ESG4SMEs
Sustainability in Action

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VOLIOTIS FAMILY ELAIOLADO PILIOU

Case study

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Context

Type and size of SME: Family-owned olive oil mill with 12 permanent staff, plus 8-10 seasonal workers during harvest.

Rural setting: Ano Lechonia, an agricultural and touristic area at the foot of Mount Pelion, near Volos city, in the region of Thessaly, Greece.

Founded in 1969 in the rural region of Mount Pelion, central Greece, Voliotis Family Olive Oil is a small-scale agri-food enterprise with deep roots in traditional olive oil production. Over the decades, the business has evolved from a local olive mill into a vertically integrated company, combining heritage with innovation.

Its mission is to offer high-quality olive oil with authenticity, transparency, and environmental responsibility, while strengthening the bond between local producers, consumers, and the natural landscape of Mount Pelion.

Operating in a region known for its agricultural character but facing challenges related to modernization, youth retention, and environmental pressures, the enterprise embraced ESG as a vehicle for long-term sustainability and community value creation. The owner's vision and proactive leadership turned the business into a model of regenerative rural entrepreneurship.

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ESG Challenge / Opportunity

The company’s main ESG challenge was **environmental**: managing the large volume of organic waste generated during olive processing. Previously, olive pulp and other byproducts were transported to remote mountain sites, incurring high costs, operational inefficiencies, and raising concerns among local residents about pollution and landscape degradation.

This challenge sparked innovation. The business invested in waterless cold-pressing technology and adopted circular practices to reuse byproducts as fertilizer. The result was lower environmental impact, reduced costs, and improved community relations.

Additional challenges included the need to secure funding for new equipment, reorganize the physical layout of the facilities, and train staff to adapt to new machinery and processes. However, each of these obstacles provided learning opportunities, reinforcing the company’s ESG maturity and adaptability.

What did they do?

The Voliotis Family olive mill implemented a **comprehensive sustainability initiative** starting in 2019, addressing both **environmental and business transformation goals**.

At the heart of this change was the strategic investment in waterless olive processing technology. Traditional olive milling required large volumes of water and generated substantial wastewater and organic waste. The new dry extraction system eliminated the need for water entirely, drastically reducing the mill's environmental footprint while also improving energy efficiency and the nutritional quality of the oil.

The initiative also included a circular waste management plan. Olive leaves and twigs, which were previously treated as waste, are now cleaned, ground, and returned to the olive groves as organic fertilizer. This regenerative model reduced the company's waste transport costs and emissions, while benefiting local soil quality and productivity.

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What did they do?

On the **social and governance side**, the initiative opened the doors of the mill to the public. The facility became a certified oleotourism destination, welcoming school groups, tourists, and international visitors. The company created accessible spaces and educational programs, helping visitors understand the benefits of high-quality, sustainable olive oil.

Stakeholders involved in this transformation included:

- The **owner**, who led the initiative as ESG Analyst, Optimizer, and Leader.
- The **owner's son**, a Food Technology student, preparing to continue the ESG journey.
- **Employees**, who were trained in new processes and sustainability principles.
- **Suppliers**, who provided technological guidance and equipment.
- **Local olive producers** and the **community**, who supported the transition and benefited from the improved environmental practices and increased regional visibility.

This transformation was not imposed by regulation alone, but rather driven by a personal vision, market opportunity, and a commitment to the land and its people.

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What changed?

The results of the ESG approach were clearly visible both inside the company and in the wider rural community:

- Cleaner production processes and near-zero waste to landfill
- Improved product quality, flavour, and nutritional profile, gaining new customers and awards
- Stronger relationships with local farmers and community acceptance of sustainable practices
- Enhanced working environment with lower noise, better air quality, and employee satisfaction
- Increased visitor interest through certified oleotourism, blending education, gastronomy, and local culture
- A sense of pride and purpose shared by staff, partners, and the next generation
- Inspired nearby mills to follow sustainable innovations and invest in bottling and tourism

This transformation combined economic resilience with social and environmental impact, proving that small rural SMEs can lead meaningful change by aligning tradition with innovation.

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ESG in Action: People, Skills, Tools

ESG Roles

Who did what?

In the Voliotis Family Olive Oil company, the owner Mr. Voliotis embodied all three ESG roles typical of small rural enterprises:

ESG Leader: Set the sustainable vision, and led with a strong sense of responsibility to the environment and community.

ESG Optimizer: Implemented the waterless extraction process, zero-waste composting model, and upgraded the facility for agrotourism and accessibility.

ESG Analyst: Evaluated results by tracking water and energy use, consulting with suppliers and partners, and aligning decisions with both ESG values and market trends.

His son is progressively engaging to integrate academic Food Technology expertise.

Tools

- **Strategy tools used:** No formal strategic tools (e.g. SWOT, materiality matrices) were applied. Decisions were guided by personal experience, supplier consultations, environmental ethics, and intuitive long-term thinking.
- **KPIs used:** No formal KPIs in place yet. Impact was assessed through observable metrics such as reduced resource use, elimination of waste transport, improved product quality, and awards or certifications received.
- **Reporting standards followed:** No formal ESG reporting standards adopted. However, the company maintains transparency by publishing product analysis certificates online and aligning operations with ISO 9001, FSSC 22000, BIO, and ETHOS CSR certifications.

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ESG in Action: People, Skills, Tools

ESG Competences

Relevant ESG Competences used

1.E.1 Having ethical and sustainable thinking
(The owner’s drive for environmental improvements and zero-waste solutions)
3.E.4 Promoting results replication potentials
(Becoming a role model for other SMEs and local producers)
3.S.5 Promoting a multi-stakeholder approach
(Engaging local producers, schools, tourists, and the community)
3.S.6 Ability to foster stakeholders’ involvement
(Involving staff, family members, and external partners in ESG actions)
1.G.1 Knowledge of systems thinking
(Integrating environmental, social, and economic aspects in decisions)
3.G.3 Knowledge of compliance regulations and procedures
(Certifications for food safety, organic, tourism, and environmental standards)
3.G.4 Understanding and planning long-term investments
(Strategic investments in machinery, building renovations, and photovoltaics)

Methods

- **How progress was tracked:** Through regular monitoring of energy and water consumption via utility bills, direct customer and visitor feedback, and external audits from certification bodies.
- **Data collection methods:** Utility bills, product quality analyses, sensory feedback from consumers and tourists, and certification audit reports.

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Leading with Purpose, Rooted in Place

How One SME Made ESG Work

Inspiring change

What ESG Leadership looks like

The owner of Voliotis Family Olive Oil demonstrated ESG leadership not through formal strategies, but through a long-term vision grounded in responsibility, courage, and transparency.

Vision: Future-oriented leadership, investing in innovation for sustainability and competitiveness.

Risk-taking: Adoption of technologies uncommon in the sector, demonstrating entrepreneurial courage.

Transparency: Regular publication of product analyses, ensuring consumer trust.

Influence: His leadership model has inspired other olive mills in the region to shift toward value-added production and sustainability in the local sector.

Making it work locally

Adapting ESG to Our Rural Reality

- The ESG strategy aligned with local values of quality, health, and nature conservation. Farmers appreciated better oil quality and environmental stewardship.
- The mill's approach showed that small rural family businesses can drive cultural shifts towards sustainability while maintaining economic vitality.

Message from the owner to other SMEs!

"Act now for sustainability – not just for the environment but for your business survival. **Markets demand greener products.** Investing in sustainability ensures competitiveness, market access, and future funding opportunities."

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REFLECT

- What helped Voliotis Family to integrate ESG in a rural context?
- What challenges might prevent other small rural businesses from following a similar path?
- What can your SME learn from this case in terms of mindset, methods, or community connection?
- How important were personal values and motivation? Would that be a strength or a challenge in your case?
- How does leadership based on ethics and vision affect long-term results?
- Could an adapted version of Voliotis' approach work in your business or community? What would need to change?
- What support (knowledge, tools, partners, training) would help a transition like this?
- What trade-offs or limitations might exist in such an ESG strategy?
- What small step could your company take today to begin a more integrated ESG journey?