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Quality systems and practices in agro-ecotourism enterprises in rural trans-border regions

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“Quality systems and practices in agro-ecotourism enterprises in rural trans - border regions”.

Tourism comprises a self- contained phenomenon synonymous to consumption and spare time and its growth. Due to the development of technology and the improvement of the standards of living it has taken global dimensions. As a result tourism has developed into a pure industry, leading the economy and society in local, regional, national and global level towards important changes. Based on the quality and the value of the natural and cultural heritage, as well as on the growth of the level of the given services, tourism developed several alternative types. An alternative type of tourism is agro-ecotourism, which went through an enormous rise and demand. The change of consumer’s behavior and tourist’s consideration of the environment has led organizations that take actions in that sector, into the adoption of high level of standards in all aspects of the generative procedure. The main reason for this continual improvement of the service level and the quality of the given services, as well as the clamp-down for the protection of the environment, was the reason that sustainable tourist growth became a strategic aim. The quality and the practices that ensure sustainability are a continuous procedure which is accomplished by the implementation of quality systems, aiming to achieve the Total Quality. Companies that comply with the specific standards receive quality marks, which conform to this kind of favor that will remain to the consumer’s consciousness.

In that perspective, the aim of the research was to examine whether agro-ecotouristic enterprises are certified for the given services, for the protection of the consumers/ tourists, as well as for the protection of the environment. The research was carried out during the last four months of 2011 in three regions, located in three deferent countries. The regions are in the Trans- border area in Northern Greece, South Albania and South F.Y.R.O. Macedonia.

Through the use of questionnaires and personal interviews, data was gathered and analyzed with the use of SPSS. Through statistical analysis, we detect that the majority of the organizations do not apply any certification system for the services that offer. However, most of the entrepreneurs were willing to learn them and apply them to their companies.

Key words: Tourism enterprises, quality systems, consumer’s protection, Trans border areas.

JEL codes: R10, R11

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1. Quality systems in agrotourism

When it comes to agrotourism, there is not any cohesive and widely accepted certification system. The term “certification” is used for many different reasons and it refers to many different things. Certification is a process that evaluates, controls and afterwards it officially affirms that a unit, a product, a process or a service abides by specific standards. All those who abide by the basic principles are awarded with a marketable sign.

It is a common ground for all the touristic associations that the certification systems for sustainable tourism should embody the certification of both the process and the execution of the process itself. The certification labels are awarded by non-governmental organizations, by private companies and by governmental organizations to companies that satisfy a number of criteria in their practices. The certification stamps validate the demand for entrepreneurial ability and consumer support. They are also useful marketing tools that facilitate intra-entrepreneurial relations and motivate the enterprises to produce environmentally friendly touristic services. The certification stamps also provide the consumers with valuable information about the sustainable products of tourism and help them make more conscious destination choices.

According to a study (2002) by the World Tourism Organization, there are more than 60 sustainable and ecotouristic certification programs in the world and 50 in Europe, mainly in Germany, Italy and France. There are few programs that operate in a global range. There are some of peripheral nature and more of national or local nature and each of them operated under different management criteria.

Due to the lack of official methods that impose the principles of sustainable management in tourism, there is a rising number of individual initiatives emerged. Those initiatives take the form of ethic codes, textbooks, awards and ecological labels. There are many ecological labels that represent different concepts and criteria and that operate in different geographical fields. Those labels narrow the need for specialization and implementation of specific systems because they cover completely or partly the requirements of an evaluation and compliance process. The rising number of certification programs has caused confusion as to the advantages of each. The final responsible organization that plans the European policy for the ecological labels is the European Committee of Eco-label. The strategy behind the Eco-label influences the environment as it directly forms the prerequisites of the product. The Eco-label is a powerful advertising tool as it influences the processes and choices of production; it is connected with the market, the primary and secondary users of the product. The Eco-label, thus, covers the consumption and the provision of services.

In parallel with the implementation of systems of environmental management, certain eco-labels or stamps of environmental quality have been developed on a local or peripheral level. Their objective is to implement the best technical solutions in order to prevent and deal with the environmental impact of the touristic enterprises. It is assessed that there are 30 to 40 such schemes operating in Europe.

2. Quality Systems

The current modern challenges create the necessity of a constant pursuit and adoption of sustainable touristic development that prioritizes the environment and the human being. The touristic industry should expect to raise the level of the quality of the provided services and to adopt practices that upgrade the environment. The first main step towards environmental certification was made in 1985, when the first blue flags were awarded as a method of encouragement for the compliance with the legislation of the European Council for the quality of swimming water. Since then, the institution of environmental education in Europe has been expanded and has certificated more than 1800 beaches and 600 marinas in 2000. In 2001 the institution expanded beyond the European borders, to South Africa and the Caribbean Seas.²

The organization of national standards established in 1996 ISO 14001 which can be awarded to all organization of any industry including touristic enterprises. In 1998, the environmental program of the United Nations publicized the first essay regarding eco-labels in tourism, a fact that encouraged the governments and the non-governmental organizations to further develop eco-labels. Today, the field of implementation has been expanded and it now includes services of the hotel industry, touristic enterprises and hotels particularly. EMAS was invented for the local authorities and it is the only edition for the faculty of services. EMAS is a mechanism of the European Union by the means of which the enterprises that improve their environmental profile for both products and processes and abide by the legislations are being recognized and rewarded. The transparency, the accessibility and the provision of environmental information are the key factors that differentiate EMAS from other systems of environmental management.

Environmental management has evolved into an important issue for many organizations. The reduction of waste produced and energy consumed combined with the more efficient use of sources can lead to economic benefit apart from the obvious environmental benefit. EMAS is being supported by the State and by the responsible Ministries and organizations for the environment. The organizations that participate in this action commit to the improvement of their environmental efficiency and economic competitiveness.

Every touristic unit needs to secure the quality of the environment by implementing complete environmental strategies and to appear sensitive to the environmental impact of its operation.³ This mainly concerns hotel units that consist the biggest part of the touristic industry. Hotel units need to follow the current trends and to adjust to the requirements of the market and the legislation. This should be done in

² Avlonitis S., (2003), *Check Data & Quality Control*, publication Ellin, Athens.

³ Vrontakis G., (2005), *Environmental and Energy Excellence. Modern Applications for Hotel Units*, www.hotel-restaurant.gr

order to secure their competitiveness and to make sure they satisfy the prerequisites for further development.

The integration of an environmental dimension into the operation of a hotel unit will considerably help the hotel to sustainably develop. The preservation of the quality of the environment is necessary for the preservation of the quality of the touristic business. The environmental sensitivity and the development of activities that protect the environment can be used as a tool to attract tourists.⁴ The increase of the number of the hotels that run under the Certification System of Environmental Management is the pre requirement for the protection of the natural environment from the touristic development and the operation of hotel units.

The constant improvement of the service and the quality of those services is the strategic objective of touristic development. In order to meet this objective along with the less expensive operation of the touristic enterprises, they need to systematically and environmentally upgrade through a complete program of cost reduction. This concept integrates the touristic development into an environmental planning that aims to the rational use and management of resources, the protection from pollution and utilization of mild and sustainable energy sources. In addition, the environmental planning also manages to increase the levels of thermal and audiovisual conformity in a space, based on environmentally friendly systems and materials. In this way, it reduces to the minimum the technologies of high consumption of energy. The result is both aesthetically nice and efficient.

3. “Local Agreements of Quality” in Greece

The globalization and the opening of the markets brought the agricultural areas in the position to deal with an open and competitive environment. In order to respond to the new consequences, to get promoted in the market, to support and designate their products and services, many regions of Greece created the “Local Agreements of Quality”. The aim was to officially certify their products. It is a form of the “Social Capital” and a linking substance that keeps a society cohesive. It is a modern construction that completed the local democracy, it activates the citizens, it participates in the development and created the prerequisites for a local endogenous development. It is connected to the collective entrepreneurship as this is represented today, in the form of Local Agreements or Enterprises Networks.

The Local Agreements of Quality include a number of organizations that are active in the touristic development and projection of a region. The agreement is based on an understanding between the members of the web of organizations. The objective is to establish certain mutually accepted specifications of quality, to improve the services provided and to project the local identity of the region. It is an agreement and a declaration of professionals that share common or complementary characteristics. They agree and decide together to voluntarily cooperate in order to

⁴ Spanos I., Lagoudi A., (2002), Complete environmental management for hotel units. The prerequisites of development, www.hotel-restaurant.gr.

promote their region as a top destination, with a common vision of the quality of their region.

The Local Agreements of Quality in tourism focus on the cooperation and collaboration for quality touristic services in the countryside. They differentiate the touristic product by incorporating elements of traditional legacy (architecture, gastronomy). They thus exploit the identity of the region and the local production of agricultural products. Each member represents the other, the whole team, the whole region. Their objective is to protect the fame of the region, as a “collective legacy” that belongs to everybody and that must be preserved by a collective construction.

The LAQ are established as an initiative by the local professionals, such as the professionals of tourism that includes hospitality, accommodation, provision of services, thematic tourism, production and alteration of local products, cottage industry and handicraft, environment and culture under the auspices of the Local Authorities and with the legal form of a non-governmental company. The community programs fund such activities with a 75% that makes the cost minimum. The community programs is a unique opportunity to create a LAQ that would ensure a common touristic policy, an expanded projection and promotion of the region, a rational and secure touristic development, certification and validation of the touristic product. The LAQ can be viable regardless the community programs because they can use the profit made by selling the local traditional products or by providing services (accommodation, organizing excursions).

4. Quality labels

- **The quality label Agrocert** certifies products of Protected Destination of Origin and Protected Geographical Indication and products of special aviary breeding. Agrocert follows an Integrated Management of Agricultural Production system, according to which the producer drastically reduces the use of chemical substances and limits cultivation interventions. The implementation of this system aims to control all the stages of the production process, to inform and educate the producers, to reduce the cost of production, to protect the producers' and consumers' health, to protect the environment and to produce safe and quality agricultural products that meet the requirements of the market. The implementation of the system is funded by several European programs.
- **A local agreement** for quality in agrotourism is “**PINDOS**” (Quality of products Equality of opportunities New Economy Structural policies Complete interventions Strategic cooperations). Its objective is to form the proper conditions for sustainable development in the mountains by creating certain prerequisites for the preservation of the population and the attraction of young people through the implementation of an alternative type of development. PINDOS expects to create a fertile ground for the economic restructuring and activation of the local communities. In this way, the places where PINDOS is implemented will acquire a dynamic economy and subsequently they will competitively enter into the socioeconomic environment of the country. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs that will attempt to get this certification will be

greatly benefited. To be more particular, they will succeed in preserving their agricultural profile, in designating and utilizing the cultural legacy and in proposing and implementing innovative ideas.

As far as methodology is concerned, the approach of this label specializes in five levels. The first one regards the basic equipment, the second regards the services, the third regards the tastes, the fourth regards the architecture and the fifth the environment.

- **The Local Agreement of Quality** for touristic services in the countryside of the Prefecture of Kozani has the trade name “Xenios Zeus”. It is a modern cooperation between individual that takes actions that would benefit all the citizens and the community as a whole. The objective of the company that was created for the certification label is social, educational, scientific, environmental, nation-directed and not at all speculative. More specifically, the company tries to create the prerequisites for the provision of quality touristic services, the protection of the cultural legacy and traditional aesthetics. At the same time, the company aims to protect the environment from the touristic activity and to ensure sustainable development of the region. LAQ’s goal is to inform both the companies and the visitors and to protect the consumers/visitors from speculative practices. Among other goals of the LAQ are the education, training and rise of awareness of the companies and their personnel, the cooperation with an expert on touristic issues in order to acquire the technical knowledge for better treatment of the consumers/visitors. The local agreement of quality “Xenios Zeus” was technically supported by the Developmental Company of Western Macedonia (ANKO SA) in the context of LEADER+. It was comprised in 31st December 2005 by 15 guesthouses, 3 restaurants, 2 information centers and one visitable winery. The main characteristic was the agricultural exploitations in the countryside of the prefecture of Kozani. The town of Kozani was first presented with the project in February 2006 in the chamber of the administrative council of Kozani.
- **The “Certification Label of Agrotourism”** was established in Greece by Agrotouristic SA for the enterprises that deal with tourism in the countryside, including all forms and services. Certain organization cooperated in order for this label to emerge: ELOT, as a state representer of standardization, Agrotouristic SA and the Greek Tourism Organization. The quality label and certification of agrotourism recognizes the level of services offered by the certified agrotouristic enterprises and it thus is an extremely important reason why a particular unit should be chosen by a visitor. It is valid for three years and it responds to the requirements of quality set by the Greek Prerequisite ELOT PRD 1417. Annual inspections are realized in order to secure the implementation of the system.
- **The Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP)** assigned to a specialized architect to write two books in order to influence the local community to preserve the traditional buildings of the area. The theme of the books was the ways and methods of renovating traditional buildings. The books were distributed to the

local people and they were also given the ability of direct counseling. The program of counseling on how to renovate traditional buildings was funded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

5. The methodology of the research

A field research was realized in order to analyze the degree of adoption and implementation of the quality labels in agrotourism. The field of the research was three trans border agrotouristic areas: the province of Koritsa in Southeast Albania, the area of Prespa in Southwest FYROM and Western Macedonia in Greece. There were certain methodological difficulties during the research. The province of Koritsa (Albania), which presents a rapid rate of development of touristic services during the past fifteen years, has never implemented or established any quality control system. The region of FYROM is going through a crisis and most of the units that were previously established with high standards are now closed. Furthermore, there are no quality labels.

Consequently, the research was restricted in the Greek area and more particularly in the prefectures of Kozani and Florina that are characterized by an agrotouristic identity and development that was organized and upgraded during the past decade.

The field of the research includes the Municipalities of Kozani (Kozani), Voio (Siatista) and Servia-Velventos (Neraida, Velventos, Ano Komi) in the Prefecture of Kozani. In the Prefecture of Florina the research was carried out in the Municipality of Aetos (Aetos, Nymfaio, Sklithro), Amyntaio (Lehovo, Limnohori), Prespa (Psarades, Laimos, district of Platees) and Florina (Agia Paraskevi).

The research was realized from October until December 2011 by the means of structured questionnaires that were completed by personal interviews. The questionnaire includes four units of questions which evaluate the quality labels ISO and HACCP, the local quality labels for tourism in the region and their contribution to the competitiveness of the enterprises. 25 enterprises out of the 41 agreed to participate in the research.

6. The research findings

The statistical analysis of the answers provides the following conclusions.

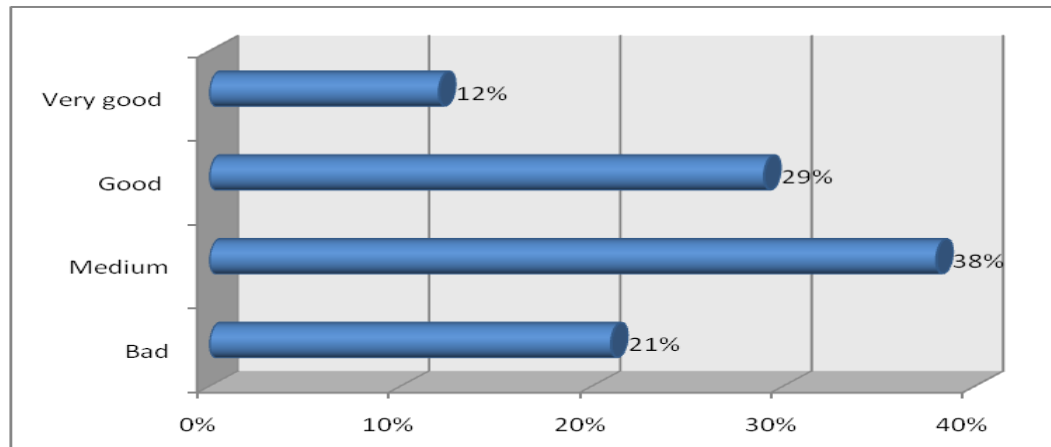
The participants from the Prefecture of Kozani were funded by the community initiative Leader+, while the participants from the Prefecture of Florina were funded by both Leader+ and by the Complete Programs of Rural Development for upgrade or establishment of restaurants, accommodation spaces and coffee shops.

The majority of the participants in the research are men between 31 and 40 years old. Only 8% are women of the same age. 71% of the participants are High school graduates, 21% are college graduates and 8% are Primary school graduates.

Most of the responders are working in the touristic industry from 6 to 10 years (54%). 21% are working from 11 to 15 years and only 4% are working from 16 to 20

years in the business. The level of quality in agrotourism is characterized medium by the 38%, good by the 29%, bad by the 21% and very good by the 12% of the responders.

1st Graph: Level of quality in agrotourism



Only 8% of the enterprises are certified by ISO and the vast majority has not yet been interested in getting any form of certification. The HACCP certification presents the same percentages. The advantages of adopting the ISO quality label are presented in the following table.

1st Table: Advantages of adopting ISO

| | Better image | Better quality of products & services | Customer satisfaction | Modern organization |
|-----------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| None | 4% | 8% | 4% | 8% |
| Moderate | 21% | 22% | 16% | 16% |
| Important | 42% | 37% | 46% | 38% |
| Excellent | 33% | 33% | 34% | 38% |

All the enterprises declare that the adoption of HACCP has positive consequences. The degree of evaluation and the specific advantages are presented in the following table.

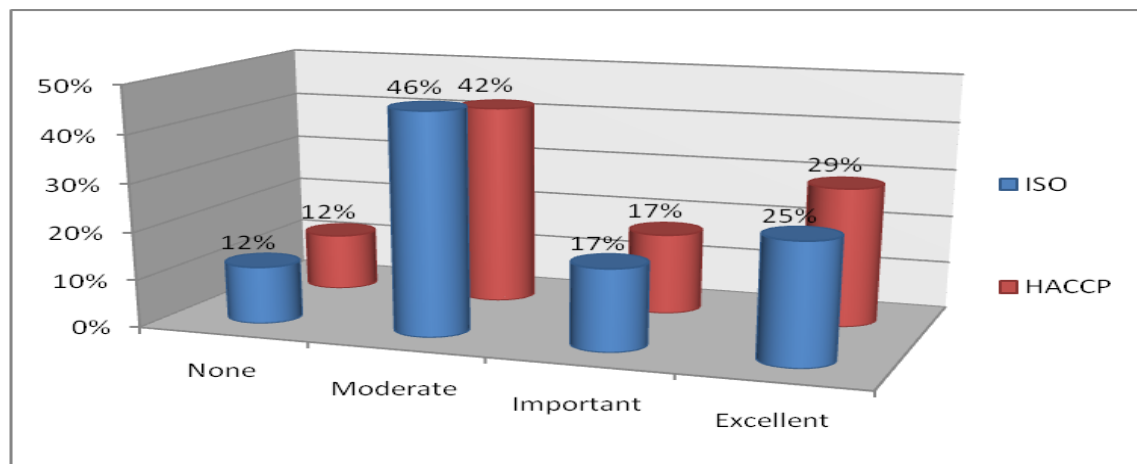
2nd Table: Advantages of adopting HACCP

| | Hygienic conditions of production | workers security | Product safety | quality of food | Customer satisfaction |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| None | | | | | |
| Moderate | 21% | 25% | 25% | 23% | 23% |
| Important | 33% | 29% | 33% | 29% | 33% |
| Excellent | 46% | 46% | 42% | 48% | 44% |

Some of the participants in the research (17%) are certified by the local agreement of quality “Xenios Zeus”, while a bigger percentage has not been certified by any local agreements of quality.

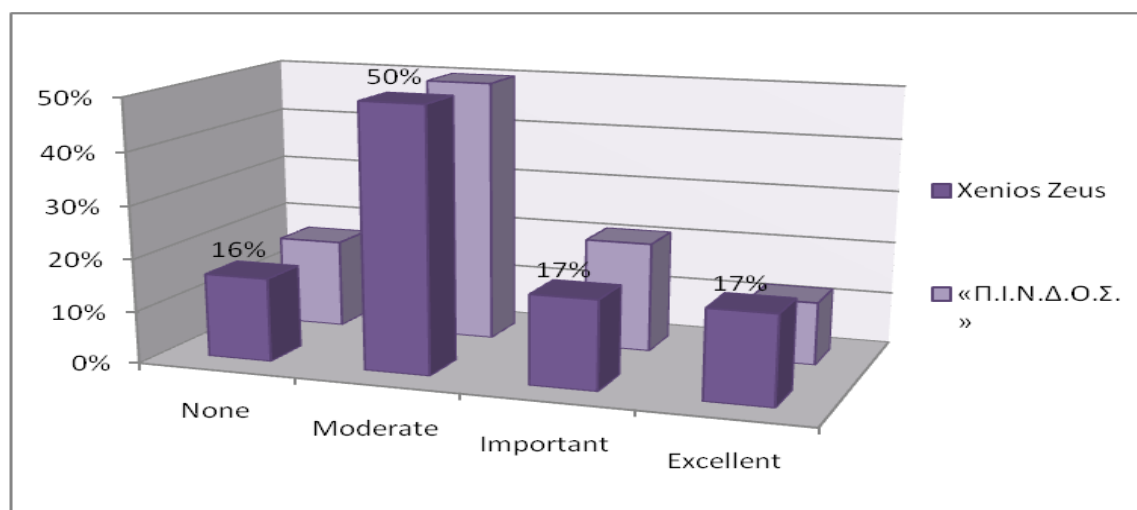
The contribution of the quality labels ISO and HACCP in the competitiveness of an enterprise is presented in the following graph.

3rd Graph: Contribution of ISO and HACCP in the competitiveness of the enterprise.



The contribution of “Xenios Zeus” and “PINDOS” are also presented in the following graph.

4th Graph: Contribution of the quality labels “Xenios Zeus” and “PINDOS” in the competitiveness of the enterprise.



7. Conclusions

After the retrospection of the bibliography and the completion of the empirical research, it can be concluded that:

The rapid development and evolution of tourism has greatly changed the community and the economy. Quality is now an important factor for the choice of destination,

accommodation and touristic services. The change of consumers' attitude has made it necessary for touristic enterprises to adopt high standards for the constant improvement of quality in the provision of services. This objective is now of strategic importance for the touristic development.

Quality control is a process that is carried out by the implementation of specific quality systems and the ultimate goal is the total quality. All the enterprises that abide by these standards are awarded with quality labels and thus obtain a comparative advantage. Those changes have also influenced the smaller units that operate in agrotouristic regions.

There are many regions like Albania and FYROM that have not yet established any form of quality control system.

In Greece, there is an attempt to upgrade but the country has not yet reached the desirable level of quality in services and infrastructure provided by the agrotouristic enterprises.

The Local Agreements of Quality deal with touristic development and the promotion of a region and their objective is to establish certain mutually accepted specifications of quality, to improve the services provided and to project the local identity of the region.

The level of quality of agrotourism in peripheral and trans-border areas is medium and the vast majority of the enterprises have not been certified by ISO or HACCP. Their participation in local agreements of quality is also low (17%).

Despite the low degree of adoption of quality labels, the agrotouristic enterprises positively assess the impact of such an adoption. The positive impact is about modern organization, better image, quality of the products and consumers' satisfaction.

Finally, the participant enterprises consider that the quality labels for agrotourism, local or not, contribute from moderately to importantly to the competitiveness of their enterprises.

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