

Aspiration and Structure in Mediterranean Sustainability

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Sustainability in the Mediterranean is rarely held back by a shortage of stated ambition, and the region now possesses an abundance of strategies, targets, and declarations addressed to its overlapping environmental, economic, and social pressures. What it possesses in far smaller measure is the productive, institutional, and behavioral apparatus through which such ambition becomes ordinary practice, and it is precisely this distance between what is declared and what is structurally feasible that the contributions gathered in the present issue examine from several directions at once. The region continues to warm faster than the global mean and to absorb pressures from energy demand, demographic change, migratory flows, and a deep dependence on tourism, and these conditions interact in ways that resist sectoral treatment and reward integrated analysis (Salvati and Vardopoulos, 2024; Vardopoulos et al., 2024). Read together, the studies and the data paper assembled herewith suggest that the unfinished business of the regional transition lies less in the formulation of goals than in the slow reconfiguration of the structures, the systems of measurement, and the everyday choices on which any durable transformation depends.

This journal was conceived to hold environmental, economic, and socio-cultural perspectives within a single conversation, and its thematic pillars of cities and environment, economics and accounting, and society, tourism, and culture were intended to keep these dimensions in productive contact rather than apart. The contributions in this issue answer that intention by refusing the convenience of treating work, production, finance, environmental assessment, and energy as separate compartments, and each in its own register asks what would have to change in the underlying structure for a sustainability objective to be met. The issue draws its coherence from a shared diagnostic posture rather than from a common method or dataset, attentive throughout to the gap between the surface of policy and the conditions beneath it.

The opening study, by Drakaki, Tatsi, and Karamanis (2025), revisits the question of job polarization in Greece across the quarter century from 2000 to 2025 and situates the national labor market within the wider comparative frame of the European Union, the G7, and the G20. Drawing on harmonized ILOSTAT employment data classified at the one-digit ISCO-08 level and reading it through the task-based account of technological change, the authors test whether the Greek experience reproduces the hollowing of middle-skill employment observed across many advanced economies. Their finding is a careful negative, since the Greek labor market does not trace a clear polarization path and, although professional occupations have expanded, managerial and advanced technical roles remain structurally thin while employment continues to gather in service and elementary activities. The deeper argument holds that occupational restructuring in Greece reflects persistent production structures, weak technological upgrading, and institutional rigidities rather than a genuine movement toward a knowledge-intensive model, a reading that resonates with longer-run accounts of economic resilience and recovery in the European South (Doukas et al., 2025). For a region whose prosperity leans heavily on tourism and on labor-intensive services, the implication is sobering, because macroeconomic stabilization on its own will not generate the higher value-added employment on which a more sustainable and inclusive growth model would rest.

Where the opening study reads the regional predicament through the composition of employment, the second contribution reads it through the composition of output, as Theodorakopoulos (2025) asks what the persistent coexistence of high public debt and a weak industrial base means for the sustainability of the European economy as a whole. Through a comparative and longitudinal analysis of Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal set within the constraints of the Economic and Monetary Union, he traces how the erosion of manufacturing capacity shapes economic resilience, external balance, and the capacity to absorb shocks. Greece appears as the extreme case, its deindustrialization and heavy reliance on tourism and services leaving it chronically exposed to external financing and vulnerable to disruption, whereas Italy shows how a

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strong and diversified industrial base can cushion the destabilizing effects of comparable debt without fully escaping long-term stagnation, and Spain and Portugal occupy an intermediate position in which moderate manufacturing coexists with a deepening dependence on services. The argument that follows is uncomfortable for a continent accustomed to financing as the instrument of cohesion, since Theodorakopoulos (2025) holds that the divergence between the industrial core of the North and the service-oriented economies of the South cannot be corrected by transfers or internal devaluation alone and that a durable Mediterranean growth model cannot be built on services, while his reading of the Common Agricultural Policy as a mechanism that has stabilized rural incomes yet left the productive hierarchy of the Union largely intact carries the diagnosis into the sphere of sectoral policy (Doukas et al., 2023). What he proposes is an industrial renaissance understood as a systemic necessity rather than a regional ambition, achievable only through closer coordination of monetary and fiscal policy and an explicit recognition of the structural interdependence that binds surplus and deficit economies together.

From the structure of production, the issue turns to the structures through which capital is governed, as Papageorgiou and Kopsidas (2025) examine how the principles of environmental, social, and governance practice become embedded inside a major Greek bank. Banks stand at the center of any sustainability transition because their lending and underwriting decisions determine which activities are financed, and the most material environmental consequences of a bank arise less from its own premises than from the portfolios it supports, which makes the question of how ESG is institutionalized within such an institution a matter of real consequence. Adopting an interpretivist stance and a single-case design built on six semi-structured interviews with executives across the strategy, risk, controlling, and compliance functions at Alpha Bank, and reading the material through reflexive thematic analysis, the authors trace how abstract commitments are translated into governance reform, dedicated ESG risk functions, transparent reporting, workforce engagement, and strategic integration. What gives the study its candor is its attention to the frictions that accompany that translation, since the executives describe the complexity of ESG data, the difficulty of measurement, the burden of evolving regulation, and the cost of implementation as obstacles that coexist with the opportunities ESG opens in risk management, investor confidence, and reputation, a tension that recalls the wider gap between the formal adoption of sustainability commitments and their operational reality (Kopsidas et al., 2026; Vardopoulos and Passas, 2025). By following the Greek banking sector at the precise moment when post-crisis reform meets the crystallization of European ESG expectations, the paper supplies a granular account of institutionalization as a lived organizational process and ties the credibility of sustainability reporting to the broader search for indicators that are at once decision-useful and trustworthy (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2024).

The same distance between formal procedure and substantive effect animates the fourth contribution, in which Angelaki, Garefalakis, and Samaras turn to environmental impact assessment as an instrument for sustainable development in the coastal and island settings where ecosystems are most fragile and tourism pressures most intense. Drawing on a qualitative review of the literature, they examine the conceptual foundations of the assessment process, its application in tourism planning, and the conditions that govern its effectiveness, and they arrive at a sober reading in which the instrument carries strong potential to support environmentally responsible decision making yet is repeatedly constrained by weak institutional capacity, insufficient baseline data, limited stakeholder participation, and inadequate enforcement. In many of the cases they survey the assessment operates as a procedural requirement to be satisfied rather than as a strategic tool capable of shaping the trajectory of development, an outcome whose costs are magnified in island and coastal systems where carrying capacity is low, cumulative effects accumulate quietly across many separate projects, and climate-related pressures compound the strain on already scarce resources. The authors give particular weight to the marginalization of local communities, whose dependence on the very resources that tourism consumes renders their limited influence over final decisions both an equity concern and a practical weakness in the assessment itself, a theme that connects to a longer record of work on residents' attitudes toward tourism development in the region. Their conclusion presses for a move beyond compliance toward an assessment practice that is integrated, precautionary, climate-adaptive, and genuinely participatory, so that environmental evaluation contributes to protection, inclusion, and resilience rather than merely recording that a procedure has been followed.

The issue closes with the feature that this journal regards as one of its distinctive commitments, a data paper that documents an empirical resource in full and releases it for reuse. The dataset records the responses of 549 households in Greece to a structured 2019 survey of environmental awareness, environmentally responsible behavior, perceptions of renewable energy sources, and the realized and intended adoption of six residential microgeneration technologies,

among them photovoltaic systems, solar thermal collectors, ground-source and air-source heat pumps, biomass boilers, and small wind turbines. What gives the resource its value is the way it holds attitudinal, behavioral, residential, spatial, and technology-specific information within a single instrument, accompanied by two composite environmental indices, several reverse-coded items, embedded attention checks, and a fully reversible coding scheme that renders the records immediately usable in standard statistical environments. The data provided the empirical foundation for an earlier study of the determinants of market acceptance of small-scale renewable technologies (Karytsas et al., 2019), and their release here invites secondary work on energy transition, technology acceptance, behavioral segmentation, and policy analysis, in keeping with a view of the household as an active participant in decentralized energy rather than a passive consumer of it (Vardopoulos and Vassiliades, 2025). By documenting the instrument with this degree of care, the paper also advances the open-science commitments that the journal has placed at the heart of its purpose.

Set side by side, the five contributions describe a region caught between a clear sense of where it must go and a structural inheritance that slows its arrival, since the labor study shows a production system that has not yet learned to generate knowledge-intensive work, the industrial study shows an output structure still missing the manufacturing base on which resilience and external balance depend, the banking study shows a governance architecture forming around sustainability faster than the data and measurement needed to make it credible, the assessment study shows an environmental procedure that registers compliance more readily than it secures protection, and the data paper supplies the household-level evidence without which the energy transition cannot be understood from below. None of these accounts offers the comfort of a transition already accomplished, and that restraint is their shared strength, because each treats sustainability as a structural and behavioral problem to be worked through rather than a destination to be announced. The Mediterranean framing of the issue is not a parochial one, since semi-arid and tourism-dependent economies elsewhere face strikingly similar tensions between aspiration and structure, and the comparative value of regional scholarship lies in the transferable diagnoses it makes possible (Salvati and Vardopoulos, 2024).

The work collected herewith reflects what this journal hopes to become a venue where environmental, economic, and socio-cultural questions about the Mediterranean are pursued with rigor and without the easy reassurance of slogans, and where the unglamorous structures beneath the rhetoric of sustainability receive the attention they require. I am grateful to the authors for the seriousness of their contributions and to the reviewers whose judgement helped shape them, and I commend this issue to a readership of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working toward a more resilient and equitable Mediterranean future.

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