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Sustainability of the development in the mountain - disadvantaged areas: the case of Vlasti in Greece

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**“Sustainability of the development in the mountain – disadvantaged areas:
the case of Vlasti in Greece”**

Abstract

The current challenges make the constant search and adoption of sustainable touristic development necessary. This kind of development has both the human and the environment in the centre of interest. The touristic development should aim to both increase the level of the offered services' quality and to incorporate activities that would upgrade the environment.

Economic globalisation is constantly testing the ability of regional economies to adapt and exploit or, at least maintain, their comparative advantages. In this difficult and volatile environment, mountain – disadvantaged areas are faced with multiple developmental difficulties.

In Greece, the mountain communities were devastated in the period of mass migration abroad and urbanization, during the decades of 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. Each village proudly carries its own history of resistance and its toll in human lives and property damage from the ravages of war and civil division.

Gradually the agricultural policy has been changed and the diversification of rural economies has been promoted in order stop depending solely on farm income. However, the mountainous areas are still underdeveloped, without adequate infrastructure in roads, hospitals, water supply, sanitation and communication systems and therefore the government policy is that money should be invested to change the profile of these areas.

Through strategic options, certain local communities are successful in achieving exemplary local and, more generally, regional development.

In 2012 an empirical research was conducted regarding the case of “Vlasti” in the prefecture of Kozani. Vlasti is a small community in the mountains of northern Greece, with interesting past, important local products and investments in agri-tourism sector. During the last decade has formulated a development strategy based on the principles of mild and sustainable development.

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The purpose of the research, which is based upon a primary measurement, is to detect and evaluate the main factors that determine the viability of the development in mountainous regions.

The survey was carried out by questionnaires to the local authorities and businesses that took part in investment projects. The questionnaire is divided into four sections with the corresponding questions. The research examines the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts came after the touristic development in the area.

The conclusions of the study are mapping and managing sustainability of the mountain – disadvantaged areas, whether tourism development in mountain areas and whether this growth is sustainable.

Key words: Sustainability, development, mountain– disadvantaged areas, Vlasti Greece

1. Regional Development and mountainous areas

In Greek reality, strategic development of mountain areas is designed to enhance synergy among the factors which promote the development process, the networking of institutional, sectoral and spatial form and the establishment of integrated packages of strategic plans, serving medium and long-term development scenarios.

The European Union through the Community Support Frameworks (CSF) plays a key role in the development process of modern Greece. The development options for the Greek mountainous area are identified in the General Framework of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development (Article 6 of Law 2742/1999) and the Development Plan of the Mountainous Area (DPMA), a special section of the Regional Development Plan 2000 - 2006. The DPMA proposes the so called “integrated development of mountainous areas” as a separate sub-program for each region and as sectoral activities of national operational programs as well.

The five priority axes recommended by the DPMA on the mountainous micro-regions are:

- ♣ Transformation of agricultural activity.
- ♣ Extensive development of soft tourism.

- ♣ Support for small industry and handicraft.
- ♣ Establishment of mountain development centers per micro-region.
- ♣ Improvement of access to mountainous areas.

2. Characteristics of the physical and socioeconomic reality of mountain areas in Greece

Greece is a predominantly mountainous country. The mountain area occupies 19,2 million acres, of which 17% is arable land, 47% pasture and 31% forests. An important feature of mountain areas of Greece is the great wealth of biodiversity. The mountainous regions of Greece, except in few cases, were a totally neglected field of interest, for purposes of planning, funding and all kinds of activities.

As for the anthropogenic environment, Greece is characterized by the large number of small sized mountain villages. The small size of settlements has contributed to preserving the mountain environment, water, soil and air, not abused by the massive over-water, intensive agriculture and monoculture and the accumulation of vehicles and industries. Thus, unlike the rural and urban lowland of Greece, and many European mountain areas, mountainous regions of Greece are have a unique range of natural wealth, which hosts a significant number of wild plant and animal species adapted to local conditions.

In Greece, the mountain communities were devastated in the period of mass migration abroad and urbanization, during the decades of 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. This exodus of the mountain population is largely due to the civil war conflicts and persecutions that followed the years of the national resistance to the German occupation. Each village proudly carries its own history of resistance and its toll in human lives and property damage from the ravages of war and civil division. The fact is that the villages have been devastated (Rokos 1980a, 1993, 1994) during the years 1950-1970, urban population has increased from 37.7% in 1951 to 58.1% in 1981 and rural population has reduced from 47.5% to 30.3% respectively.

Gradually the agricultural policy has been changed and the diversification of rural economies has been promoted in order stop depending solely on farm income. Mountainous areas have been under "special treatment". Specific chapters in national and European programs were

devoted to the “development” of the mountainous areas. The main “apparent” natural resource of them is their beauty that can be exploited in accordance with the dominant “development” rationale for tourism businesses.

However, the mountainous areas are still underdeveloped, without adequate infrastructure in roads, hospitals, water supply, sanitation and communication systems and therefore the government policy is that money should be invested to change the profile of these areas.

One study (Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, 2000) classifies the prefectures of the country according to their mountainous features, using population and land criteria. According to the findings, 32 prefectures of Greece are characterized by a significant mountainous area and population. SWOT analysis in these prefectures indicated that 8 of them (Fthiotida, Karditsa, Florina, Arta, Grevena, Ioannina, Arcadia and Evrytania) contain, according to the study, the most problematic mountainous areas of the country. All 8 prefectures have declining income and declining population.

3. The case study

A short distance from Ptolemais (24 km) in the center of Western Macedonia Vlasti is located. It is built at an altitude of 1,180 meters, between the mountains Askio and Mourikio (1,800 m) and physical position like elevated vast throne. Registered citizens basis of the last census amounted to 1457.

In the community of Vlasti every summer take place "Earth Festival" and other local events. It ecological festivals through a fun atmosphere and communication transmit messages for the environment and increasing environmental problems and inform the efforts and activities of environmental organizations. The "Earth Festival" organized by the Society of Environmental Research and Information OIKOTOPIA, with the financial support of the Directorate General for Environment of the European Commission, in cooperation with the Municipality Eordaia and local agencies in the area. There are also several hotels, some of which have been supported by rural development programs and offer a pleasant stay to its guests.

4. The empirical research

4.1. The methodology

In 2012 an empirical research was conducted regarding the case of “Vlasti” in the prefecture of Kozani. Vlasti is a small community in the mountains of northern Greece, with interesting past, important local products and investments in agri-tourism sector. During the last decade has formulated a development strategy based on the principles of mild and sustainable development.

The purpose of the research, which is based upon a primary measurement, is to detect and evaluate the main factors that determine the viability of the development in mountainous regions.

The survey was carried out by questionnaires to the local authorities and businesses that took part in investment projects. The questionnaire is divided into four sections with the corresponding questions. The research examines the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts came after the touristic development in the area. Totally 18 questionnaires were completed.

4.2. The research findings

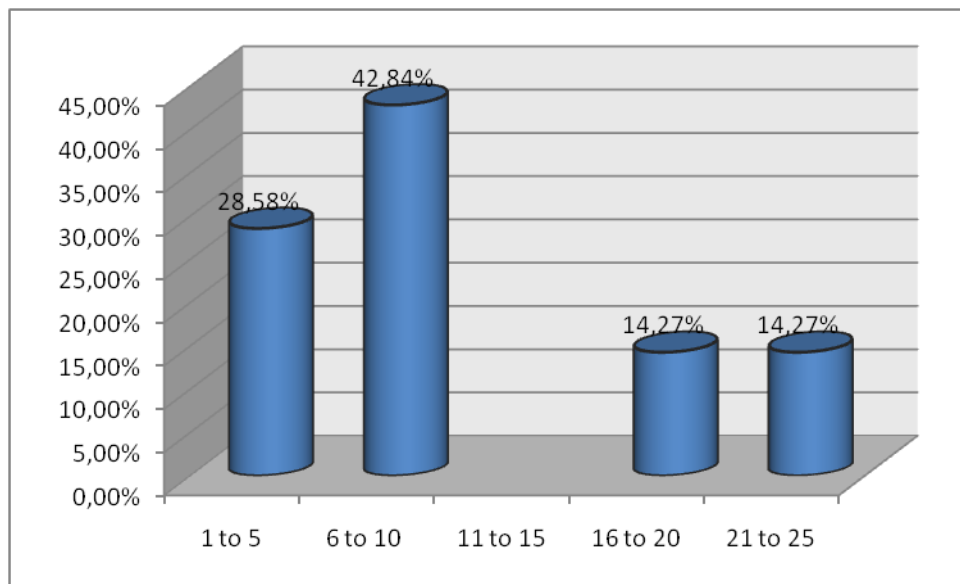
After statistical analysis of the responses shows that:

The respondents were mostly male (57%) and to a lesser extent women (43%). The age of most respondents ranged in percentage 42.86% from 51 to 60 years old. Smaller percentages (28.57%) are aged 31-40 years. In figure 14.29% are in the age of 21 to 30 and 61 to 70 years. The educational level shows that the largest percentages (42.86%) are graduates of Technological Educational Institutes and in at 28.57% are primary school graduates and high school.

Respondents owned agro tourism enterprises (34.78%), working in agritourism enterprises (22.36%), and representatives of agencies / public officials (28.58%).

As shown in the graph below the highest percentage (42.84%) are those who work from 6 to 10 years. Immediately following percentage (28.58%) is for those employed in the sector since 1-5 years. Last and smallest percentage (14.27%) as for those who have worked 16-20 years and 21-25 years.

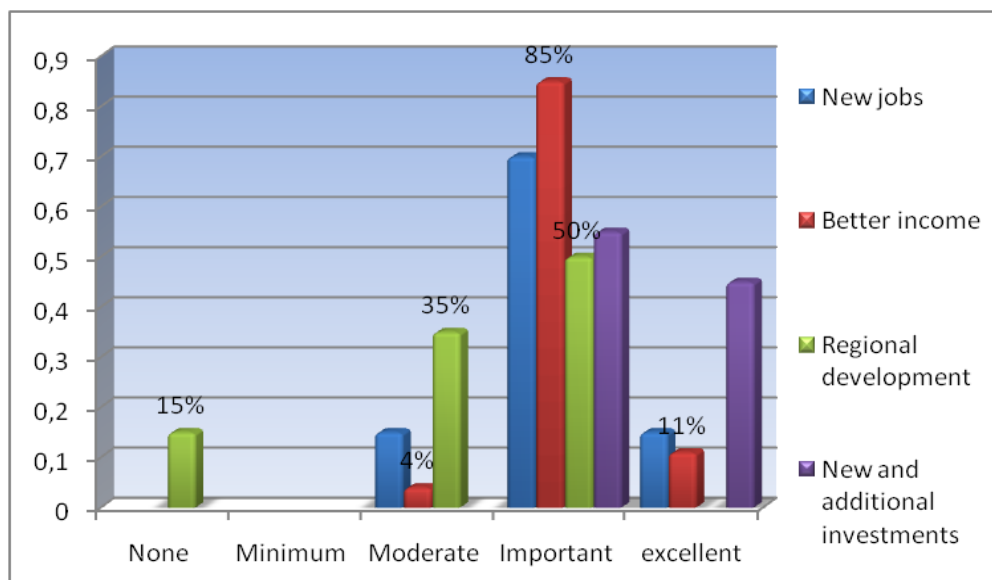
1st graph: Work Experience



Most companies (71.43%) work full time as opposed to the much smaller percentage (28.57%) which is characterized by seasonality.

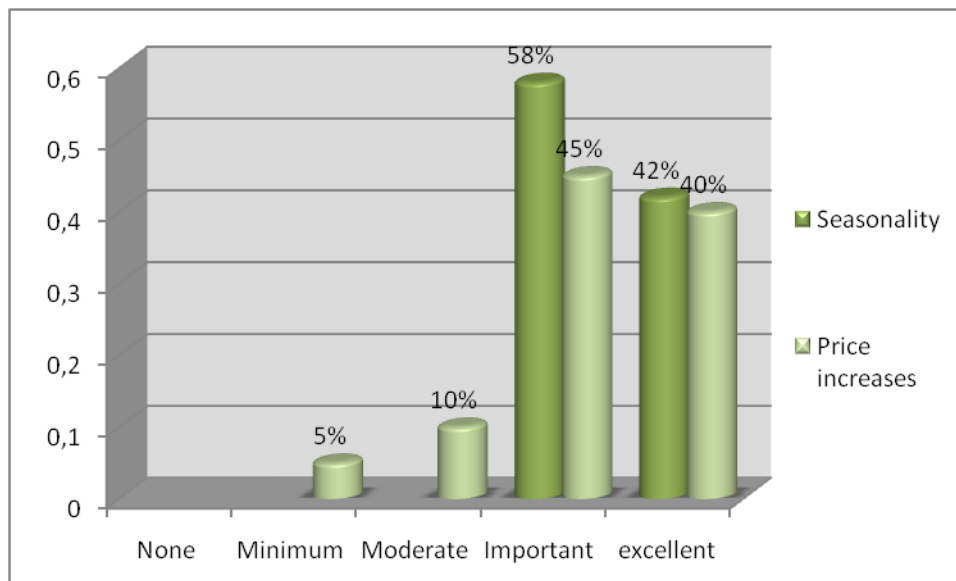
As noted by the respondents' answers to the tourism development of Vlasti recent years resulting benefits to the local economy such as job creation, income generation, regional development and new and additional investments. Precise estimates are shown in the graph below.

2nd Graph: Estimates of benefit / impact



Apart from the positive and negative effects are. Namely Vlasti characterized by strongly seasonal tourism and the tourist season occurs from small to large price increases. Also, the participants felt that still has not achieved a balanced community development.

3rd Graph: Estimates negative impact



Regarding social and cultural impact that has on the local community tourism development, the answer seems to be very important. Specifically, the development of tourism residents come in contact with new cultures, they come closer to the habits of other peoples and highlight local culture. Important role played by cultural events "The Earth Festival" organized in shoots and have now secured and assistance of the district and all relevant clubs. The cultural events believe that is an important factor for the enhancement and promotion of the region.

The estimates show that the residents consider important (70%) special cultural events organized by the community for tourism development and 30% consider it to be extremely important (30%).

A very large proportion of participants (86%) say that beyond the interest of residents to the nature, preservation of archaeological sites and monuments, regeneration of degraded areas have shown signs of interest and ecological sensitivity and the visitors themselves having designed the natural wealth of Vlasti to endure and remain throughout the year.

The responses appear to benefit from tourism development and there are no appreciable negative impact on the environment since the destruction of reconstruction of hotel complexes and other buildings is minimal. Also, stated that tourists respect the area, not pollute nature with transport or waste too much water, energy and natural resources.

5. Conclusions

Following the review of the literature concludes:

Economic globalisation is constantly testing the ability of regional economies to adapt and exploit or, at least maintain, their comparative advantages. In this difficult and volatile environment, mountain – disadvantaged areas are faced with multiple developmental difficulties.

In Greek reality, strategic development of mountain areas is designed to enhance synergy among the factors which promote the development process, the networking of institutional, sectoral and spatial form and the establishment of integrated packages of strategic plans, serving medium and long-term development scenarios.

In Greece, the mountain communities were devastated in the period of mass migration abroad and urbanization, during the decades of 1950's, 1960's and 1970's.

Over the last two decades, with support from the European Union and financing through development programs, many mountains - disadvantaged communities created a tourism development. The management of this growth can create conditions for sustainable development. On the other hand, it is likely that tourism development created series of problems.

The survey reveals that the mountain communities that tourism development brought more positive impact on the local economy and society, and fewer negative.

Specifically, tourism development led to a significant rise in job creation to increase income, created a regional development and brought new and additional investments.

Weakness is the highly seasonal nature of tourism development. Negative impact is the increase in prices during the holiday season and it seems those have not yet ensure a balanced development.

The social and cultural impact in its local community tourism development is very important. Specifically, the development of tourism residents come in contact with new cultures, they come closer to the habits of other peoples and highlight local culture.

Important role played by cultural high level events organized in communities, an important factor for the enhancement and promotion of the region.

Apart from the interest of the residents of the nature, rescue of archaeological sites and monuments, regeneration of degraded areas have shown signs of interest and ecological sensitivity and the visitors themselves.

From traffic and tourist development there are no appreciable negative impacts on the environment since the destruction of reconstruction of hotel complexes and other buildings is minimal and visitors respect the area, do not pollute the nature or wasting too much water, energy and natural resources.

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