ESG4SMEs
Sustainability in Action

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"ZelOlje„ – Sunflower Oil Cooperative

Case study

Context

Type and size of SME: [Worker cooperative with 12 employees]

Rural setting: [Prekmurje region, northeastern Slovenia – agricultural area with low employment]

Founded in 2018, ZelOlje is a local initiative focused on sunflower seed processing. The company's core activity is the organic production of cold-pressed sunflower oil.

The company lacked structured data on its environmental and social impact, which limited internal reflection and made it difficult to apply for sustainability grants.

ESG monitoring was introduced to improve energy efficiency and transparency towards the local community.

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ESG Challenge / Opportunity

ZelOlje

Sunflower Oil Cooperative

Data on electricity and water use in production was scattered, making it difficult to measure efficiency.

Environmental – energy and water use

Governance: lack of structured data collection

Establishing a unified data collection system would enable regular tracking, year-to-year comparisons, and process improvements.

What did they do?

Explain the ESG decision or initiative taken:

- **Environmental step:**
  They began systematically tracking electricity and water use per litre of oil produced, using internal meters and production logs.
- **Governance step:**
  They assigned a specific staff member (the production manager) to be responsible for ESG data collection and created standard procedures using Excel templates.
- **Approach:**
  Proactive. The decision to implement ESG monitoring was strategic, based on internal reflection and future planning needs—not due to regulatory pressure.
- **Who was involved:**
  The cooperative board approved the initiative. Daily implementation was led by the production manager in collaboration with the administrator, with support from the local chamber of agriculture.

They chose a low-tech, cost-effective approach suitable for rural SMEs, based on internal data sources

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What changed?

- **Water use was reduced by 18%** within one year, after monthly tracking revealed unexpected peaks and inefficiencies in equipment cleaning routines.
- **Staff became more engaged with energy and resource use**, as data visualisation and monthly reviews helped make invisible processes visible. This led to small but impactful behavioural changes on the shop floor.
- **The ESG summary enabled ZelOlje to apply for and receive a €25,000 rural sustainability grant**, as they could demonstrate measurable progress and a clear plan for further improvement.
- **Internal decision-making improved**, with ESG data now used in quarterly meetings to inform maintenance planning, procurement priorities, and investment timing.
- **A culture of continuous improvement emerged**, driven by ownership of the data process and the realisation that even small changes could have measurable results.

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ESG in Action: People, Skills, Tools

ESG Competences and Roles

Who did what?

ESG Analyst (Understanding): The production manager – responsible for understanding and collecting ESG-relevant data (energy, water, safety records).

ESG Leader (Steering): The cooperative president – approved the ESG plan, reviewed KPIs quarterly and linked them to internal improvement decisions.

Relevant ESG Competences used

3.E.1, 4.E.3, 4.G.2, 4.G.3

Tools and methods

- Tools: Excel dashboard, monthly templates, trend summaries
- Tracking: Monthly inputs, quarterly reviews, annual overview
- KPIs: kWh/litre, m^3 water per litre of oil, kg waste/month,
- Data collection: Internal logs and meter readings, manually tracked and checked
- Reporting: The reporting format was adapted from GRI but used only internally to support process improvement, not for regulatory compliance.

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Leading with Purpose, Rooted in Place

How One SME Made ESG Work

Inspiring change

What ESG Leadership looks like

- Vision: ESG used as a tool for improving production efficiency, not just for compliance
- Collaboration: ESG system co-created with staff and supported by the local chamber
- Risk-taking: Voluntarily initiated ESG monitoring before being required
- Transparency: Results shared internally, online, and with local partners
- Influence: Local school used the case as an educational example of sustainability in agriculture

Making it work locally

Adapting ESG to Our Rural Reality

- Adaptation: Tools were low-cost, easy to use (Excel), and required no external consultant
- Consideration of local dynamics: KPIs were chosen based on what matters to the cooperative's work and community expectations (e.g., water, energy)
- Cultural relevance: ESG materials used local language and were visually presented in ways that were accessible to all workers – even seasonal ones

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REFLECT

- Limited staff time and capacity may hinder regular data tracking.
- Even simple data collection (e.g. in Excel) can lead to meaningful improvements.
- Rural SMEs may lack ESG knowledge or digital skills needed to implement tracking.
- This approach can work if roles are clearly assigned and templates are easy to use.
- Local support (e.g. chambers, cooperatives) can help kick-start the process.