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By **JNC** & **TM**



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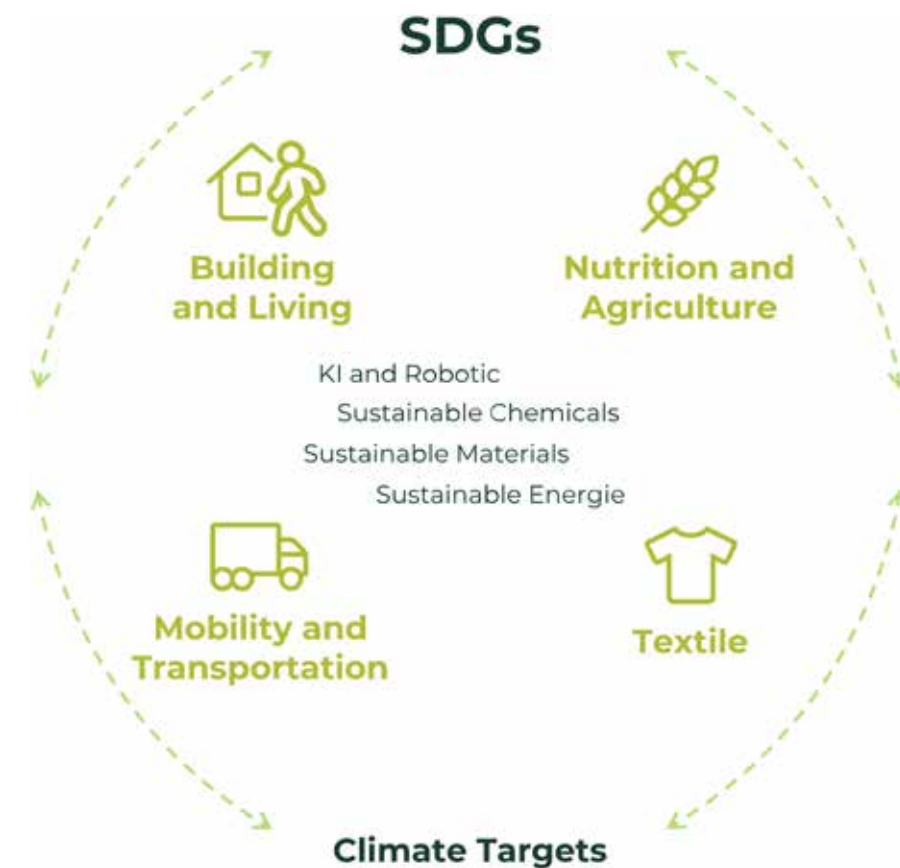
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BEATING THE VALLEY OF DEATH!

→ BY JENNI KOUTNI

Valley of Death is a term used to describe the failure of many start-ups, causing them to give up due to a lack of capital and support, even though their products themselves are tried and tested in the relevant field.

And this is where the Global Entrepreneurship Centre (GEC) comes in. Their mission can be summed up in a nutshell: as a centre for innovation, they actively support start-ups with the emphasis on sustainability and climate protection. CEO **Friedrich Barth** and **Tanja Kliewe-Meyer**, Senior Advisor in the field of Sustainable Textiles, tell us why they chose North Rhine-Westphalia and elaborate on the opportunities available through their GEC Textile Award.



The Global Entrepreneurship Centre is a relatively new initiative. How did the project come about and where did the idea come from?

Tanja Kliewe-Meyer: Our founders Friedrich Barth and Sebastian Gronwald came up with the idea after talking to the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The NRW Ministry of Economic Affairs generously funded a preliminary phase to prepare the groundwork behind the concept and creation of GEC. We regard ourselves as an ecosystem of young and established businesses and investors with a common focus on sustainability and climate protection. Hence the word 'centre' at the heart of our name.

Your project seeks to promote the start-up ecosystem in NRW, creating around 3,000 new jobs across the region by 2030. It's quite an ambitious target!

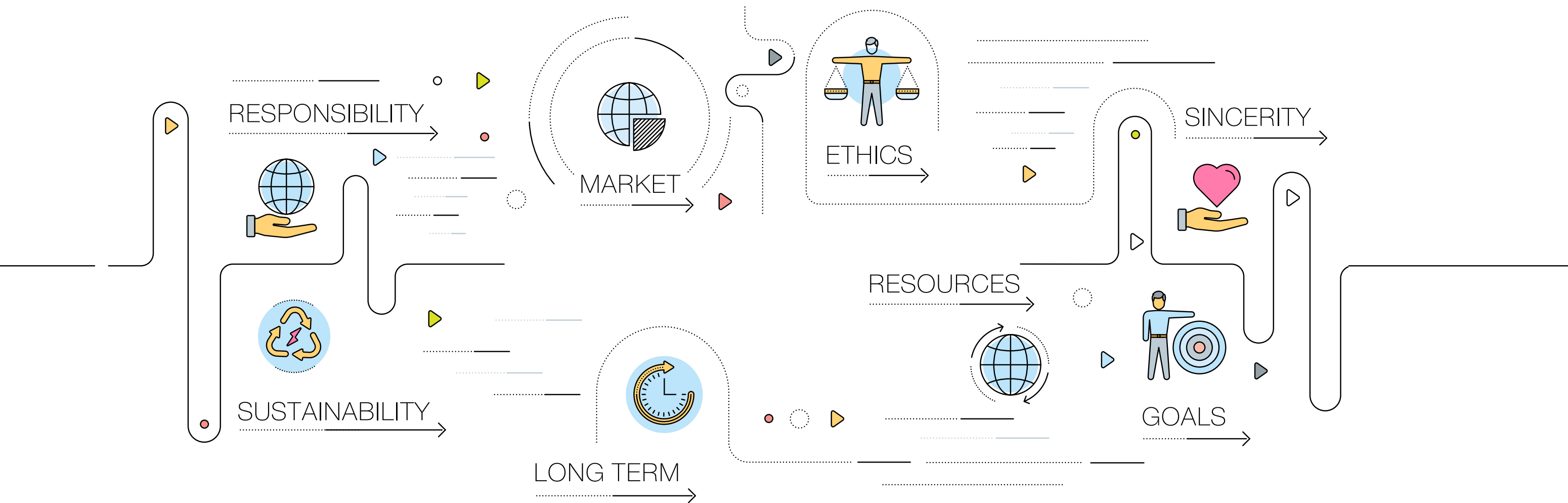
Friedrich Barth: Our scale-up service seeks to encourage the best start-ups to come to the Rhineland region. To achieve this, we look at around 1,000 start-ups a year from a wide range of sectors. 20 start-up companies are then offered intensive support and two of these are expected to set up an office in the area every year. We invest up to 200,000 euros in customised scale-up services for these start-up businesses, which sets GEC apart from other centres.

Why did you decide to base the centre in the Rhineland region?

Friedrich Barth: Because it's right in the middle of the industrial triangle extending across the Netherlands, Belgium and NRW. There is already a great industrial base here, plus the state government is currently investing a lot of resources in the start-up ecosystem. As a result of structural changes, there is also considerable demand for new jobs in this area. We are keen to become one of the most vibrant and successful ecosystems for sustainable start-ups in Europe – and hope to play our part in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals on the 2030 Agenda.

So you help start-ups to succeed commercially – what does it take to do this?

Friedrich Barth: The textile industry is often very set in its ways, so young, sustainable labels using innovative materials can find it hard to get a foothold. Funding the serious marketing budgets needed to make an impression can also be an issue. Traditional investors struggle to grasp why start-ups in the textile sector find it harder to make their mark than those in the IT business, for example. ▶▶



The GEC Textile Award offers a total prize fund of €350,000. The winners will be announced in March 2022, with the first prize-winner receiving €200,000. Three winners will be selected from the pool of applicants based on successful innovations in the following areas: material and product, process and logistics, recycling and business model.

How does Germany fare with start-ups compared with other countries on the international stage? Do we have the same opportunities over here?

Friedrich Barth: In terms of new start-ups, Germany has caught up internationally and is now on a par with the US. However, three times as many US companies make a success of their businesses as in the EU as a whole. There are quite simply more opportunities in the US and greater access to venture capital, which explains why many good start-ups continue to be attracted to the States.

Fashion and technical textiles can access targeted support via the GEC Textile Award. The winners of the first award will be announced in March 2022 – can you tell us anything about it?

Tanja Kliewe-Meyer: The official award ceremony will take place at the Areal Böhler events venue in Düsseldorf on 6 March 2022 as part of the Gallery Shoes trade fair. All we can tell you at this stage is that we have a very exciting and extensive line-up of applicants from all sectors of the industry, including technical textiles, new materials, new products and innovative business models.

What will the winning entries receive by way of support?

Friedrich Barth: The award winners will receive support in developing their business, with particular emphasis on the following growth areas: market access, digital strategy, legal advice, lab openings, access to technology support and initial production workshops, introductions to investors, financial advice, help with recruitment and HR organisation tips. The programme will run for 15 months and be customised to suit the individual companies' needs.

Why is it more and more difficult for sustainable production methods or business governance schemes to get off the ground compared with companies that don't have an environmental slant?

Friedrich Barth: Because they are usually associated with higher costs. Raw materials and other resources are more expensive, which of course means the end product costs more too. Today's consumers tend to buy based on price or brand. ■

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