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Combining a business idea with climate adaptation in the Dolomites, Italy

A sustainable and replicable forestry-related business model enhances community engagement and climate resilience after Storm Vaia

The VAIA business model – named after the storm that struck the Dolomites in 2018 – restores damaged forests and utilises deadwood to create sound boxes for phones.

Key Learnings

- **Local community engagement increases product value:** Involving local craftsmen to transform the dead wood into design objects has created a strong link between the territory and the company's mission. It has also strengthened the economy in northeastern Italy, generating a positive social impact and strengthening brand identity.
- **The business model boosts environmental regeneration:** Funding one tree planting for every product sold contributed to reforesting the areas affected by the storm. This way, the business fosters environmental regeneration and climate adaptation.
- **Circular economy principles support overall sustainability:** A dedicated product line helped clean up five Alpine glaciers. Recovering 4,000 m² of geotextile fabric used to slow down ice and snow melt and repurposing it as sustainable packaging, prevented pollution and transformed waste into a valuable resource.
- **Combining international growth and economic sustainability:** With over €4 million in revenue and sales in 38 countries, the company has demonstrated that sustainability and economic growth can go hand in hand.

About the region

The Dolomites, a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#), are a mountain range located in northeastern Italy, spanning across several provinces including Trento, Bolzano, Belluno, and Pordenone. This alpine region is known for its dramatic limestone peaks, dense coniferous forests, and rich biodiversity. In October [2018](#), one of the most severe windstorms in recent Italian history – Storm Vaia – struck the region. Wind speeds exceeded 200 km/h, destroying about 8.5 million cubic meters of forest. The storm damaged roughly 14 million trees, particularly in the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Friuli Venezia Giulia. The Dolomites face increasing climate pressures.

Climate Hazards

Storms, Extreme Heat, Ice and Snow

Sector

Business and Industry, Forestry, Mountain Areas,

Biodiversity protection

Key system

Local Economic System, Ecosystem and Nature Based Solutions



Figure 1: Location of the Dolomites in the European context. Image Credit: [Britannica](#).

Climate Threats

The Dolomites are increasingly affected by climate change. Rising temperatures and melting glaciers are reshaping the landscape. Extreme weather events, such as storms, droughts, floods, and landslides, are becoming more frequent. Extreme rain events have occurred four times more often in 2025 compared to 2018 (Il Sole 24 Ore, Italy). Water scarcity is threatening lakes, springs, and natural ecosystems.

Biodiversity is at risk as many alpine species struggle to adapt to the changing climate and environmental conditions. The species move to higher altitudes to escape warmer temperatures at lower heights, which reduces their range. Human pressures, like mass tourism and infrastructure development, worsen the situation. Local communities face new environmental and economic challenges. The Dolomites symbolise the delicate balance between nature and culture.

A severe storm as a chance for a new business opportunity for climate resilience

After the 2018 storm severely damaged the region and devastated the timber industry, local communities and political stakeholders responded by adopting concrete adaptation strategies. Two friends founded a start-up to recover the wood by creating sustainably developed sound boxes. The business uses local

materials (wood), involves local supply chains, and supports the local economic development of communities affected by the storm.

Environmental awareness is the company's foundation. The idea was to turn collective trauma into a tangible opportunity for regeneration and restoration, while contributing to climate resilience. The adaptation model builds on three pillars:



Figure 2: The destruction of Storm Vaia in 2018. Image Credit: Marianna Moser.

1. **Land Regeneration:** By closely working with local companies along the supply chain to repurpose timber, the company avoids waste production and supports the economy in the areas affected by the storm. Twelve local craftsmen create the products, and for every VAIA Cube sold, the company plants a tree in the regions impacted by the storm. To date, the company has financed more than 150,000 tree plantings.

2. **Community Engagement:** Each product – [VAIA Cube](#) (a sound box), [VAIA Focus](#) (a smartphone screen amplifier supporting cultural initiatives), and [VAIA People](#) (a docking station contributing to glacier protection) tells a story of renewal and encourages people to reflect on the environmental impact of their everyday choices. By helping to fund cultural initiatives like the La Ribalta Theatre in Bolzano, the company promotes social inclusion and artistic expression. Every year, the company hosts a public event called “The Forest of Innovators,” bringing together local communities to actively participate in reforestation efforts.



Figure 3: VAIA sound cube made of damaged wood. Image Credit: Giulia Lenzi.

3. **Circular Economy and Positive Impact:** The approach creates shared value by generating positive environmental and social outcomes, including participatory reforestation and raising awareness about climate change. Repurposing salvaged materials, such as transforming damaged wood into unique, handcrafted objects, gives new life to what would otherwise go to waste. A dedicated product line recovered 4,000 m² of geotextile from the Presena glacier and turned it into sustainable packaging. In its primary use, geotextile protects glaciers from melting snow and ice. Instead of discarding the material, the company prevents pollution by transforming it into a valuable resource.

Successfully restoring forests through collaboration

"We have shown that a new way of doing business is possible. Now, we want to make it inevitable. Because 'sustainability' isn't just a word – It's a daily responsibility."

Federico Stefani, Co-founder VAIA

The success of the VAIA startup is rooted in a strong collaboration between individuals, institutions, and local communities, working together to create lasting positive change. The adaptation measures revitalise damaged wood through sustainable design and ethical production practices. Every product sold is more than just an object – it actively contributes to tangible environmental initiatives, including reforestation efforts and the preservation of vulnerable glaciers.

The company also supports scientific research at [Ca' Foscari University of Venezia](#), through its [Ice Memory](#) glacier project. VAIA combines traditional craftsmanship with a strong commitment to ecological responsibility, transforming materials while inspiring a shared sense of purpose and care for the planet's future.

Financial revenues

The adaptation actions generated over €4 million in revenues with sales in over 38 countries. The business model shows that adaptation, economic growth, and sustainability can work together. 60% of customers are consumers and 40% businesses. Italy holds the largest share with 80% of products sold, Germany the second largest with 15% and other EU countries account for 5%.

Summary

Transforming wood damaged by the storm into unique, handcrafted objects through a sustainable upcycling process showcases how the effects of climate change can become a business opportunity. The VAIA company collaborates with local communities, institutions, and other companies to regenerate land, support the local economy, and contribute to concrete environmental initiatives, such as reforestation and glacier preservation. The company combines sustainable design, positive environmental impact, and social engagement through its products.

Further information

- www.vaia.eu
- <https://www.facebook.com/therealvaia/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/therealvaia/>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/company/vaiasrl/posts/?feedView=all>
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPtTJEh97yiEMm-vE_Ux3Aw

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