. Other results of the interviews have shown that, on the one hand, the respondents were positive about the dual role of the AGT and experienced this as an added value. But on the other hand, other respondents questioned this dual role.

Looking at the level of compliance, from the official declaration, it becomes clear that the AGT does not require full compliance of the participants (SER, 2018c). The participants are only obligated to achieve a minimum score every year. Besides the minimum requirements of complying with the program, I also considered it important to assess *how* the assessment by the AGT Secretariat was conducted. Therefore, I have also evaluated the existing assessment framework. The AGT Secretariat makes use of one assessment framework applied to all participants to monitor the process (SER, 2018c). To estimate the level of compliance of the committed firms, the AGT Secretariat assesses the submitted objectives. The results are treated in strict confidence. Nevertheless, the secretariat communicates about the progress in an aggregated form. The majority of the respondents were positive framework, which was used as a starting point to develop a plan. Nevertheless, the results of the interviews have shown that there is no clear consensus whether 'yardstick for all companies' (e.g. the assessment framework) is a positive or negative aspect of the AGT. Several respondents were positive about the yardstick since it makes the AGT accessible for all. Although, other respondents expressed their serious concerns with the assessment framework. They mentioned that due to the involvement of a high variety of firms, it is considered unfair to assess these companies by the same assessment framework. Some respondents added that they also experienced inconsistency during the assessment by the program administrators, which had led to different outcomes.

When evaluating the developed fines and/or sanctions, it becomes clear that when a firm is showing non-compliant behavior, sanctions in terms of a reduction of points, can be given, as well as an extension of the period for due diligence (SER, 2018b; SER, 2018c). If a company is not able to submit its objectives within the given extension, the Steering Committee will discuss the case and if necessary, the case can be referred to the Complaints and Dispute Committee (SER, 2018c). The Complaints and Dispute Committee is an independent committee where parties (including the disadvantaged parties) can submit a dispute or a complaint about a firm or party if they are not showing compliant behavior (SER, 2019a). The results of the interviews have shown that this latter committee is highly valued by the respondents since it creates a level playing field for all participants. Nevertheless, multiple respondents have mentioned that both committees are not using their full potential and they are not strict enough. Especially the Complaints and Dispute Committee has been limited used (SER, 2020).

5.1.5 Documenting and monitoring

The last indicator to assess the level of stringency was the indicator documenting and monitoring. I have evaluated this indicator by looking if the program is monitoring the process and if these results are documented. Above that, I have assessed to what extent these results are made publicly available to create transparency.

From the official policy document, it became clear that documentation is provided on two levels: on policy and at a company level. First, looking at the policy level, the secretariat treats the individual firms' monitoring process and results in strict confidence and is not shared publicly (SER, 2016). As previously mentioned, the secretariat reports on the progress of the companies in an aggregated form (SER, 2016; SER, 2018a; SER, 2018d). Regarding the latest released annual plan of 2019, the AGT was positive about the progress made so far and has presented the results with figures and diagrams (SER, 2020). Nevertheless, the way the AGT is communicating about the progress is not yielding any clarity since it remains unclear what scales and information the figures are based on.

Another finding was that some of my interviewees disagreed with the decision that the results and the scores from the due diligence questionnaire (e.g. one of the obligated objectives) are not shared with the other committed parties. Multiple interviewees explained that it would be interesting to get insight into the frontrunners to learn from their experiences. Some respondents added to this by sharing scores that could stimulate a race to the top. Some participants mentioned that it is a missed opportunity by the AGT for not openly communicating any results or scores. Nevertheless, some respondents pointed out that mutual comparison would not be fair due to the great differences between the firms. And lastly, several respondents mentioned that sharing scores and results could harm some companies, since sharing confidential information could lead to competition on the market. These respondents did not experience the AGT as a race to the top, as some other respondents did.

Looking at the company level, it became clear that the companies are obligated to report about their progress within their third year of the declaration (SER, n.d.a). Firms are required to monitor their process by accomplishing audits (e.g. social audits) to get a real insight into their supply chain (SER, 2016; SER, 2019c). The results of the interviews have shown that respondents were hesitant about the results retrieved from social audits since it reflects a distorted interpretation of the situation within the producing countries. Furthermore, referring back to the limited transparency, several respondents mentioned that because of that, the collaboration is lagging. This result indicates that despite the aim of the AGT of joining forces to make a real impact on the ground, this cannot take place in the current format.

5.2 Outcome

The level outcome refers to the behavioral change of the participants, presumably caused by the governance initiative (Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; Jastram & Klingenberg, 2018). The indicators I used to evaluate level outcome were related to the uptake of the program by participants and the effect per participant.

5.2.1 Position role

The first indicator that was used to evaluate the level of uptake regarding the actors and their position role, i.e., their responsibilities. Assessing the AGT, it becomes evident that this program is an MSI representing a heterogeneous group of actors with a variety of types and sizes of businesses, several trade-unions, and NGOs. Some respondents described the AGT as a unique platform where new stakeholders can meet each other and where a safe operating space was created. The diversity of stakeholders and their expertise is seen as an added value of the program, and most responsibilities of committed stakeholders is known. From the MTR (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019), and, from the interviews, it became evident that the participants were hesitant at the beginning about the new group formation since some of them were not naturally collaborative partners. But the group feeling, and trust increased over the years.

5.2.2 The government

The second indicator that I have evaluated was to what extent the government acts as a neutral actor within the program. From the policy documents, it became obvious that the program contains a Steering Committee with representatives representing the parties such as firms, NGOs, labor unions, and the Dutch government (SER, 2016). The government is within the context of the AGT accountable for putting conducting responsible business in the textile industry on the international agenda (SER, 2016). Moreover, is the government contributing to the strengthening of the collaboration between the parties in- and outside the scope of the AGT. The MTR had concluded that due to the involvement of the government, participants consider the declaration as more legitimate (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019).

5.2.3 Sector representatives

For the next indicator, I have evaluated the involvement of sector representatives within the AGT. This indicator holds the operationalization that a program should entail a variety of stakeholders due to their valuable expert knowledge. As mentioned before, the AGT is an MSI with several sector representatives (SER, 2016). From the MTR it was clear that the sector representatives were seen as valuable partners due to their 'insider approach', knowledge they use to help the companies by identifying their risks (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019; SER, 2018d). Above that, the AGT is also interfering with supporting stakeholders outside the scope which is deepening the dialogue (SER, n.d.b.). These sector representatives, and more importantly, their local partners within producing countries, are of high importance when formulating and implementing solutions based on the due diligence process (SER, 2016). The results of the interviews have shown that the respondents acknowledged the potential expert knowledge of the sector representatives. Nevertheless, some respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited guidance and support that some sector representatives can offer due to financial and capacity constraints. Regarding the involvement of local partners, several respondents mentioned their desire for enhancing this relationship during the interviews. To establish this relationship, connections via sector representatives are required. However, again due to the limited capacity of some

representatives, it has not been able to help to enhance the relationship. And lastly, several respondents mentioned that the limited transparency (e.g. sharing scores and action plans) among the participants is hindering the collaboration between participants and sector representatives.

5.2.4 Access to decision-making venues and procedures

The next indicator that I have evaluated was open access to decision-making venues. I have assessed to what extent the committed parties (i.e. the representatives of each group of actors) were allowed to access the decision-making venues and procedures. From the policy documents, it is clear that the Steering Committee is operating as the collective actor who makes confidential decisions about the AGT (SER, 2016). The committee is consisting of several representatives that are representing the different committed parties. Every representative should inform their community about the current agenda-setting. In this way, every single firm that is not directly participating in the Steering Committee still has the ability to vote for decisions via the delegates. The outputs of the confidential meetings are shared, in aggregated form, with the rest of the committed parties. Furthermore, besides these meetings, there is also a yearly wide-range stakeholder meeting that is open for access for all participants to discuss specific aspects of the declaration (SER, 2016). The establishment of the Steering Committee provides evidence that a balanced dialogue is aimed for. From the interviews, it became clear that respondents were aware of their ability to vote through their delegates. However, due to time constraints, this ability has not been fully used by the participants. And last, several respondents mentioned that the committee is not inclusive enough in terms of the variety of firms represented.

5.2.5 Exclusive participation benefits for participants

The last indicator that I have evaluated was the existence of exclusive participation. I have assessed this indicator to define if the AGT is offering benefits in terms of financial supports and/or access to expert knowledge. From the MTR document, it is clear that the AGT offers the participants a variety of exclusive benefits (e.g. a newsletter, collective projects, workshops, expert knowledge et cetera) (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). From the interview results, it became clear that especially the expert knowledge from the sector representatives and the developed collective projects were highly valued by the respondents. Nevertheless, several respondents have mentioned that the focus within these benefits is mainly on social themes. Therefore, the results have shown that there is a need for more collective projects with a more holistic perspective. This need was already concluded by the MTR but was still one of the main points mentioned during the interviews. In addition, from the interview results it became obvious that it is unlikely to expect that firms will start such collective projects. Next, several respondents mentioned that due to the limited time and/or financial constraints, the sector representatives were not always able to support a brand in their needs. Regarding financial support, most respondents mentioned that this type of support was not seen as the most important. Rather, the intrinsic motivation of conduction due diligence was seen as more important.

5.2.6 Effect per participant

The last indicator of the level outcome that I assessed was the extent to which the participants have changed their behavior presumably caused by signing the AGT. The results of the annual plan 2019 of the AGT pointed out the increased progress that has been made (SER, 2020). This entailed that 63 percent of the committed firms have been able to fully comply with the due diligence process requirements, 19 percent were on their way, and 18 percent were lagging (SER, 2020). Nevertheless, due to the aggregated information within the annual report, no detailed information is provided. The

interview results have shown that some respondents are experiencing a real positive change among the companies that have signed the declaration. Nevertheless, the results have also shown that there is a difference in the level of change per participant. Some interviewees mentioned that participants have changed their business ideology into doing responsible business. Other results have shown that some respondents experienced a behavioral change in terms of increasing awareness within the company. Despite these changes, most respondents added that the real impact on the ground is still lacking. The reasons given for this were that developing a due diligence policy was more time-consuming than was estimated within the first place. Moreover, in line with the time-consuming aspect, several respondents mentioned that the effort they put into developing a due diligence policy does not outweigh the profit. Because of that, some respondents even doubt if they will continue their commitment to the AGT.

On the following pages, I have summarized the findings in a table:

Table 3: Results of the case study on the AGT summarized

Aspect	Indicators	Summarized results	Scaling results
<i>Stringency (Output)</i>	Scope rules	⇒ Program is ambitious	Medium, there is discrepancy on the level of ambitiousness / some goals are not realistic (e.g. 80% market share; making impact on the ground in 5 years)
		⇒ Clear problem definition	Yes, all respondents acknowledge the importance of the AGT
		⇒ Well-defined objectives	Medium, clear due diligence objectives / developing tailor-made targets is less clear for firms/ focus is mainly on social themes
		⇒ Well-defined actions	Medium, more guidance needed on the prioritization to define concrete actions
		⇒ Participants are informed	Yes, but more clarity would be preferred
	BAU baseline	⇒ BAU-scenario per firm	Yes, initial estimation of the risks is made by AGT Secretariat during intake
		⇒ Tailor-made targets	No, firms are responsible to define these but need more support with this
	Existing regulation	⇒ Use of (inter)national rules/legislation	Yes, OECD Guidelines, UNGPs and ILO
	Enforcement of rules	⇒ Program administrator	Yes, AGT Secretariat / disagreement about level of expertise
		⇒ 100% compliant behavior	No, minimum requirements are set / disagreement on assessment framework
		⇒ Fines / sanctions for non-compliant behavior	Medium, committees should use full potential / should be stricter
	Documenting monitoring	⇒ Monitoring process/results documented	Yes, only in aggregated form
		⇒ Results are made publicly available	No, only in aggregated form

The program AGT is scaled as lenient – neutral

<i>Uptake (outcome)</i>	Position role	⇒ Heterogenous group	Yes, diverse group of actors is represented within the AGT	<i><u>All five indicators are almost completely fulfilled which means that the AGT can be considered as very inclusive</u></i>
		⇒ Clearly defined roles and responsibilities	Yes	
	Government	⇒ Government inclusion	Yes, Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the Steering Committee	
	Sector representatives	⇒ Sector representatives included	Yes, NGOs, trade unions and ssector associations	
		⇒ Expert knowledge	Yes, but more support, advice and support is requested	
	Access to decision-making venues and procedures	⇒ Open access decision-making venue	Yes, via Steering Committee	
		⇒ Balanced dialogue	Yes, in theory, but difficult to assess in reality due to the lack of transparency	
	Exclusive participation benefits for participants	⇒ Financial support	Not considered as precondition for doing responsible business. Firms should have an intrinsic motivation to change.	
		⇒ Exclusive access to knowledge	Yes, through sector representatives and other provided tools	
	Effect per participant	-	Yes, but in terms of increase in awareness, expansion of capacity	

The results in the table have highlighted two main aspects: the level of stringency is assessed as lenient – neutral, and the level of uptake is scaled as very inclusive. In more detail, regarding the level of stringency, it is important to note that the scaling relied on qualitative data and on a data set with continually changing questions. This means that a hard conclusion about whether the AGT can be assessed on their level of stringency was difficult to make. The results should be interpreted as an indication. The reasoning behind the scaling the results as *neutral – lenient* was that to score neutral, the program needed to fulfill the first indicator of scope rules. However, this indicator was not completed by the AGT. Regarding the level of uptake, the results have shown that almost all indicators were completely fulfilled. Nevertheless, the result of the level uptake has shed light on an interesting finding. The AGT has scored as very inclusive, however, in reality, is the actual uptake of the AGT lagging behind its aimed target. This means that the indicators based on the literature are not giving the correct estimation since they do not match the actual uptake. Therefore, it can be concluded that regarding the first sub-question about how a VEP is constructed, there is a trade-off recognizable between stringency and uptake. The AGT scored between lenient – neutral, and there is a discrepancy in the level of uptake. Therefore, in the following section how, it is important to assess how this trade-off could be solved, to create an effective AGT in theory and reality.

5.3 *Strategies for addressing the trade-off*

I have evaluated which strategies were considered suitable to address the trade-off between stringency and uptake to answer the second sub-question. Two main approaches, including their strategies, were evaluated: the direct and indirect approach. The direct approach could affect the direct changes in the behavior of the committed and prospective participants. The indirect approach was about the importance of creating synergies between the participants.

5.3.1 *Rewarding top players*

The first strategy that I have evaluated was about the top players of the program by publishing their best practices to create a race to the top. The prior results have shown that the AGT uses different channels to communicate about the best performances (SER, 2019d). The AGT publishes best practices according to the official declaration, which mentioned that the best practices would be made publicly available in order to align the movement towards *knowing and showing* instead of *naming and shaming* (SER, 2016). The interview results have shown that respondents acknowledged the added value of sharing the best examples, which was seen as a stimulator to improve firms' behavioral processes. The interviews' results have pointed out a discrepancy between the respondents about the existence of a 'race to the top'. Several respondents of this study agreed on the fact that publishing best practices and even publishing the scores from the due diligence questionnaires, could lead to a race to the top. Other participants expressed their concerns about creating a race to the top since the motivation to join the AGT in the first place should be an intrinsic motivation rather than a competition. These latter respondents questioned the extent to which it would be fair to create a race to the top since there is only one assessment framework for all companies that determines these scores.

5.3.2 *Improving the relevance of the program for laggards*

The second strategy I have evaluated was about improving the relevance of the program for laggards. This strategy was operationalized that the implementation of a tier-system of sustainability within a VEP would improve the relevance for laggards that are reluctant to sign the declaration. From the

official policy documents, it became evident that the AGT has developed one assessment framework to assess all the committed participants. This assessment framework does not entail a tier-system of sustainability. The results from the interviews have pointed out that the laggards within the program were likely not stimulated enough to improve their behavior. A reason given for this was that some companies have a lack in capacity (in terms of financial and team capacity) to achieve the requirements of the assessment framework. Another reason why laggards were not stimulated enough was that the AGT is too narrowly focused on Asia producing countries. The respondents would highly appreciate a more broadened scope to European countries. These findings are in accordance with the statement of van der Heijden (2020), which entails that a one-size-fits-all program will not yield the desired results. Implementing a tier-system with a broad scope could overcome the difficulties with a too narrow-focused scope (Bush et al., 2013).

5.3.2 Reducing the complexity of the program

The next strategy that I have been evaluating was about providing clear communication about the program to reduce the complexity of the program. I looked at whether the AGT is providing sufficient enough expert knowledge when requested and if there is a strong diffusion network existing in the program.

The results of the interviews have shown that several respondents were satisfied with the clear communication about the program provided by the AGT. Nevertheless, some other respondents pointed out that they were overwhelmed with the large quantities of information that was given at the beginning of the program. This made it difficult for these respondents to filter the information and to transform it into their due diligence process. The respondents mentioned that there is a need for more expert knowledge provided by the sector representatives to guide the participants in their process more properly. However, as mentioned earlier, the lack of transparency is making it difficult to establish the right balance between demand and supply systems in terms of acquisition of knowledge. Regarding the existence of a strong diffusion network, the results have shown that the AGT is not using its full potential to communicate clearly and consistently in- and outside the scope of the declaration. Most interview respondents were positive about internal communication and appreciated the AGT's efforts so far. However, several other respondents were not satisfied with the aggregated way of communicating done by the AGT. Another aspect was that the AGT is not visible enough within the sector in comparison to other initiatives. This is seen as a missed opportunity. The respondents explained that the official website could be improved in clarity and updating documents. These results have demonstrated that the AGT lacks in a strong diffusion network. The AGT could improve their current communication strategies by expanding them and to develop more strategies to attract prospective participants (van der Heijden, 2020).

5.3.4 Orchestration

Next, I have assessed the indirect strategy called orchestration. This strategy is a soft governance mode entailing the importance of creating synergies between the committed participants by empowering and supporting them. Orchestration can foster the participants to accelerate their performance to the desired result. A successful orchestrator, typically an independent organization or a government, needs to have several capabilities succeed, such as accepted leadership, sufficient legitimacy, and resources (Abbott & Snidal, 2009).

From the results, it was clear that there is no identified orchestrator within the AGT. Nonetheless, according to the respondents of the interviews, there is a pressing need to enhance the synergies and collaboration between the participants in-and outside the scope of the declaration. Guidance by creating such synergies could lead to more collaboration and potentially lead to more collective projects. An orchestrator within the AGT could intensify the current stakeholder engagement. Evaluating the AGT's current governance structure, the role of orchestrator could be possibly be fulfilled by the AGT Secretariat, by the Steering Committee, or by the Dutch Government for various reasons. The AGT Secretariat and the Steering Committee are both committees that have a strong relationship with the participants due to the assessments, advising, and deciding roles they fulfill. The results have shown that the Steering Committee has the power to decide on new projects and collaboration with other stakeholders, which could foster the implementation of the AGT (SER, 2016). Nevertheless, the MTR report pointed out that both committees endure high workloads, which implies that fulfilling an extra role would not be ideal since this will increase the workload further (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Above that, the MTR concluded that any additional governing structure would not be a solution (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). For this reason, these committees are not considered as potential orchestrators. Nevertheless, the Dutch Government, who is part of the Steering Committee, could potentially fulfill the role of an orchestrator due to the gained legitimacy by the respondents. The MTR reported that participants see a role for the government to become a regulator (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Furthermore, one of the current roles of the government is *“to place the subject of multi-stakeholder collaboration in the garment and textile sector firmly on the agenda within the EU and to promote it”* (SER, 2016, p. 18). These findings indicate that the government is already fulfilling the task of enhancing the synergies with other relevant stakeholders outside the scope of the AGT.

Besides the identity and role of an orchestrator, I evaluated the two types of orchestration that could foster the synergies between the participant and ultimately steer the behavior in the desired directions.

5.3.4.1 Directive orchestration

The first type of orchestration that I have evaluated was defined as follows: the orchestrator has the goal to incorporate the voluntary initiative within its regulatory framework after 2021. The MTR concluded in their report that several companies would be open for legislation on the (inter)national level since this would lead to a more ‘level playing field’ for all participants (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Moreover, the government was considered as an important actor to establish this level playing field (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). However, contrary to the conclusion of the MTR, the interviews of this study have pointed out that respondents were less positive about the idea that the AGT would be adopted within an (inter)national regulatory framework after 2021 for several reasons. First, respondents mentioned that the current group of participants in the AGT has chosen to sign the declaration because of their intrinsic motivation. This has increased the group's feeling as like-minded people. If the AGT would become an obligation for all Dutch textile companies, then this group of like-minded actors might be expanded with firms that are not interested in changing their business. This could potentially lead to a decrease in the earlier established group feeling and developed trust. A second reason given by the respondents was that due to the voluntary and flexible character of the AGT, creative and innovative ideas from participants are appreciated to propose. When the AGT would be incorporated within a regulatory framework, this flexible character will possibly be replaced by a more rigid regime. Nonetheless, several respondents mentioned that a combination of mandatory aspects within the voluntary program might be the perfect solution.

Regarding the idea of the upscaling of the AGT, the results of the interviews have demonstrated that most respondents acknowledged the importance of creating a level playing field within an international context. Nonetheless, the majority of the respondents did not support the idea of transforming the AGT in its current form into an international program. The respondents mentioned that it is first necessary to improve the current AGT into the most effective national policy possible, before upscaling and attracting more international brands. This does not necessarily mean that international cooperation should be postponed as well. These findings implicated that the focus of the AGT should not only be on achieving the highest uptake by attracting prospective international participants but on developing an effective national AGT as possible. Furthermore, the results of the interviews have shown that if there would be international legislation, the AGT is still considered as a highly important program. The reason for this was that AGT is assumed to be key for the practical implementation of such legislation on a national scale.

5.3.4.2 Facilitative orchestration

The second type of orchestration that I have evaluated, facilitative orchestration, was defined as follows: the orchestrator provides financial and/or technical supports to the committed parties. Respondents of this study disagreed on whether financial subsidies for firms a stimulating factor for enterprises should be to improve their behavior. Some respondents explained that providing more subsidies would be advantageous for companies with limited financial capacity. Other respondents argued that it is a firm its responsibility to invest in conducting responsible business. Most respondents explained that they were more interested in support in terms of the sector representatives their expert knowledge.

In sum, a combination of strategies could contribute solving the trade-off between stringency and uptake. The implementation of a tier-system could potentially contribute to the increase of stringency. Next, a strong diffusion network could improve the performance of the committed parties and could potentially attract prospective participants which could enhance the uptake. And last, an orchestrator could enhance the synergies and collaboration between participants, which will positively influence the participants their behavior. This ultimately could increase the impact on the ground.

5.4 The coronacrisis

The interviews were conducted during the coronacrisis. Questions were asked about the role of the AGT and the role of businesses during and after the pandemic.

The results have shown that the AGT Secretariat responded proactively during the pandemic in terms that they have investigated the current status of all committed participants and whether they needed help. Furthermore, the AGT had launched a joint statement about how to collaborate during and after the coronacrisis (Amfori et al., 2020). The respondents of this study were positive about how the AGT investigated and informed the participants about the pandemic. However, the respondents mentioned that the AGT could have released the statement earlier. On the question of whether the AGT has a responsibility to incorporate the actions of the committed parties (who have canceled and/or postponed their orders as well) within the coming assessment, no consensus was reached. Some respondents mentioned that the AGT should act strictly against these brands, while others considered it more a governmental task to act upon businesses that canceled their orders.

Regarding the companies, the results have shown that most respondents mentioned that companies should act in a more global responsible manner. This means that firms should look beyond their national

supply chain by taking shared responsibility. Respondents emphasized the need to establish long-term relationships, open communication, and hold brands accountable for their actions. The actors along the supply chain should become partners rather than stakeholders. Overall, the respondents were shocked by how brands and retailers, including some AGT firms, are acting during the ongoing pandemic. Some argued that if the AGT is not acting sanctioning these brands, then the AGT might lose responsible members as a consequence. The reason given for this is that the declaration can lose value if it is involved with brands that are not acted in a responsible manner.

6. Discussion

The first section of this chapter will highlight a conflicting result in the level uptake. After that, the contribution of this study to the academic debate will be described. Within the third section, the limitations of this study will be explained. Next, theoretical implications are described, and in the last section, recommendations for the AGT 2.0 will be given.

6.1 Conflicting result in literature versus reality

The results revealed a conflict between the theory and reality of the level of uptake of the AGT. Initially, the case study results have shown that the uptake level was scaled as very inclusive. This should, in theory, mean that the AGT's actual uptake is in line with the aimed market share, namely eighty percent. Nonetheless, the AGT's actual uptake is lagging behind its aimed target. As mentioned, this means that there is a discrepancy between theory and reality, resulting in a misalignment between my results and those of previous studies. I speculate that this might be due to the fact that because of the low level of stringency, parties are inclined to join the declaration. Therefore, a higher level of stringency is required to attract a prospective participants. This shows the complexity of designing a voluntary program, since the contrasting finding shows that fulfilling all the indicators, in theory, does not mean this will be automatically translated in attracting more prospective participants. In addition, the contrasting result could also imply that other variables (that are not within the scope of this study) are influencing the level of uptake as well. These other external variables should be taken into account when assessing the level of effectiveness of the AGT.

6.2 Contribution to the academic debate

The trade-off between stringency and uptake has been put forward by a number of previous studies. However, a small number of studies have examined how this trade-off can in fact be solved. Most studies have focused on the performance of VEPs, how it could be designed most effectively, and why firms were participating in such programs (Borck & Coglianesi, 2009; Coglianesi & Nash, 2016; van der Heijden, 2020). I wanted to build further on the existing knowledge by assessing how the AGT was designed, and I wanted to discover the precise nature of the existing trade-off. And, most importantly, the goal of this study was to assess the strategies that appear most favorable for successfully address the trade-off. Therefore, this study has contributed to the academic debate with the creation of a theoretical framework and by providing potential strategies that could address the trade-off.

Furthermore, in the previous section, I have reflected on a result regarding the level of uptake. This result indicates that we should be aware of conflicting results that can appear when assessing a program's effectiveness. Therefore, we should focus on broadening the theoretical framework with additional variables to make it more comprehensive. Next, several studies have pointed out that there is no clear consensus about whether a VEP is effective in achieving its desired result. This study contributed to this discussion that, despite the ineffectiveness of the AGT, actors in- and outside the declaration see value in voluntary programs as the AGT with a multi-stakeholder character. Moreover, the results have shown that collaboration and transparency are overarching factors that influence the level of effectiveness and, ultimately, the level of impact on the ground.

Next, this study also contributes to a broader understanding of VEPs in general. The GTA implied an inductive research approach to build a new theory. From this approach, I used two of the three main stages of coding. This means that I did not build a new theory on the effectiveness of VEPs, but that I

have instead contributed to the existing literature on VEPs. This study aimed to follow the shape of an hourglass:

- Starting with a general common problem (the trade-off between stringency and uptake) within the field of VEP;
- Zooming in on a case study with a trade-off between stringency and uptake;
- Zooming out and reflecting on the results of the case study to contribute to the academic debate of the effectiveness of VEPs.

6.3 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The limitations will be discussed in terms of validity, reliability, and, representativity.

6.3.1 Internal and External Validity

Internal validity is concerned with causality, which entails the extent to which no other variables have caused the objective (Bryman, 2012). Concerning this study, this would mean that the indicators and strategies were the only variables that influenced the effectiveness of voluntary programs. However, in section 6.1, I have pointed out a conflicting result in the level of uptake. This implied that other external factors might serve as a spurious variable, influencing the effectiveness of a VEP as well. Due to this study's scope on internal indicators, it is more difficult to reveal a potential spurious variable. Therefore, the internal validity is believed to be medium since the variables within this study are considered partly influencing the level of effectiveness. Next, the external validity, which entails whether the findings apply to other circumstances, is considered medium (Yin, 2014). The findings of which specific strategies are assumed to be most suitable to solve the trade-off in the AGT are less translatable to other VEPs. Besides, the AGT is a national scale-based program that makes the results less applicable to transnational VEPs. Nevertheless, the general conclusions on the importance of orchestration and creating transparency can be translated to other VEPs, since these factors are considered valuable to incorporate.

6.3.2 Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable, and if it arrives at the same results and conclusions (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014). The data collection of this study consisted of desk research and nineteen semi-structured interviews with a changing set of questions. The interviews were conducted since it was assumed that it would reveal new insights that may not be derived only from the document analysis. Since I have coded all the collected data, some subjectivity has inevitably during the coding process. In order to minimize the subjectivity, I have transcribed the entire interviews and coded it as objective as possible.

Furthermore, I have compared all the answers to get an objective perspective on the created codes. A disadvantage of semi-structured interviews was that saturation could not be reached for every code. Due to the time constraints of this study, it was not possible to conduct more interviews to increase this saturation. Achieving reliability with the semi-structured interviews is more difficult due to the variation of questions and the interpretation of a researcher (Yin, 2014). A more standardized interview format could have increased the reliability of the data collection. Nonetheless, the semi-structured interviews allowed me to adapt the set of questions to the new insights given by the respondents. Therefore, the reliability of this study is what one could expect of a study of this nature.

6.3.3 Representativity

The representativity of the data collection is assumed to be adequate for this study. The reason given for this is that the sample selection is based on a specific group of participants since they could offer in-side knowledge about the AGT. Furthermore, the sample selection was expanded with stakeholders that were assumed to offer a perspective from outside the scope of the AGT. These different visions have created a balanced view on the effectiveness of the AGT. Next, the document analysis was based on all provided documents by the AGT and the related other (policy) documents. This gave a profound basic understanding on the AGT.

6.4 Theoretical implications

The findings and the limitations of this study can be seen as starting points for further investigation. The study of Borck & Coglianese (2009) pointed out that more research was required to answer the pressing policy question on how a VEP should be designed to be as effective as possible. This question is still relevant and unsolved today. Concerning the theoretical framework, the scope of the study was on the first two levels of effectiveness. A more theoretical analysis is required to expand the theoretical framework to deepen the second level outcome (especially the effect per participant) and examine the impact level. When the theoretical framework is expanded, it will increase the full understanding of the effectiveness of voluntary programs. This expansion can contribute by answering the pressing policy question of Borck & Coglianese (2009).

Next, the results of the case study have shown that a voluntary program with the inclusion of mandatory elements was assumed to be effective in increasing the effect per participants. Further research could focus on whether there are other VEPs with the construction of a voluntary flexible program in combination with rigid elements. From these other voluntary programs, lessons can be learned.

Regarding the internal validity, further research needs to be conducted to expand the current internal factors with external factors to reveal potential spurious relationships and to prevent further conflicting results. Such expansion of the theoretical framework could give a more holistic indication of all the internal and external indicators contributing to the level of effectiveness. This study has shown that an orchestrator and the lack of transparency are contributing to some extent to the level of effectiveness. Future research on these factors has to be undertaken to understand better such factors and their influence on effectiveness.

The external validity could be increased by conducting more comparative case studies within the field of VEPs, with a specific focus on international commodities. Moreover, for some indicators, full saturation was not achieved. Therefore, an expansion of the sample size could be advised.

Furthermore, the pandemic has shed light on some topics that are important to further examine, such as accountability and shared responsibility. Therefore, future research should explore how these concepts can be integrated within VEPs as fundamental concepts.

6.5 Recommendations for AGT 2.0

The results from the case study have shown that there is a trade-off within the AGT between stringency and the program's uptake. To solve this trade-off, I have evaluated several strategies according to

scientific literature that were adequate to address this trade-off. In the following paragraphs, I have presented recommendations that might solve the trade-off.

6.5.1 Orchestration as a new additional governance structure

This study has shed light on an essential factor to improve the program's effectiveness: reconsidering the governance structure. The current governance structure consists of the AGT Secretariat, as assessor and advisor, and the Steering Committee as the decision-making actor. The results have shown that both groups are overloaded with a high number of (time-consuming) tasks. Moreover, MTR concluded that any additional governing structure was not recommended (Rutten & Oudendijk, 2019). Despite this conclusion, I still recommend the AGT to restructure its current governance structure. In more detail, this means that the AGT should create an additional important key actor, besides the current committees. This actor may be the critical factor missing for the implementation of more stakeholder engagement, more collaboration and, more collective projects. Therefore, I propose a new additional governance structure in line with the strategy of orchestration. This entails that the Dutch government should fulfill the role of the AGT's orchestrator to strengthen the (missing) collaboration between all participants. The government has gained authority and can manage the collaboration within the AGT and outside the AGT with other (inter)national stakeholders. This would intensify the underlying purpose of the AGT of joining forces to create more leverage. Therefore, orchestration should be considered as a precondition in a program for achieving the highest impact, rather than a solution. This might prevent the trade-off between stringency and uptake.

6.5.2 Intensifying the AGT

Besides the advice of creating a new additional governance structure, the findings of this study have highlighted several additional points that are necessary to intensify the commitment. These points are the following:

- **Implementing a tier-system** of different sustainability targets, including more differentiation within the assessment framework. More targets and more differentiation will make the AGT more applicable to all different firms and, ultimately, lead to more behavioral change;
- **Expanding the nine themes** with new themes and subcategories;
- **Broaden the focus of the AGT** to all producing countries;
- **Increase the level of expertise** in the AGT Secretariat;
- **Implementing binding and more strict elements** within the declaration to steer for more compliance among the participants. The results have shown that if the AGT would become obligated for every firm, the group of like-minded actors might be expanded with firms that are not interested in conducting due diligence. This expansion with new firms could potentially lead to a decrease in the earlier established group feeling and developed trust. This group feeling and trust are essential to enhance future collaboration. Therefore, a program with several binding elements would effectively steer for more compliance among the like-minded actors.

If the AGT considers implementing these points, this will enhance a more tailor-made program, which is assumed to be more effective than a one-size-fits-all program.

6.5.3 Creating more transparency

Besides the recommendation of an additional governance structure and intensifying the AGT's format, there is one essential factor hindering the overall performance of the AGT, namely the lack of transparency. In more detail, the findings of this study have demonstrated that there is a need for more clarity in communication, a need for more guidance and, support. Above that, the respondents would like to see more established collective projects, including enhancing the local stakeholder engagement to steer for the goal: making a real change on the ground. However, it is unlikely to expect that firms will create such's collective projects. The underlying factor that is hindering the needs is the lack of transparency. The lack of transparency is visible within the aggregated form of communication in- and outside the AGT. A more open and transparent dialogue might enhance the collaboration and the establishment of joint projects. Therefore, I would recommend creating more transparency among all participants of the AGT. More transparency in sharing scores or annual plans may lead to more collaboration since firms, and sector representatives can more easily reach out to each other. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all confidential information needs to be shared; only the results that will enhance collaboration.

Furthermore, the Steering Committee commented that the increasing transparency within the provided information gives the consumers the tools to make more informed decisions (SER, 2019). Nonetheless, the current aggregated information communicated by the AGT is not stimulating consumers to improve their purchasing habits. Moreover, the results have shown that the AGT is not visible enough within the field. This lack of invisibility is seen as a missed opportunity since the AGT can offer impressive front leading information. Therefore, the advice is to be more transparent within the results communicated and enhance the program's visibility with building a strong diffusion network.

6.5.4 Knowing and Showing

The recommendations above might lead to an increase in stringency and uptake of the program by stimulating committed participants in their needs and attracting prospective firms. All these recommendations are in light of the AGT's statement, which entails moving away from *naming and shaming* and steer for *knowing and showing*. This last movement is more important than ever, since the coronocrisis has emphasized the need for more transparency, more accountability, and more importantly, more shared responsibility among actors along the supply chains.

During the interviews, several questions were asked about whether the AGT should continue in its current form or whether change is needed. Most respondents would vote in favor of the continuation of the AGT, but some respondents were dissatisfied with the AGT's outcome so far that they would not commit to the AGT's sequel in its current form. Despite the disagreement on whether respondents would commit to the AGT's follow-up or not, almost all respondents stated that there are aspects within the declaration that should be changed to become more effective in its aimed result. The AGT has the potential to contribute to restructuring the post-pandemic international system. However, if the AGT wants to make a real contribution, they need to develop a new narrative that is implementing the requesting needs.

7. Conclusion

The central research question guiding this study was how the effectiveness of voluntary programs could be improved. Moreover, this study examined how the case study on the AGT could be enhanced in its effectiveness from 2021 onwards. I have focused on the trade-off between stringency and uptake, and how it could be solved with adequate strategies.

The first sub-question was about the construction of the AGT regarding the level of output and outcome. I have evaluated the level of stringency and uptake by assessing its indicators. I have evaluated the level of stringency between lenient and neutral due to the discrepancies between respondents on how they experience the level of stringency. The interview results have shown disagreements on the AGT's level of ambitiousness, the level of expertise within the AGT Secretariat, and whether the assessment framework was suitable and applicable for all firms. Furthermore, there was an overall need for more clarity, guidance in developing tailor-made targets, and support. Looking at the level outcome, the AGT appeared to be comprehensive at first sight with the fulfillment of almost all indicators. Therefore, it led to the conclusion that the AGT was considered as very inclusive in theory. Nevertheless, the AGT's actual uptake is showing a different result with lagging behind aimed market share. This conflicting result shows that the program's actual uptake does not confirm the findings based on the literature. So, there is a trade-off between stringency and uptake, but the voluntary program's construction is revealing conflicting answers where the exact trade-off is taken place.

The second sub-question entailed how the trade-off between stringency and uptake could be solved. This study has examined direct and indirect strategies that were assumed to be adequate to solve the revealed trade-off. The second direct strategy (improving the relevance of the program for laggards by introducing a tier-system) has been considered the most effective way to increase the level of stringency and the level of uptake. In more detail, the stringency of a program will be increased with the implementation of the tier-system. The inclusion of different levels of sustainability will increase the program's applicability to the heterogeneous group of actors. This tier-system, might in combination with binding elements within the declaration, lead to a higher effect per participant. Next, there is a need to broaden the scope of the AGT to all producing countries. Moreover, the uptake might be increased as well by the second strategy since the tier-system may attract prospective participants. The concept of this strategy is in line with the statement of van der Heijden (2020), who holds that a one-size-fits-all-program (such as the current AGT) will not yield the desired results. More differentiation is needed to fulfill the needs of the heterogeneous group of actors.

Another direct strategy, reducing the program's complexity, is considered as necessary in terms that the AGT could improve their communication with the use of building a strong diffusion network in-and outside the AGT scope. The orchestration strategy was also considered important to implement. This strategy aims to enhance and strengthen the collaboration and synergies between all participants. These factors are currently underexposed in the AGT, while these factors are highly essential to collectively achieve a real impact on the ground. Therefore, I have assumed this strategy as highly effective to solve the trade-off between stringency and uptake. This strategy will steer for an additional governance structure with the Dutch government as the orchestrator to guide the process.

Concerning the third sub-question (developing recommendations for an AGT 2.0), key findings emerged for enhancing the effectiveness with the implementation of steering for a new additional governance structure with the Dutch government as the orchestrator, intensification of the AGT (implementing a tier-system, binding and more strict elements, expansion of the nine themes, increase

the level of expertise in AGT Secretariat and more broadened focus), and creating transparency. These aspects have the potential to foster collaboration between all participants. This might ultimately lead to more impact on the ground.

The coronacrisis has emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach that is adequate to enhance the transition towards a more sustainable industry for all related actors. The AGT can contribute to restructuring the post-pandemic unsustainable textile industry. However, if the AGT wants to make a real contribution to this transition, they need to update their program by implementing the requested needs as listed above.

The main research question of this study was how the effectiveness of a voluntary program could be improved. From the results, it can be concluded that there is no silver bullet on which indicators are essential to incorporate within a program to prevent a trade-off between stringency and uptake. The reason given for this is that the case study's findings concluded that the uptake of the AGT was evaluated as very inclusive, which is in high contrast with the actual uptake. This conflicting finding points out that the indicators that are included in the theoretical framework, are insufficient for assessing the overall effectiveness of a VEP. Therefore, it is important to go beyond the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the results from this study have shed light on the importance of defining a new additional governance structure in which it can include an orchestrator. This strategy is considered adequate to guide and strengthen the program's process to steer the participants in the desired direction. By incorporating orchestration within the framework as a precondition rather than solution, the trade-off between stringency and uptake might be prevented instead. This incorporation could contribute to the academic field pressing policy question of finding the perfect fit for a voluntary environmental program.

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