



BLOG POST

‘Navigating the maze: what we learned about HREDD tools from our Brussels workshop’

Key insights from the 10 June session on HREDD

Hanne Van Cappellen, KULeuven

On 10 June 2026, a diverse group of stakeholders—including representatives from government, business organisations, civil society, academia, and the private sector gathered in Brussels for a MEDIATE workshop on Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HREDD) tools. The central question guiding the discussions was simple but pressing: how can these tools support meaningful change in practice?

Across two interactive sessions, participants unpacked the rapidly expanding landscape of due diligence tools and reflected on how these instruments are shaping the work of intermediary actors.

A crowded and fragmented tool landscape

The workshop opened with findings from the MEDIATE tool mapping exercise, which has already identified over 180 HREDD tools¹, a number that continues to grow. While this signals the development of a rich and dynamic ecosystem, it also raises questions about how to identify and select high-quality tools, where gaps or imbalances remain, and whether the use of tools ultimately adds value or introduces new risks.

A first step in making sense of this landscape is to analyse tools in terms of their purpose, methodology, focus, and target audience. Broadly, three main types of tools can be distinguished:

- **Guidance documents**, which define principles and frameworks;
- **Operational toolkits**, which translate these principles into practical steps;

¹ By ‘tool’, we mean guidance documents, checklists, risk mapping tools, indicators, databases, digital platforms, helpdesks, methodologies, or similar practical resources used to support HREDD. Tools may be privately developed or publicly available.

- **Digital platforms**, which manage, monitor, or analyse due diligence processes.

These tools are developed by a wide range of actors. Intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and multi-stakeholder initiatives each develop about 20 percent of the tools, primarily specialising in guidance documents and toolkits. Private firms develop about 15 percent of the identified tools, predominantly platforms. While more than half of the tools are cross-sectoral, sector-specific tools tend to cluster in high-risk industries such as mining, agriculture, and textiles.

Most tools are designed with companies in mind, reflecting their responsibility to implement due diligence obligations. Far fewer tools target the needs of workers, communities, or public authorities. Yet, discussions highlighted a demand for such tools, for example, resources that enable trade unions to understand what they can expect from companies, or grievance mechanisms that are accessible to workers.

Tools are not neutral

A key insight from the workshop is that HREDD tools are far from neutral. Rather than being purely technical instruments, they embed particular assumptions about risk, responsibility, and what “good” due diligence looks like.

Some tools focus on identifying systemic risks and enabling deeper understanding. Others are geared towards performance measurement and compliance, prioritising efficiency and legal coverage. Rights-based tools tend to emphasise stakeholder engagement and structural issues, whereas data-driven platforms, despite their growing influence, often operate as “black boxes” with limited transparency.

These underlying logics matter. They shape not only how due diligence is understood, but also how it is carried out in practice. They raise important questions about key dimensions, such as accountability and transparency, that should guide tool selection and use. This makes the choice of tools all the more critical.

Emerging gaps: what’s still missing?

These gaps, and the absence of a clear way to evaluate tool credibility, were the focus of the second session. The session started with participants reflecting on the challenges they encounter in practice and the gaps that remain.

A key concern is the absence of a clear and trusted system to guide users in selecting tools—helping them understand *which* tool to use, *when*, and for *what* purpose. Participants also highlighted legal uncertainty and a lack of harmonisation, for example beyond emerging standards such as the VSME, alongside gaps in EU-level guidance and in tools capable of covering multiple regulatory frameworks.

There is also a clear need for tools that go beyond risk identification to support risk mitigation and implementation, as well as for greater attention to producer-country legislation and local contexts. At times, tools can even offer conflicting guidance, further complicating their use in practice. Participants nevertheless stressed a fundamental point: tools cannot replace place-based, context-sensitive approaches, nor meaningful stakeholder engagement.

The rise of AI

An “elephant in the room” throughout the discussions was the rapid emergence of AI and digital platforms. These tools promise efficiency and scale, but also raise new concerns.

As highlighted in the session, these include a lack of transparency in risk scoring, reduced accountability, and the potential displacement of purpose-built HREDD tools by general-purpose AI systems. As companies increasingly experiment with these technologies, the future of due diligence tooling may evolve faster than regulatory frameworks can keep up.

Compliance versus impact: a persistent tension

Discussions repeatedly highlighted a core tension between compliance and impact. In practice, companies may formally comply with requirements without effectively addressing underlying human rights and environmental risks. At the same time, businesses need tools that are practical, user-friendly, and compatible with existing systems—often pushing them towards compliance-oriented solutions. This creates a fundamental tension between usability and transformative ambition.

Again, this underscores the importance of careful tool selection: how can users identify tools that are truly fit for purpose?

What makes a “credible” HREDD tool?

A central objective of the workshop was to explore criteria for assessing tool credibility. Participants widely agreed that such assessment is both necessary and challenging. Through group discussions and voting exercises, several key dimensions of credibility emerged:

- transparency of methodology and data;
- meaningful stakeholder engagement (seen as non-negotiable);
- data quality and reliability;
- usability and accessibility;
- interoperability with existing systems;
- alignment with regulatory frameworks;
- independence of tool developers;
- capacity to drive real-world impact.

However, important tensions remain. Can tool developers ever be fully independent? Should a single tool aim to serve both compliance and impact objectives? Is widespread adoption an indicator of quality—or simply convenience?

These questions suggest that assessing HREDD tools will remain an open and contested space.

Where do we go from here?

The workshop made clear that improving HREDD practice is not simply a matter of developing more tools. Instead, the priority may lie in:

- building a better understanding of existing tools and their underlying logics;
- developing shared frameworks for assessing credibility;
- improving transparency and comparability across tools;
- ensuring that stakeholder voices—especially those of affected communities—are meaningfully included.

Ultimately, tools can support due diligence—but they cannot replace it. As participants emphasised, real impact still depends on engagement, context, and action beyond the tool itself.

Building on these insights, the MEDIATE project will continue to refine its tool database and analysis, explore the implications of AI and digitalisation, and contribute to greater transparency and comparability across tools. It will also continue engagement with stakeholders across sectors to inform these processes.

