

AGRO-TOURISM IN GREECE: THE CASE OF WOMEN AGRO-TOURISM CO-OPERATIVES OF AMBELAKIA

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The term agro-tourism, as used in Greece, embraces tourism activities which are undertaken in non-urban regions by individuals whose main employment is in the primary or secondary sector of the economy. The most prominent of such activities is the supply of tourist accommodation, by upgrading and using spare rooms in private houses or by building extensions to such houses to create additional units or by building independent buildings and using them as guest houses. Complementary agro-tourism activities may include the establishment and running of communal catering and recreational facilities for tourists, the organisation of cultural events, the production and sale of handicrafts, the sale of agricultural products to tourists etc. (Iakovidou, 1992).

The term "farm tourism" has not as yet been applied in Greece, because to take in tourists and put them up on farms, involving them actively in farming life and production activities, would present difficulties because of the *sui generis* nature of the land structure system (*) which obtains in Greece, and also because of the attitude of Greek society towards the rural population (Tsartas, 1991).

This paper, based on the results of field research by the author, discusses the organization and modus operandi of the most original type of agrotourism in Greece, the women's agrotourism co-operatives, as well as the experiences gleaned from the ten-years of operation. It will focus also upon the characteristics and attitudes of the tourists who choose the women's agrotourism co-operative, on the basis of survey data collected during the year 1994.

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(1) The land structure system which obtains in Greece is characterised by the small size of the agricultural units (ave. = 4.5Ha) and their partition (6-7 farms/unit), high degree of participation by the agriculturally active population (21-2%) in the total economically active population, 13-14% participation of the agricultural sector in the GNP - at 1970, fixed prices -, participation of agricultural in exports at 30%, as against 17% in imports and so on (Pezaros, 1994).

(2) According to this system, which is widespread in urban centres in Greece, the builder bears the financial and technical responsibility for erecting a building on a plot of land which he does not own, on the understanding that he will transfer to the owner of the land a portion of the completed building.

ABSTRACT

Agrotourism in Greece is structured around three basic axes: private enterprise, the traditional villages and women's agrotourism co-operatives. The women's agrotourism co-operatives, constitute the most original type of tourism in Greece, both on the level of planning and organization, as well as that of management. In Ambelakia, a mountain village in Central Greece, one of the 12 women's agrotourism co-operatives in the country has been in operation since 1984. The women's cooperative has played an important role in the development of agrotourism in the village as well as in the promotion of the social and economic role of women in the countryside.

RÉSUMÉ

L'agrotourisme en Grèce, réalité typique, s'articule autour de trois grands axes: une activité liée à l'initiative privée, les villages traditionnels et les coopératives féminines spécialisées. Les coopératives agrotouristiques féminines constituent la forme la plus structurée au niveau de planification, organisation et gestion.

A Ambelakia, un village montagneux de la Grèce Centrale, les femmes ont mis en fonction une telle coopérative depuis 1984. La contribution de la coopérative agrotouristique féminine d'Ambelakia au développement de l'agrotourisme dans la région ainsi que à l'essor du rôle économique et sociale des femmes est très important.

THE PROMOTION OF AGROTURISM IN GREECE

Until 1970, there was no organized form of agro-tourism in Greece. Some enthusiasts had envisaged the development of agro-tourism, but had never put it into practice. From 1980 onwards, within the political framework of integrated economic development of rural areas, many local experts were convinced of the need to start planning new forms of Greek tourism. This was mainly due to the fact that mass tourism was already at saturation point, and new forms were increasingly in demand. Social interest was aroused in safeguarding threatened landscapes and helping them reveal their true identity through their cultural

values. Such interest was the spur for Greek agencies to start planning the development of agro-tourism in Greece at the beginning of the 1980s. Agro-tourism was viewed as a local or regional means to secure complementary income for rural families, improve their standard of living and maintain of rural population. In addition it was seen as a local or regional activity aimed at revitalizing the rural environment and reducing desertification as well as an activity capable of offering an alternative solution to the great social and economic problems facing the unfavorable rural regions whose resources were mainly bound up in the primary sector of the economy (Iakovidou, 1991).

Three main agencies have been entrusted with the development of agro-tourism in Greece: the Ministry of Agriculture, the General Secretariat for Equality, and the Agricultural Bank of Greece. Each of these have set their own objectives, associated with different forms of agro-tourism, and independently of each other. In addition to these some other agencies such as the Greek National Tourism Board, and the prefectures played a complementary role in the development of agrotourism.

Promotion of rural tourism in Greece has been organized around three axes. The first of these is private enterprise, which involves either small hotels or functional rooms of rural houses or other houses to let in the rural area. Rural people did not wait to be given grants by agencies in order to start investing in this type of tourism. They either let rooms in their houses or had new rooms built for this purpose. Investment was from personal savings, loans from the Agricultural Bank of Greece, the "exchange system" (2) and use of directive 797/85 (replaced by 2328/92 of the E.U.). This form of

agro-tourism is supported by the Ministry of Agriculture. The second axis has to do with the traditional villages, which have been maintained and preserved largely through the help of the Greek Tourist Organization, and are now tourist attractions. To these can be added those settlements which are being built in such a way as to resemble the traditional ones, with the simultaneous creation of a whole substructure, which also retains the local color. Most often, these settlements are enterprises in which farmers take no part, so whether this type of tourism can rightly be called agro-tourism or not is a matter of interpretation (Tsartas, 1991). What can be said with certainty, however, is that it is an extreme form, which D. McKannel called "Staged Authenticity". Finally, the third aspect involves women's agro-tourism co-operatives, which is the most articulated form of agro-tourism.

WOMEN'S AGRO-TOURIST CO-OPERATIVES IN GREECE

The initiative for the establishment of women's agro-tourism co-operative belong to the General Secretariat for Equality of the Ministry of the Presidency. The Secretariat took into account analyses of tourist demand, concern for equality between the sexes and the co-operative movement (Grolleau, 1987).

The basic aim of the Secretariat was the promotion of equality between men and women and the recognition of the economic role which women could play in the field of agriculture. For the General Secretariat for Equality, agro-tourism should ensure:

- an independent income for farming women
- the promotion of the social and economic role of women in the countryside
- the undertaking of responsibilities by women
- the social incorporation of women
- the creation of activities and jobs in the countryside
- the development of alternative tourism.

Women's agrotourism cooperatives in Greece are based on developing rural women's traditional skills in managing the household unit-never before recognized as such-into professional capacity. Furthermore, rural women who are usually non-paid working members of the family farm may find in these cooperatives a source of independent income.

They offer bed and breakfast, comprising accommodation in traditionally furnished, standard rooms, often with private facilities or in guest's houses, and a traditional breakfast based on local produce. Complementary activities, such as running restaurant and refreshment facilities, producing and selling traditional foodstuffs, organizing recreation and cultural activities, hosting training seminars and conference tourism as well as opportunities for visitors to take part in traditional agricultural and ecological activities, contribute to the overall product(offering).

Planning for the establishment of women's agro-tourist co-operatives began in 1983 and was based largely on the principles of Law 921/79 and the following one 1 = 41/83 concerning "Agricultural Co-operative Organizations" (°).

The first co-operative came into operation in 1984, in Petra on the island of Lesbos, in the Aegean Sea.

To date, a total of 12 co-operatives are in operation throughout rural Greece.

Three of those are on Aegean islands, (Lesbos, Chios and Kassos), one on an island in the Ionian Sea (Zakynthos) and one in a village in Crete.

The rest are on the mainland (Arahova in Central Greece, Ayios Germanós, Psarades and Leptokarya in Macedonia, Maronia in Thrace, Klitoria in the Peloponnese and Ambelakia in Thessaly).

THE WOMEN'S AGRO-TOURISM CO-OPERATIVE OF AMBELAKIA

Ambelakia is a mountain village built as an amphitheater on the northern slope of Mount Kissavos in Thessaly, and seems, according to historical evidence, to have existed since the 16th century. In Ambelakia, in 1778, the first co-operative in the world was founded, with the unification of the guilds of the cotton dyers and processors, which had been operating in the area since 1774.

At its height, the co-operative of Ambelakia was a society bursting with life and creativity in every sphere of development of the era, when the other parts of Greece were living under the stifling yoke of the Ottoman Empire. At this time, mansions were built which were outstanding examples of architecture, and of these, that of Georgios Schwarz has survived to this day in very good condition. The decline in the fortunes of the co-operative was not slow in coming, however, and it was finally dissolved in 1811. The main reasons for this decline was the failure of the Bank of Vienna, where the people of Ambelakia had most of their deposits, stiff competition from the cotton mills of Manchester in England, after the introduction of steam looms and certain factors linked to the representatives of the Ottoman Empire. From then on, Ambelakia, with its rich heritage, followed a downward path, in economic, demographic, social and cultural terms.

At its height, its population was 6,000, while at the beginning of this century (1920) it had dropped to 1443, and stood at 470 in 1991 (°). However, on the basis of the community's own records, the permanent population in 1990 was 350 souls, of whom 161 (46%) were over 65 years of age and only 36 (10.2%) were in their childhood. The economically active population of Ambelakia amounted to 74 persons, of whom 20 were involved with livestock, 6 with agriculture, 32 with trades (builders, wood-cutters, mechanics and so on), who worked in a nearby urban center and 16 employed in the service or commercial sectors. Those who were engaged in secondary or tertiary sectors, however, were also involved in a subsidiary way in agriculture, in that they grew barley and wheat, vines and olives. All the households in Ambelakia own chestnut groves, which are concentrated in the location known as "Kastanarió" (*kastano* = chestnut). This land, which belonged to the state as a forest area, was distributed to the permanent inhabitants of the village in three successive phases, 1946, 1972, and 1988. Chestnuts are basic to the provision of income for the villagers.

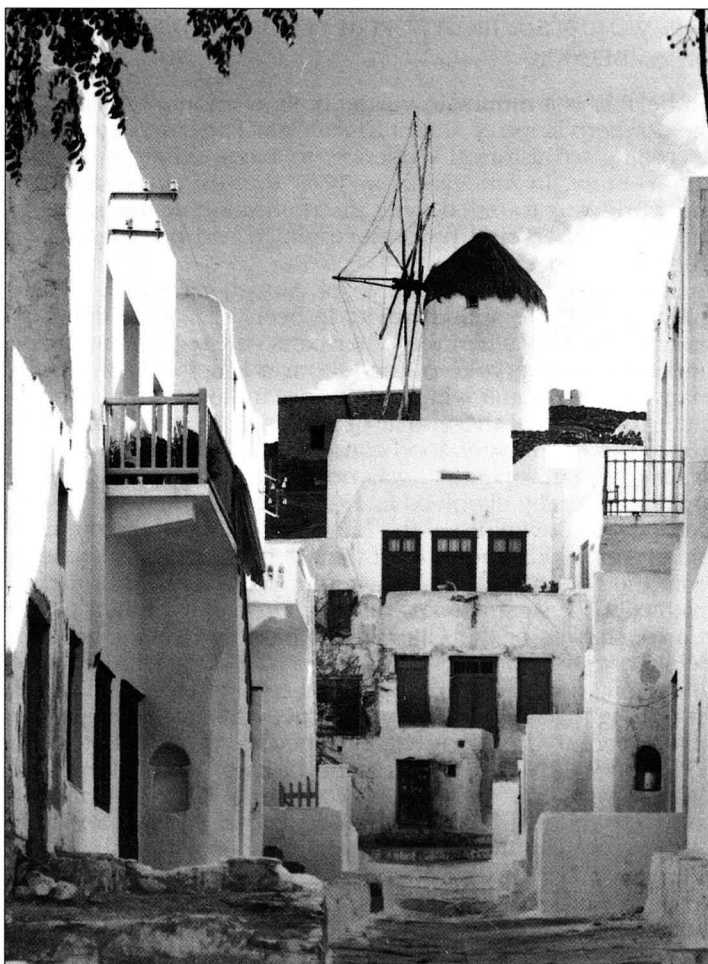
THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE

The development of agro-tourism in Ambelakia was effected through the Women's Agro-Tourism Co-operative of Ambelakia, which was founded in 1985, in accordance with the principles of Law 1541/1985 concerning "Agricultural Co-operative Organizations". Its foundation and operation, which were realized with support from the General Secretariat of Equality, were completed in three phases.

During the first phase, the phase of sensitization, discussions took place and lectures were given by the lady in charge of the General Secretariat for Equality, who managed to arouse the interest of the women in Ambelakia. Five of these were then interested in learning more about this new activity. After proper instruction and discussions, these women managed to

(°) These laws were based on the principles of democratic operation, members ability to join and leave at will, distribution of surpluses in accordance with participation in activities, limited capital gains, concern for education and co-operation between co-operatives (Oustabasides, 1991).

(°) Census details from the National Statistics Office of Greece.



attract another 20 women to agro-tourism, and these were willing to undertake the obligations and also to reap the benefits of their introduction into the co-operative.

In the second phase, after the foundation of the co-operative, the infra-structure work necessary for the reception of tourists was tackled. Public agencies and banks made significant contributions to the implementation of these tasks, by taking on the cost the construction of accommodation and furnishing it. Advertising for the co-operative was undertaken by the "Tourist Organization of Greece" (EOT), which issued pamphlets with relevant information. "Word of mouth" advertising was of vital significance, however.

In the third phase, efforts were made to educate the members of the co-operative with four seminars in all, funded by various state agencies. In the first seminar, which lasted a total of 120 hours, 24 women took part, for 6 hours a day over 20 days. The course material had to do with co-operative principles, co-operative book-keeping, basic concepts of finance, agricultural and co-operative economy, marketing, investment programs and practical issues of tourism. In the second seminar, which lasted a total of 126 hours, 24 women took part, for six hours a day over 20 days. The course material dealt with matters of communication, human relationships, the history of the women's movement, the social roles of the sexes, analysis of the charter, the ideological/political framework of the foundation of women's co-operatives, as well

as practical issues of tourism and behavior towards tourists. In the third funded seminar, which lasted a total of 50 hours, 19 women took part, for three hours a day over 17 days. The subjects addressed were to do with making women aware of matters of equality, and the development of the personality, architecture and local tradition for the needs of agro-tourism. The fourth seminar, finally, was of the same length and had the same participation, subsidy and organizing agencies as the previous one and dealt with matters of co-operative administration, so that members of the co-operative would be able to operate successfully as a group and administer the co-operative properly.

At the same time as the women were being trained, the co-operative was given legal substance by a record of establishment made out before a lawyer. A temporary administrative committee was elected and the Rules submitted to magistrates for ratification. Once this ratification had been carried out, elections took place for the organs of the co-operative, which consist of:

a) the General Meeting, which is the highest organ for decision taking on matters concerning the co-operative and is made up of all members who have voting rights.

b) the Administrative Board of the co-operative, consisting of five members elected by the General Meeting of the co-operative, and having as its duties the administration and general operation of the co-operative in terms of achieving its aims.

c) the Supervisory Committee, consisting of three members, also elected by the General Meeting, its responsibilities being to check and supervise the Administrative Committee in the performance of its duties. According to the charter, the lady presiding over the co-operative is elected every three years by majority and is responsible for the running of the co-operative. She is assisted in this task by an economic advisor.

The main activities during the setting-up phase of the co-operative consisted of letting rooms, the optional provision of breakfast and lunch, and the production and sales of traditional preparations such as sweets, cloth, embroidery and so on. These activities were extended in 1986 to include the operation of a refreshment area, from June to the beginning of September, where refreshments, food and pies were on offer. The co-operative also runs an office-cum-shop in the central square of the village, where various items made by women themselves are on sale. Income from all these activities is deposited with the co-operative and at the end of every quarter, once 15% has been deducted for running costs and a further 18.6% for tax, the remainder is distributed among the members, depending on how far they have been involved in overnight stays or have contributed to other activities. In the case of the refreshment area, once expenses have been deducted, tax is taken off at 18.6%, 5% goes to the co-operative and the rest is distributed among the women members who are employed in the refreshment area itself.

THE PROFILE AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE MEMBERS OF THE CO-OPERATIVE

Of the 25 founder members of the co-operative, 20 continue to play an active part in its activities today⁽⁵⁾. These women, who, before the foundation of the co-operative, were for the most part engaged exclusively with housework, decided to become members on the one hand to improve their family income without leaving their house or village and on the other to make productive use of their free time.

They are married women, many of whom (9 out of 20) have not completed their basic education and are older than 35 years old. 16 of them let rooms, also providing breakfast and/or a meal, if requested by the tourists. At the same time they were engaged in making handicraft items and producing

(5) The data for the profile of the co-operative derive from the field research, which was based on the completion of a questionnaire, drawn up specially for this purpose, in 1991.

traditional, home-made preparations for sale in the co-operatives shop. The others were employed exclusively in the refreshment area while it was in operation. It is worth noting that, the greater the size of the family of the member of the co-operative, the more activities the women undertake, in order to bolster the family income further. Attitudes of the families towards the initiative of the women taking part in the co-operatives were positive, although there was no help or participation by members of the family in the new activities of the women. The expectations of the women from the operation of the co-operative, as also their satisfaction with its course of development so far, have been fulfilled, especially for those of greater age, who form the majority of members. The very few young women members of the co-operative, who are also better educated, are less satisfied with the activities and running of the co-operative and it is they who are making efforts to expand its activities, with the creation of a restaurant and recreation area, which will operate throughout the year. These aims need an increase in membership, however, which seems unlikely since the younger age group is not interested in employment in agricultural activities in Ambelakia, but rather in any kind of job in Larisa, Thessaloniki, Athens or other urban centres in Greece.

THE PROFILE OF THE AGRO-TOURIST

The tourist season in Ambelakia extends throughout the year, with the feasts of Christmas and Easter the busiest times, as well as long week-ends. The vast majority of tourists visiting Ambelakia since the foundation of the co-operative are Greeks (70%), who come mainly from Thessaloniki and the rest of Northern Greece and to a lesser extent from other parts of Greece. The remaining 30% consists of tourists of various nationalities, almost exclusively from Europe and in the main from Great Britain, Austria, France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere. A good number of these tourists, Greeks and non-Greeks, return to spend their holidays in Ambelakia with their families more than once because they have become linked not only to the place, but also to the inhabitants, with whom they form relationships and friendships. The number of persons staying overnight in rooms let by members of the co-operative has followed a downward course, from 1987 to 1992, the year for which we have the most recent information⁽⁶⁾. On the basis of research data gathered over the year from February 28, 1992 to February 28, 1993, the total number of tourists who stayed in co-operative accommodation in the above period amounted to 290 persons. Fifty of these completed a questionnaire, the aim of which was to determine the profile of the agro-tourists who had chosen to spend time in Ambelakia. At this point, we ought to note that it is relatively difficult to define the general profile of the agro-tourist, since agro-tourism is an on-going phenomenon, linked to pre-determined cultural conditions, which guarantee its temporal extension and support the tourist clientele in an increased sensitivity to the natural environment, tradition, architectural heritage and authenticity of foodstuffs. Despite that we shall attempt to describe the profile of the agro-tourist who has chosen a mountain village, Ambelakia, outside the pre-determined tourist and cultural centers of Greece. They are young people, of a high educational level, whose permanent place of residence is in towns with a population greater than 50,000. They opt for agro-tourism for cultural reasons. They go on holiday with friends, with whom they share the same room, and they develop good relationships with the lady of the house and the other inhabitants of the village. Their length of stay in the accommodation provided by the co-operative is limited to 2 days, and is centered on the long week-ends of the autumn and winter. They are highly satisfied with

their welcome by the women, as well as by the quality of services provided the prices. It is the natural environment and traditional architecture of Ambelakia which attract and impress, and walking and photography are the interests the tourists pursue during the course of their stay there.

CONCLUSIONS

The women's agrotourism cooperative of Ambelakia has played an important role in the development of agrotourism in the village. It has succeeded in placing Ambelakia on the Greek "alternative tourism" map. It has achieved the creation of homebased hospitality services for tourists, while maintaining the natural, social and cultural authenticity of the region. In addition, it has developed new economic activity potential in rural areas boosting local economies and creating employment opportunities for the women.

The development of women's agro-tourism co-operatives in Greece, especially that of the Women's Agro-Tourism Cooperative of Ambelakia, could be described as a continuing story of both success and struggle. Some of the successes achieved by the co-operatives are due to the qualities of the women themselves, such as: real "welcome to my home" hospitality and a genuine interest in pleasing the customer. In addition, other factors contributing to the progress of the co-operatives include the rich resource base and potential in terms of rural tourism product, the need to supplement traditional income from agriculture and a desire to retain human resources in rural areas.

Key elements of success – often overlooked – are the benefits which have accrued to the women themselves. Through co-operatives, women have been able to contribute to the income of their families and to bring themselves a measure of economic independence. This has contributed to the recognition of the significant role played by women in the economic and social fabric of rural life. It has also acted as a catalyst in boosting their confidence and improving their standing within the local community. The daily contact of these women with people from a variety of cultures, with diverse mentalities, has given them the chance to go beyond the limits of their own small community, thus broadening their horizons. In the case of Ambelakia, one important lesson is that warm and friendly home-based hospitality is not enough: a comfortable bed, traditional breakfast and a little information about an area is not a tourism product. If visitors are to stay more than one night, to spend their entire holidays in the area, full use must be made of the local resource base (nature, history, culture) and further activities and potential must be developed. ●

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⁽⁶⁾ Thus, in 1987, 1009 persons made overnight stays, in 1988, 812 and in 1989 353.