ESG4SMEs
Sustainability in Action

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STEVIA HELLAS COOP

Case study

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Context

Type and size of SME: Agricultural cooperative with around 120+ active members. Farmers cultivate stevia across approximately 100+ acres in Central Greece.

Rural setting: Spercheios Valley, near Lamia, Greece – a fertile plain traditionally used for tobacco farming.

Founded in 2012, Stevia Hellas is the first agricultural cooperative in Europe focused on stevia cultivation. It was established by former tobacco growers seeking sustainable alternatives. Through innovation and international partnerships, the cooperative evolved into a vertically integrated business producing high-quality stevia-based sweeteners.

Its mission is to offer a natural, health-conscious alternative to sugar, while supporting rural livelihoods through sustainable farming and collective entrepreneurship.

Operating in a region affected by agricultural transition and depopulation, the cooperative embraced ESG principles to ensure economic viability, environmental stewardship, and social resilience.

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ESG Challenge / Opportunity

- The cooperative's main **ESG challenge** was to enable a just and sustainable transition from tobacco farming to a future-proof crop. Farmers needed to adopt entirely new agricultural techniques, adapt infrastructure, and access new markets. There was also **environmental uncertainty**, as stevia cultivation had never been tested at scale in Europe.
- Another major challenge was the **knowledge gap**: growers had limited familiarity with plant-based sweeteners, sustainability practices, or food industry quality standards. Socially, trust in the cooperative model had to be rebuilt after past disappointments in the sector.
- These challenges became an opportunity for **innovation and inclusive growth**. The cooperative partnered with research centers, applied precision farming (e.g. gaiasense smart farming), and trained members in sustainable practices. The switch from chemical-heavy tobacco to stevia enabled reduced use of water and inputs, improving both environmental and economic outcomes.

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What did they do?

The cooperative implemented a **holistic transformation plan** starting in 2012, focused on replacing tobacco with stevia as a sustainable crop. It conducted pilot tests with seed varieties from the US, Israel, and Canada, before establishing full-scale cultivation.

To support the transition, the cooperative offered its members continuous **training in good agricultural practices**, focusing on organic and sustainable methods. It also introduced **precision farming tools** through collaboration with gaiasense, helping farmers reduce water use by 22% and fertilizers by 17%.

At the processing level, Stevia Hellas developed partnerships with European laboratories to extract and purify steviol glycosides, ensuring high product quality. The launch of the *La Mia Stevia* retail brand expanded their reach to health-conscious consumers.

This transformation was rooted in **collective ownership, innovation, and social impact**, enabling former tobacco farmers to become stewards of a regenerative agri-food model.

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What did they do? — Sustainability Practices

- **Organic cultivation without pesticides:** Only natural inputs are used, ensuring pesticide-free, certified organic stevia leaves.
- **Zero-waste approach:** Plant residues such as stems and trimmings are reused as animal feed or natural compost.
- **Smart farming:** With gaiasense precision agriculture, farmers reduced water use by 22% and fertilizers by 17%.
- **Soil regeneration:** Use of crop rotation, cover crops, and organic fertilization to improve soil quality and biodiversity.
- **Energy & packaging efficiency:** Investments in low-consumption processing systems and recyclable or biodegradable packaging.
- **Responsible sourcing:** Collaboration only with committed, certified organic growers who follow sustainable practices.

What did they do? — Education & Community Programmes

- **Training for members:** Continuous capacity-building in organic farming, environmental awareness, and business planning.
- **Youth inclusion:** Participation in the “New Agriculture – New Generation” initiative to train young farmers and future cooperative members.
- **Public engagement:** Educational activities in schools and field visits to promote healthy living and natural sweeteners.
- **Support for women:** Women make up 60% of the cooperative’s workforce, with active roles in production and management.
- **Rural development:** A successful transition from tobacco to sustainable farming, offering economic opportunity and renewed purpose to the local community.

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What changed?

The cooperative's ESG-driven transformation produced significant results across environmental, economic, and social dimensions:

- Cleaner agriculture
  Farmers moved from pesticide-intensive tobacco to organic stevia, reducing chemical inputs and improving environmental health.
- Improved resource efficiency
  Smart farming practices led to measurable reductions in water and fertilizer use, while maintaining high yields and leaf quality.
- Product innovation & market expansion
  The cooperative launched *La Mia Stevia*, reaching new consumer segments in Greece and abroad, and establishing itself in the natural sweeteners market.
- Community revitalization
  Former tobacco producers gained new purpose and income through sustainable farming, reversing negative trends in rural employment.
- Stronger social bonds
  Collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and fair participation helped rebuild trust among members and promoted intergenerational engagement.
- Recognition as a model
  The cooperative received awards and media attention as a leading rural innovation story, inspiring similar transitions across Greece.

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ESG in Action: People, Skills, Tools

ESG Roles

Who did what?

In Stevia Hellas Cooperative, the ESG responsibilities are shared among key actors within a lean and collaborative structure:

ESG Leader: The cooperative's president and board define the long-term ESG vision, aligning sustainability with community development and market innovation.

ESG Optimizer: Agronomists, technical advisors, and trained farmers lead the implementation of sustainable farming practices, resource optimization, and product traceability systems.

ESG Analyst: Internal teams and external partners (e.g., gaiasense, laboratories) monitor environmental data, soil health, and farming performance, ensuring alignment with organic certifications and market standards.

Many members, especially younger farmers, progressively engage in multiple ESG dimensions—from data monitoring to social outreach.

Tools

Strategic approach: Combination of cooperative governance, EU-funded knowledge transfer, and external expert support. No formal ESG strategy tools (e.g. SWOT or materiality matrices) used, but decisions are aligned with sustainability outcomes and funding eligibility.

Monitoring methods: Smart farming systems (e.g. gaiasense IoT sensors) track irrigation and fertilization efficiency. Organic certification audits validate environmental compliance. Product quality data verified via accredited labs. Stakeholder feedback collected through training sessions and co-op meetings.

Certifications: Organic (EU), Fair Trade, and Greek national quality labels for food safety and environmental farming.

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ESG in Action: People, Skills, Tools

ESG Competences

Relevant ESG Competences used

1.E.1 Having ethical and sustainable thinking
(Driving the shift from tobacco to stevia with organic and regenerative goals)
3.E.4 Promoting results replication potentials
(Serving as a model for other producer groups in Greece)
3.S.5 Promoting a multi-stakeholder approach
(Working with agronomists, young farmers, women, and food tech partners)
3.S.6 Ability to foster stakeholder involvement
(Training members and activating community-level participation)
1.G.1 Knowledge of systems thinking
(Balancing environment, cooperative economics, and rural social inclusion)
3.G.4 Understanding and planning long-term investments
(Investing in processing, branding, and sustainability certifications)

Methods

- **How progress was tracked:** Digital data from precision farming systems (water use, soil health, input efficiency). Audit reports from organic/fair trade certifiers. Market feedback on product quality and consumer awareness
- **Data collection methods:** Sensor-based field monitoring (gaiasense platform). Lab tests for product purity and consistency. Member training records and participation in ESG education. Stakeholder feedback via cooperative assemblies

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Leading with Purpose, Rooted in Place

How One SME Made ESG Work

Inspiring change

What ESG Leadership looks like

The leadership of Stevia Hellas exemplifies ESG in action—not through abstract strategy, but through bold choices rooted in community, cooperation, and sustainability.

Vision: The cooperative's founders envisioned a sustainable alternative to tobacco that could regenerate the land, support farmers, and meet global demand for natural sweeteners.

Courage: As early adopters of stevia in Europe, they invested in unfamiliar crops and untested markets—despite uncertainty and financial risk.

Transparency & Trust: Through organic certifications, traceable processes, and community engagement, Stevia Hellas earned credibility with partners, members, and consumers.

Impact: The number of active growers in the cooperative continues to rise, from the initial 25 to over 120 members, showing trust in the model and its long-term viability.

Inspiration: Their model encouraged other farming communities in Central Greece to explore high-value, sustainable crops, showing that rural reinvention is possible.

Making it work locally

Adapting ESG to Our Rural Reality

The cooperative aligned ESG goals with local values: land stewardship, product purity, and collective well-being.

Farmers saw **real economic and environmental benefits,** leading to stronger engagement and long-term commitment.

Stevia Hellas proved that rural SMEs can drive sustainability—not as a luxury, but as a practical path to **market relevance and survival**.

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REFLECT

- Transition & Risk:

What challenges would your organization face if it had to shift from a conventional product to a sustainable one, like Stevia Hellas did? How would you manage risk and uncertainty?

- Engagement:

How can you engage your team or community in ESG initiatives when trust in collective action is low?

- Tools vs. Values:

Stevia Hellas did not use formal ESG tools but relied on shared goals and simple monitoring. Can ESG progress happen without complex tools in your context?

- Rural Opportunities:

What hidden assets—land, people, traditions—exist in your rural or local setting that could be leveraged for ESG transformation?

- Inspiration to Action:

If your organization had to send a message like Stevia Hellas to other SMEs, what would it be?