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## Empowering smallholder olive growers in northwest Tunisia through an agroecological business model

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### Abstract

Olive cultivation is the most important agroecosystem in the Mediterranean basin. This agroecosystem is facing tremendous challenges, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, environmental pollution and resource degradation, as well as increasing price volatility with harmful implications for farmers' incomes, livelihoods, and rural development. Agroecology is considered actually as the mainstream model for transforming agriculture toward more sustainable and resilient agri-food systems within the given economic and political context. This study aims to conduct an agroecological assessment of the current business model of the olive growers and to develop an upgraded one integrating the agroecological practices and principles in northwest Tunisia. An inclusive and participative approach based on workshops with the main stakeholders in the olive oil value chain was conducted. In addition, a business model canvas (BMC), followed by the application of the Business Agroecology Criteria Tool (B-ACT) was used.

The agroecological assessment results show that six principles specifically, co-creation of knowledge, social value and diets, fairness, connectivity, land and natural resource governance, and participation are integrated within the existing BMC, but hold significant promise for enhancement within an upgraded BMC. Conversely, four principles (recycling, input reduction, animal health, and biodiversity) demonstrate the strongest levels of alignment with agroecological transition in the current BMC. The upgraded BMC represents a transformative vision addressing the constraints of the current model, emphasising collaborative endeavours, agroecological practices, and strategic partnerships, as well as an accelerator to catalyze agroecological transitions. It focuses on economic diversification, niche market penetration, and heritage preservation. The establishment of an Olive Growers' Association is geared towards unifying and empowering olive growers, fostering collaboration and access to resources, knowledge exchange, collective decision-making, and co-learning in sustainable food systems. Additionally, the adoption of agroecological practices (composting and intercropping) aims to optimise yields, improve soil health, and promote long-term sustainability. The creation of a Controlled Designation of Origin label serves to authenticate and elevate the olive oil quality, establishing its unique identity and distinguishing it in the market. Moreover, integrating olive oil processing, conditioning, and marketing into the Olive Growers' association ensures quality control, streamlines operations, and enhances value across the olive growers' BMC.

**Keywords:** Agroecological business model, food systems, olive growers, sustainability, Tunisia