



Rural entrepreneurship in mountainous regions within the severe crisis in Greece

KARAGOUNI GLYKERIA*, TRIGKAS MARIOS, PAPADOPOULOS IOANNIS,
MPASDEKIS DIMITRIS

^{1,3} Department of Wood & Furniture Design and Technology, Technological Educational Institute of Thessaly, Greece

² Department of Forestry & Natural Environment, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

⁴ Department of Statistics, Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece

Abstract

Aim: This paper aims to investigate the realities of starting a business in the countryside, and more specifically, in mountainous regions. This study examines the unique characteristics of the business ecosystem structure in the mountainous Pyli area, Region of Thessaly, Greece, and its population, two central aspects of rural entrepreneurship according to existing literature.

Methodology: One-third of the local businesses were included in the field study, which was deemed sufficient for the research's aims. Research information was gathered from participants via predetermined questions.

Findings: The results corroborate previous research and aid in formulating new policies to revitalize Greece's rural communities, which have been hit hard by the country's protracted economic downturn.

Implications/Novelty: The paper set out to stimulate more generic policy innovation to foster the bottom-up development of local approaches to bolster rural entrepreneurship in mountainous areas, particularly during times of crisis.

Key Words: Rural Entrepreneurship, Rural Regions, Mountainous Areas, Social Entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

What, exactly, are the factors that strengthen or weaken rural entrepreneurship? Researchers in business administration, economics, sociology, and geography have carefully analyzed relevant literature to provide a replica of directions, policies, and views (Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, and Skuras 2004; Jack and Anderson 2002).

Other interesting and relevant modern approaches include the "Actors Network Theory" (Economic Geography) and the "Structuration Theory" (Sociology). To illustrate, Lockie and Kitto (2000) state that the Actor's Network Theory provides a helpful theoretical framework for comprehending the rural entrepreneurship process.

The authors delve into the strategies or practices, technologies adopted, and institutional forms developed by those who successfully promote their business objectives and achieve the best results in rural areas. The creation of competitive businesses (primarily SMEs) in the secondary and tertiary sectors (Stathopoulou et al., 2004) in lagging rural areas has traditionally been addressed through the mobilization of local resources to create competitive advantages (Kumar 1989).

The crisis framework creates additional constraints in rural regions, but more research on rural entrepreneurship still needs to be conducted. By examining what kinds of entrepreneurialism are already in place and what's managed to stay afloat in mountainous regions, we hope to spark new thinking and policy around the social entrepreneurship model and encourage the growth of locally informed strategies for bolstering entrepreneurship.

Next, I'll make an effort to provide a high-level overview of the main factors that contribute to developing

* Corresponding author: Karagouni Glykeria

† Email: karagg@teilar.gr

an entrepreneurial ecosystem in rural areas and briefly describe the central ideas of entrepreneurship and rurality. Empirical findings will describe the difficulties encountered by rural entrepreneurs in one particular mountainous region of Greece (Pyli, Thessaly). Hopefully, this discussion of statistical data will yield actionable insights into the future of rural entrepreneurship in challenging conditions and provide guidance for appropriate policies. The final section addresses what comes next, the restrictions, and some policy suggestions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Entrepreneurship

Rural entrepreneurship emerged in the 80s; however, it was only after 2000 that it drew significant attention (Pato and Teixeira 2014). Today, it is a dynamically developing area of research in the entrepreneurship field and one of the most important areas to support rural economic development. According to an epitome of relevant literature, population density in combination with percentage of people in rural communities and in contrast to the size of urban centers may define the “rurality” of an area (OECD 2008). Besides its name as “rural entrepreneurship” the field covered “a myriad of other activities (namely industrial activities”, according to Miljkovic, Bilali, and Berjan (2010).

In recent literature on the issue, studies have focused on differences between rural and urban areas, several types of traits, economic growth, institutional frameworks and regional growth policies (Avramenko and Silver 2009). Within the social context investigation, ‘embeddedness’ and networks have been also emphasized (Kalan-taridis and Bika 2006; Pato and Teixeira 2014; Smallbone and Welter 2006).

Characteristics of the Rural Entrepreneurial Milieu

In general, rural regions represent more than half (57%) of the European territory and 24% of its population. Especially mountain regions are dominated by the agricultural sector, present a rather poor socioeconomic environment and a rapid decline in employment (Lopez-i-Gelats, Tabara, and Bartolome 2009), while they suffer from distance to markets and services. According to a recent OECD (2008) report, aging population, associated with an outmigration of young people eliminates the chances of potential entrepreneurs.

When studying the rural entrepreneurial milieu, there are certain parameters to take into consideration. Heterogeneity, for example, reflects potential variations at local level even within national economies. Heterogeneity actually forms the distinctive business ecosystem of each rural region within the common rural environment characteristics such as small local markets, usually poor infrastructures regarding communication and transport, access to finance or even skilled labor, advice and information (Labrianidis 2006; Bhullar and Singh 2016).

Another significant group of factors regards the rural area’s social capital, attributes and culture of these areas’ population (Bosworth 2012; Mandl, Oberholzner, and Dorflinger 2007). This stream is strongly related to the one dealing with the characteristics of the existing rural business. Businesses in rural areas are usually small ones with a more personal image; they are mainly one-person or micro-firms and although called “rural” they actually cover a large variety of farm, re-creation and non-farm activities (Whitener and McGranhan 2003).

However, agriculture remains the dominant sector in the majority of these economies. At the same time, changing policies such as reductions in agricultural support, increase pressures on rural business especially when combined with changing market trends; the healthy reaction is - of course - diversification of activities and exploration of new business opportunities. However, even in such cases, profitable entrepreneurial choices are strongly related to location and proximity to urban centers (Labrianidis 2006). A very small stream of literature also attempts to explore the potential of innovation within rural entrepreneurship (Escalante and Turvey 2006).

EMPIRICAL PART

Research Objective

This paper reports a quantitative research which is conducted in the mountainous region of the Municipality of Pyli in western Thessaly, Greece. The area of the Municipality of Pyli is characterized mountainous or highland (87.38%) with a significant rate of unemployment and a mediocre presence of entrepreneurial activities; these, however, cover all three sectors of economy (primary, secondary and tertiary) with the agricultural sector to be the dominant one. The region presents all the characteristics described above in literature i.e. poor socioeconomic environment, aging population and outmigration of young people and poor infrastructures to name a few.

The research will try to map the major factors that shape the investigated rural entrepreneurial milieu in order to delineate the existing business ecosystem and to produce a rather representative profile of the entrepreneurial culture. The first part of the research is based on the existence of rich literature; for the purposes of the research firm characteristics, market sizes, existence of infrastructures and easiness of access to specific sources have been taken into consideration. Being by nature difficult to define and measure, the second part; i.e. entrepreneurial culture in rural areas has a strong impact on entrepreneurship (Westhead and Wright 1998).

However, even today, this view is based more on assumption than evidence (e.g. Shields 2005), since there is hardly any quantitative empirical research on the relationship between the “prevailing socio-cultural features of everyday life in rural areas and business operations” (Shields 2005). In order to tackle the challenge, factors such as reasons of starting a business and thoughts and views regarding knowledge, innovation and networking were examined.

METHODOLOGY

The research followed the quantitative research approach under the positivistic research philosophy. Research was conducted in 2015-2016 i.e. the seventh year of the severe socio-economic crisis. The population of the study consisted of around 300 enterprises as registered by the relevant authorities. The sample was chosen to include the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the local economy. In order to collect the necessary data, a structured questionnaire was prepared and random sampling was engaged. Likert scale was used for the majority of the questions. The research was conducted by skilled researchers who addressed the entrepreneurs or executive members of the firms by personal face-to-face interviews. Although the research targeted at a sample of 100 respondents (1/3 of the total population), the response rate was 87% yielding a quite satisfactory sample. A pilot study confirmed the reliability of the constructs. The data were recorded, processed and analyzed via the statistical package SPSSWIN.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis focused on two core aspects of entrepreneurship in rural mountainous areas and namely the distinctive characteristics of the businesses ecosystem structure of Pyli area and of its population. The first aspect includes the firm and market size and types, transport and communications infrastructures; access to information, finance and advice services; and the institutional environment. The second group of factors refers to the existing entrepreneurial attitude regarding entrepreneurial culture, innovativeness and the importance of knowledge.

Sampled firms represent quite satisfactorily rural entrepreneurship in the selected mountainous region where services and more specifically tourism appear to be the dominant economic activity area. As evident in Table 1, firms of the tertiary sector cover more than 50% (actually 77.1%) while manufacturing companies are really scarce. However, services refer almost exclusively to the hospitality industry; this in turn focuses on accommodation, restaurants and bars while it lags in other relevant services such as transportation, thematic tourism and relevant. A special group named “mixed activity” regards firms that combine the above sectors (e.g. farming and hospitality). However, according to the researchers’ view and to relevant literature (e.g. Whitener and McGranahan 2003), firms that stated “tourism” as main activity belong more or less to the “mixed activity” group since they may depend on a diverse mix of farming, recreation services and non-farm activities. However, agriculture appears to be of

significant influence on the local and regional rural economy besides the fact that reductions in agricultural support and changing market trends due to globalization as well as the severe Greek crisis press farmers increasingly to abandon or diversify their activities.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Economic Sector	No. of Firms	Percentage	Turnovers	No. of Firms	Percentage
Primary sector	7	8.0	<100.000 €	63	72.4
Manufacturing	4	4.6	100.000-300.000€	18	20.7
Trade	18	20.7	300.000-500.000€	2	2.3
Tourism	52	59.8	500.000-1.000.000€	3	3.4
Mixed activity	6	6.9	>1.000.000€	1	1.1
Total	87	100.0	Total	87	100.0

The majority of the firms are micro-firms with less than 9 people, with only a 4.3% to be SMEs and employ people outside family members. This is in line with relevant literature; e.g. Smallbone (2009) states that rural areas are dominated by micro businesses and they mostly consist of solo owner/managers. Furthermore, it appears that the entrepreneurs of the area target mainly the everyday living since they are quite satisfied with turnovers less than 100.000€.

The turnover of 65.7% of the firms depends clearly on their local and regional market while the rest 34.3% regards the national market. This fact, in combination with the Greek crisis and the lack of penetration to European markets (not even regarding the approach of European tourists), can be considered the main reason of the drastic downturn in turnovers within 2009-2016. Extroversion appears to be scarce in this area; it is significantly related to the unwillingness of the respondents to develop extroverted networking activities so far and their adherence to local conditions and markets.

According to the analysis results, surveyed firms seem to expect new markets to be provided by the institutional settings. This view is further supported by the fact that the limited market size is significantly related to the high score of “improvement of new market penetration and the development of international markets” as a main policy to support rural entrepreneurship in the area. However, several of the respondents commented on the need of self-created changes such as the development of niche markets or networking for thematic tourism and marketing.

Infrastructure is particularly important in this context, since it impacts heavily the effort to attract foreign customers (or even businesses, OECD 2006). According to the results, the ICT - internet infrastructure constitutes a major issue; it is actually statistically significantly related to the core obstacles of the business environment together with bureaucracy, extremely high taxes and social insurance contributions.

It has been mentioned as a major obstacle in overcoming the distance barrier together with several comments on cellphone reliability especially in cases where micro-firm owners cannot afford contact personnel. However, it is quite interesting to see that no one of the respondents thinks that their business is excluded due to geographical reasons. This can be contributed to the good transport infrastructure which was actually realized during the first decade of the millennium.

Table 2 presents the critical areas of the improvements regarding the business ecosystem environment. It is quite evident that the national framework regarding bureaucracy, taxation and funding is actually responsible for the major obstacles that enterprises in Greek rural areas face amidst the crisis. Indicatively, Greece still has one of the highest VAT rates at a European level with the biggest number of changes in the rate. This volatile and unfavorable tax environment together with labyrinthine and extremely time-consuming licensing procedures is combined to ambiguity and the general lack of information and advice. Furthermore, the access of micro-firms to loans, credit and financial resources is quite difficult due to the extreme reluctance of banks for loans, the lack of specialized mechanisms of financial support and the on-going financial situation in general.

Table 2: Critical areas to foster entrepreneurship in rural areas

Rates Areas	(a) Extremely Important	(b) Very Important	(c) Quite Important	(d) Somewhat Important	(e) Unimportant	(a)+(b)
Easier access to funding	79.8	13.1	6.0	1.2	0.0	92.9
High taxation / social insurance contribution	72.1	22.1	2.3	2.3	1.2	94.2
Easier access to internet	65.5	27.4	4.8	1.2	1.2	92.9
ICT / e-business	64.3	28.6	4.8	1.2	1.2	92.9
Bureaucracy	61.9	29.8	4.8	1.3	2.4	91.7
Lack of entrepreneurial knowl- edge	57.1	33.3	3.6	3.6	2.4	90.4
Support / promotion of innova- tion activities	48.8	39.3	9.5	1.2	1.2	88.1
Extroversion	19.0	35.7	34.5	8.3	2.4	54.7
Equal skills at regional level	14.5	47.0	33.7	4.8	0.0	61.5
Strong competition	4.7	7.0	12.8	22.1	53.5	11.7
Strict environmental require- ments	1.2	2.4	20.5	50.6	25.3	3.6
Geographic exclusion	0.0	2.4	7.1	29.4	61.2	2.4

Within this framework, it is worth noting that lack of knowledge in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills is considered as a significant barrier to rural entrepreneurship. A significant percentage of 58.6% stated that they have received no education or any kind of training regarding their business. According to the results, lack of proper education is mainly due to the non-existent relevant infrastructures in mountainous areas. Under this general umbrella, the need for both entrepreneurial knowledge as well as more special knowledge issues (e.g. hospitality) has been mentioned. Cooperation with knowledge agents and access to information and advice are critical ways to enhance the local ability to enlarge business activities. This is in line with relevant findings in other countries as well; for example, North and Smallbone (2006) suggested the creation of an appropriate entrepreneurial education infrastructure in rural regions of Portugal.

Innovation appears to have become the target of the competitive advantages that surveyed companies want to develop. Innovation means new products or alternatives of existing ones incorporating novelties, the creative involvement of more sectors in their current activities or the novel use of the latest technologies. In these cases, there is a very strong relationship between this strategic choice and the expectation for innovation facilitation and promotion by state or other supporters. It is also significantly related to the promotion of the entrepreneurial culture as a pre-requisite for any new business. However, a frequent remark of the respondents was that their customers do not seem to perceive the novelty of their innovative products and services.

Besides innovativeness and knowledge, entrepreneurial attitude and culture constitute significant elements of the second group of factors that impact rural entrepreneurship. Path dependency appears to play a significant role in the creation or sustenance of business in the area of Pyli; practically people become entrepreneurs in the areas they were born and grown up (85.7%) to continue their family business (30%), increase their income while still living with their family (21.4%) or become independent within the wider family environment (a sum of smaller percentages of different reasoning, Figure 1). This group's attitude is related to more complaints about lack of information, existence of satisfactory infrastructure or difficulties in funding. It appears that this group - not consciously committed in the entrepreneurial ecosystem - cannot see and exploit actions and situations in distinctive ways. This assumption is further based on their indifference so far to seek for knowledge sources on their own. A (33%) seems to be more conscious in developing opportunity-based entrepreneurship (Figure 1). This percentage usually starts business by taking advantage of EU programs such as Leader and Leader+. In practical terms, this means funding as well as involvement in rural development actions and sometimes learning

processes and promotion networks. Furthermore, these entrepreneurs seem to exploit the specific advantages of the mountainous area (e.g. environmental beauties, cultural monuments, local products, etc.) in order to build their competitive advantages. They are also conscious of the local social capital and rely on the interaction between individuals in formal or informal ways; they build on long-term denser kinship and neighbor-based relationships and cooperation not easily found in urban areas.

These people constitute actually the dynamic part of rural entrepreneurs of the area who are also the critical mass for the development of social entrepreneurship. Nowadays, amidst the deep recession, the rest of the entrepreneurial community starts to become sensitive in the new forms of networking and cooperation. This is also quite evident by the big percentage of respondents who agree on the need of entrepreneurial knowledge (around 90%) consider it as extremely or very important) and of support and promotion of innovative activities (88.1%) (see Table 2). This indicates a change in the attitudes and culture of the entrepreneurs of the area.

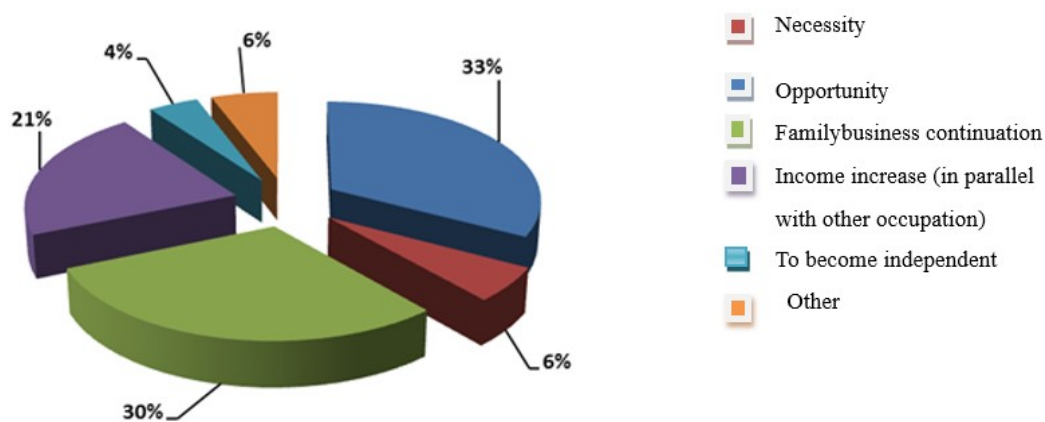


Figure 1. Reasons for entrepreneurial activity

The research confirmed that the nature of the business ecosystem in the mountainous area of Pyli satisfies the existing literature on rural entrepreneurship; enterprises of small size which target only local and regional and to a lesser extent the national market; difficulties in communications infrastructures; and significant weakness regarding access to information, finance and advice services within a severe socio-economic crisis framework. On the other hand, respondents highlight the lack but also the importance of significant entrepreneurial skills and knowledge while the research indicates that people of such areas are in need of relevant education and support to develop proper entrepreneurial culture in order to confront the rather negative institutional setting nowadays. Furthermore, there is an effort and a turn to innovativeness more in the form of novel services and diversified products.

As entrepreneurs in rural mountainous areas face greater levels of market competition and entrepreneurial support is reduced within the long-lasting and still on-going severe crisis in Greece, one of the policy challenges is to encourage them to look for new business opportunities and perhaps turn to novel approaches such as knowledge-intensive or social entrepreneurship. For example, farm diversification can include retail activities by expanding business or in terms of networking and co-operation such as craft centers, thematic tourism or food processing); lodging can be combined with sports and recreation; services (e.g. agricultural, non-agricultural, and tourism) can be further enhanced by advanced promotion using ICT technology etc. Creation of sustainable competitive advantages, cultivation of the entrepreneurial culture and engagement in new forms of co-operation such as the scheme of social entrepreneurship may offer considerable scope for improving the economic viability of businesses in rural areas and leverage financing needs while contributing to the local rural economy as a whole. Of significant importance is the fact that while transport costs seem to have removed the barriers of distance, weaknesses in communications technologies and the internet hinder the potential for a substantial expansion of market areas for rural businesses; additionally, it is quite evident that small enterprises need support to take full advantage of this potential. The research highlights also significant national institutional roadblocks that hamper rural entrepreneurship. In particular,

taxation, social security and bureaucracy are issues which should be immediately tackled by the political leadership as part of a coherent national entrepreneurial policy. Policies proposed regard simpler licensing procedures, special public procurement and taxation measures for mountainous areas as well as a friendlier framework for the absorption of structural EU funds. Encouragement and development of networks and other forms of social entrepreneurship could support the creation and sustenance of structures of services transferring knowledge, advice and strategic information which today appears to be non-existent in such places. In the context of these mechanisms, it is deemed necessary to develop and promote actions to map and analyze the current socio-economic and technological changes in societies, sectors and professions where rural enterprises operate and grow at least at national and European levels.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Albeit the upward trend in rural entrepreneurship research, national, geomorphological and cultural factors appear to be still largely unexplored regarding the way they impact the entrepreneurial processes in rural areas or more specifically in mountainous areas in times of severe socio-economic crisis. On the other hand, rural entrepreneurship has been acknowledged as an important component that contributes to the sustainable development of a country and can act as a medium to overcome crisis in Greece. Moreover, lately, a strong trend of abandoning urban places and returning back to country ones is evident in Greece. Thus, people seek to find alternatives to survive the crisis. Therefore, the role of rural entrepreneurship becomes rather crucial and therefore the issue is of great importance for both theorists and practitioners. More precisely, this paper contributes to adding empirical support to both a growing number of theoretical works on the issue as well as the necessary background for the formation of policies and institutions regarding rural entrepreneurship.

The main contribution of the study seems to be its indication that there is a significant difference of rural entrepreneurship even at local level. Findings actually support the assumption that different entrepreneurship support policies should be prepared for different regions at local, regional, national and European levels in order to address successfully the distinctive culture and environment of the communities involved. Mountainous areas are usually less competitive than rural areas in fertile lowlands close to urban areas. Sustaining entrepreneurship in these areas means supporting the creation of strong competitive advantages so that rural mountainous enterprises can expand beyond the confines of local or even national markets especially in times of crisis (which imposes more constraints but also economic development challenges). According to the findings, the group of particularly the opportunity-driven entrepreneurs who are traced in these areas -if properly supported - may maintain profitable entrepreneurship in mountainous areas and also become the critical mass to lay the foundations for a stronger and better targeted focus on novel types of entrepreneurship such as social entrepreneurship.

The results of this questionnaire provided valuable insight into constraints to rural entrepreneurship, as perceived by rural entrepreneurs as well as major weaknesses in both cultural and institutional issues which policy makers may take into consideration. Although several good practice ideas have been proposed, these are frequently inadequately targeted to the specific needs of mountainous business, a sector which is notoriously hard to sustain.

Policy makers should engage educational institutions, government agencies as well as local members of the targeted entrepreneurial communities in order to form effective policies.

Furthermore, surveyed businesses have survived the long severe socio-economic Greek crisis; this might cause survival bias while the absence of a longitudinal analysis derives our research by a more evolutionary perspective and relevant useful insights. In addition, it appears that the factors used in the questionnaires deserve to be further broken down in sub-factors (e.g. regarding knowledge, innovation, culture, infrastructures etc.) while other informal and informal institutional variables could be introduced to compliment the analysis. Consequently, further research could attempt to replicate similar analyses in different geographic, sectoral and territorial contexts, enrich the content of the questionnaire and explore reasons of failure. Researchers are also encouraged to explore the issue at case study level and from a longitudinal/historical perspective.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Admittedly, the results are tentative since the research bears certain limitations. In the first place, a significant drawback was the lack of sample diversity since the analysis was limited to only one geographically bounded sample

limiting the generalizability of the findings. However, this choice enabled the control for potential confounds due to cross-region differences, increased the internal validity and provided the main contribution of the study highlighting the significance of bottom-up approach of every single area of interest when regarding rural entrepreneurship and policy making.

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