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# JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION



Centre international de recherches sur les communautés coopératives rurales  
International Research Centre on Rural Cooperative Communities  
המרכז הבינ-לאומי לחקר קהילות כפריות שיתופיות

**CIRCOM**

VOLUME 24

No. 2

1996

CIRCOM, International Research Centre on Rural Cooperative Communities was established in September 1965 in Paris.

The purpose of the Centre is to provide a framework for investigations and research on problems concerning rural cooperative communities and publication of the results, to coordinate the exchange of information on current research projects and published works, and to encourage the organization of symposia on the problems of cooperative rural communities, as well as the exchange of experts between different countries.

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*Information for Subscribers:* The *Journal of Rural Cooperation* is a semi-annual periodical, aimed at the pursuit of research in the field of rural cooperation. Editorial enquiries and other correspondence should be addressed to CIRCOM, Yad Tabenkin, Ramat Efal 52960, Israel (Fax: +972-3-5346376). Subscription rate: \$23 per annum (plus \$2.00 sea mail; \$6.00 airmail).



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# Rural Women and the Development of the Agritouristic Cooperatives in Greece: The Case of Petra, Lesvos

by

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## Abstract

The role of rural women in Greece is changing gradually within a broad framework of socio-economic transformations the rural sector has been facing in the recent years. This article is concerned with the broadening of rural women's activities to include matters of public life such as the women's agritouristic cooperatives. The moving force behind the development of these cooperatives has been the General Secretariat for Equality as a way to make known the socio-economic role of women in rural communities and to enhance their income. The first cooperative of this type was established in 1984 in Petra, a small village in the island of Lesvos. In its twelve years of existence, this project has seen the smooth shift of this community from an agricultural economy to an agritouristic one, a pattern that has been quite fulfilling in terms of occupation and income for the local population.

## Introduction

For many decades the development policy in Greece focused on the industrialization and modernization of the country placing the development of the rural areas in a secondary position. The rural development of the post-war decades was concentrated on the intensification of productivity and the modernization of agriculture. This policy led to the social and economic marginalization of the rural areas and the exodus of the rural population to the big cities (Kazakopoulos, 1986; Tsartas, 1991; Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992).

From the 1970s onwards, an effort has been made, through the national policy and the regulations of the EEC, to stimulate regional development. The model of *endogenous development* has been applied, based on the mobilization of the local and regional potentials, both natural and human, until then untapped or underdeveloped (Papakonstandinidis, 1989; Gidarakou, 1990; Damianos *et al.*, 1991; Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992). Along with this model, nowadays, the model of *sustainable development* is promoted and defined as "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own

needs” (Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992; Kousis, 1993). In the context of sustainable development, actions should promote rural diversification and pluriactivity in the rural family (Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992). Within this political framework and the socio-economic changes that the rural sector has been facing in recent years, the question emerged of incorporating the rural women in the production process and of reallocating their “traditional” role within the rural household and the local community.

## **Rural women and cooperatives**

Research has shown that a very small percentage of rural women (4.1 percent) is occupied in activities outside agriculture. The rest concentrates on activities within the household and the farm (Gidarakou, 1990). Nowadays, the rural women enjoy the recognition of their situation through the enacting of a pension, the increasing representation of their interests in legislation and their growing participation in projects of rural development. Nevertheless, for many years these activities were not “visible” either to the official statistical data or to the state policy – even to the society at large. The women worked in the household and the field with a dynamic contribution to the country’s production but with no personal revenue or pension and having no labor rights as these activities were considered to be their natural duty (Gidarakou, 1994; Moisisidis, 1994:61). Moreover, the socio-economic structures of the rural areas contributed to the entrenchment of the rural women in the household, as the occupational possibilities outside of it and the farm were rather limited (Gidarakou, 1994).

Their involvement in the cooperative movement was presented, among others, as a way out (Michou, 1986; Gidarakou, 1990; Iakovidou, 1992). Formerly, eligibility to agricultural cooperatives was only for those married women who owned agricultural land. Law No. 1257/82 of the Ministry of Agriculture gave women the right to enter agricultural cooperatives as long as their spouses were members of the cooperative and presupposing that agriculture was their main or secondary occupation (Livas, 1986; Michou, 1986). With Law No. 1541/85 rural women were finally accepted on equal terms with men in agricultural cooperatives (Apostolopoulos, 1995:99). But, in reality, it was soon realized that letting women into cooperatives already run by men was a sure way to leave them on the sidelines. As Turner (1985) points out: “women farmers’ occupational requirements are often not recognized, and therefore neither met, in the context of existing agricultural cooperatives, which are often male-directed and male-dominated.”

The only way, therefore, to help the rural women to fully participate was to let them organize in their own cooperatives. It was necessary, though, to find a cooperative activity that the women could engage in directly. It had to be the type of work with which women were already familiar and at the same time to be innovative so they would greet it with enthusiasm. And it had to be of small scale,

as the women lacked both capital and means (Livas, 1986). The answer came in the form of agritouristic cooperatives, a project that required minimum capital and basic knowledge, and was promising and familiar enough to the women to arouse their interest (Livas, 1986; Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992).

### **Agritouristic cooperatives: background and current situation**

In the mid 1980s the development of the women's agritouristic cooperatives was initiated, in spite of the fact that there has been no development of a cooperative movement in the tourism sector in Greece. Whatever collective efforts have been realized, they have been exclusively restricted to the collaboration of individual private agencies.

The key force behind the development of the women's agritouristic cooperatives in Greece was the General Secretariat for Equality (GSE), coupled with training, financial and development support from a host of other public sector agencies, including the Rural Bank of Greece, the Ministry of Agriculture, Prefectures' Councils and municipalities (Iakovidou and Kazana, 1992; Turner, 1993). The best known activities of these cooperatives refer to:

- Provision of tourist lodgings with or without breakfast;
- Provision of traditional meals;
- Preparation and provision of local agricultural products (handicrafts, home-made traditional dishes).

The first women's agritouristic cooperative was established in the village of Petra in Lesvos (1984) and one year later was followed by the agritouristic cooperatives of Ambelakia in Thessalia, Mastichochoria in Chios, Arachova in Viotia, Agios Germanos in Prespes (Florina) and Maronia in Rodopi (Map 1).

The development of agritouristic cooperatives agrees well not only with the interests and needs of the local women – as mentioned above – but also with the general idea of regional development. It contributes to the changing image of the rural sector where pluriactivity and tourism are gaining ground over pure agricultural activities. It also offers a product – agritourism – that has been characterized as friendly to the natural environment and powerful enough to enhance the local economies without disrupting the socio-economic structure of the local community. Furthermore, it can inherently mobilize resources which otherwise would not be available to the single individuals and could internalize many of the risks and uncertainties which, again, individuals on their own would hesitate to face, especially in the case of rural women.

The agritouristic cooperatives are facing a system of mass tourism development based on the principles of a free market economy. The confrontation of this system

by the cooperatives relies on the particular characteristics of agritourism as a “soft” type of tourism such as its respect for the surrounding environment, its emphasis on homely and low cost vacations and its compliance with the local socio-economic structure.

Some basic data on the current agritouristic cooperatives follows (Giagou and Apostolopoulos, fieldwork research, 1996):

The agritouristic cooperative of *Petra* counts 35 members of an average age of 40. It provides 55 accommodations with 120 beds (double and triple). It also has a restaurant and courses in Greek cuisine, language and folklore dances are offered.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Mastichochoria* (or *Notiochoria*) counts 14 farm houses with 95 beds. The members of the cooperative are 32, of an average age of 53. The cooperative offers meals of the traditional chiotiki cuisine to its visitors as well as the possibility of participating in one of the most interesting local agricultural activities, the “pricking” of the mastic.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Agios Germanos* in Prespes counts 12 members, 35 years old on average. This cooperative differs from the others by offering hostels instead of agritouristic accommodations in the houses of the women cooperators. It has 4 hostels with 16 rooms in traditional buildings, with a hosting capacity of about 40 people. It is active throughout the year, reaching 100 percent capacity. The women are occupied at the same time with the preparation and the trading of traditional food as well as with the organization of a monthly summer seminar on Greek folklore dances.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Psarades*, in Prespes (Florina), was founded in 1994 and counts 14 members with an average age of 40. This cooperative is a particular one as it is based solely on the exploitation of a small hotel built by the Prefecture of Florina and given to the cooperative on a two-year renewable contract. This hotel includes 37 beds, a restaurant and a bar. It is active throughout the year, reaching 70 percent capacity. The restaurant offers food only by order and functions, as well as the hotel, through the services offered by the women cooperators. The members of the cooperative of *Psarades* are occupied at the same time with the preparation and trading of traditional local food.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Maronia*, despite the efforts, did not function on an accommodation basis (although agritouristic accommodations do function in the area on a private, non cooperative basis) and from the beginning of its operation has been restricted to a restaurant with a 20 tables capacity. The members of the cooperative are 16 women, responsible for the operation of the restaurant and the service to the customers.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Abelakia Larisa* offers 12 double rooms. It has 18 members of an average age of 55. Each member provides a double room. Besides the agritouristic accommodations, the cooperative provides an open bar as



well as home industry products of the women cooperators (traditional sweets and handicrafts) displayed at the exposition office of the cooperative.

The agritouristic cooperative of *Arachova Viotia* offers 55 accommodations of 150 beds. It has 28 members of an average age of 40. Besides the agritouristic accommodations, the cooperative provides its visitors with free courses in Greek cuisine, pastry, the art of weaving as well as tours in the area and handicrafts of local art.

However, the agritouristic cooperatives as tools of socio-economic local development are nowadays in a rather stagnant position. Beyond the individual fluctuations each cooperative has been confronted with, there are some general factors that can account for this situation:

- The women cooperators failed to adopt in a satisfactory degree a professional behavior towards their agrotouristic product (*i.e.*, the offer of “soft” tourism services) and their associations;
- There is a lack of institutional support, especially on a state level. The responsible agencies reacted to these cooperatives as short-term projects, withdrawing their support without establishing a sufficient network of communication and training;
- The cooperatives lack a central agritouristic agency to represent them in the relevant institutions on any level. The result is lack of communication among the cooperatives as well as among the cooperatives and the agencies responsible for the agritouristic and, more generally, regional development.

Behind these reasons lies mainly the “top-down” origin of these projects. Under the heavy guidance of the agencies, the capability of the cooperators to act on their own name and under their responsibility, remained greatly underdeveloped.

The case that best reflects the expectations, the successes and the failures of these projects in Greece is the women’s agritouristic cooperative of Petra, Lesbos.

## **The case study of the women’s agritouristic cooperative of Petra, Lesbos**

### ***Methodological approach***

The cooperative of Petra was selected for our research as the first of its kind to develop in Greece and to initiate the keen involvement and support of the relevant institutions.

The purpose of this research was to understand the development and functioning of the cooperative as well as to analyze the effects on the local community and households. The research took the form of a case study and was concluded in two stages: fieldwork A (Athens/Petra, summer 1992) and fieldwork B (Athens/Petra, winter 1994). Both phases were conducted on two levels: the macro-level of the

involved institutions (governmental and not) and the micro-level of the community and the household-members of the cooperative.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were used altogether with group discussions with the adolescents of the last classes of Lyceum (15–18 years old); moreover, life histories of members of the cooperative were recorded along with the experiences from General Meetings as well as the observations of everyday life in the community and the everyday life of the cooperative. This was done during personal stays in agritouristic accommodations of the cooperative in the high season (end of summer) and the low season (winter). Data proved useful for the understanding of the relationships amongst the members of the cooperative along with the differentiation of the daily life of the community and the households during tourist and non-tourist periods.

### ***Background and structure of the cooperative***

The women's agritouristic cooperative was put in operation as a pilot project with the intention of establishing, in case of success, cooperatives of the same type in various areas of the country. Its function has been based on cooperative legislation as this takes effect in the free-economy countries and conditioned by international cooperative principles.

As such, the main purpose of the cooperative is the common use of assets by the members. Specifically, each member should assign the use of one to four rooms to the cooperative for common use by foreign and domestic tourism, against a rent, the amount of which is to be decided by the General Meeting of the members. The time of assignment is defined to five months yearly (from the 1st of May till the end of September). After the end of the tourist season, the profits are distributed according to the participation of each member, that is to the numbers of beds allocated by each to the cooperative.

The elected Board of Directors and its central office are the core management of the cooperative. The Central office is responsible for the advertisement of the cooperative, the booking, the distribution of the tourists to the accommodations as well as the financial arrangements. The cooperative rents a building in the village square, on the seafront, housing the central office and its restaurant.

The cooperative started to operate fully in 1984 with 24 active members and a restaurant. The main actors that participated in the establishment and the initial operation of the cooperative were the General Secretariat for Equality (GSE), the Ministry of Agriculture (Sector of Rural Home Economics), the Panhellenic Confederation of Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives, the Rural Bank of Greece, the National Tourism Organization and of course the women of Petra. Each of these actors had different objectives and perceptions of what the project was about. The GSE was the moving force behind the project. It had just been established and in the spirit of the times (1983) it was looking at the project as a way to promote the

equality between men and women and to reveal the social and economic role of the women in the rural community. Its involvement was mostly in creating the necessary networks for the support of the cooperative and in promoting it on the national and international level.

The *Ministry of Agriculture* was concerned chiefly with the rural development, namely to restrain rural migration, to secure a supplementary income to the rural families and to improve the social, economic and cultural conditions of the area. It contributed to the project of the cooperative by means of financial support and educational programs to the women.

The PASEGES as the top organization of the cooperative movement in Greece, supported the project to its cooperative needs.

The *Rural Bank of Greece* was also very interested in the project as a way of economic uplifting of the area and as an experiment that in case of success could prove to be a useful tool for overall rural development. Its involvement has been from the very beginning quite dynamic by providing financial support and educational courses in bookkeeping and financial management. It also became the assessor of the cooperative during its first steps.

The *National Tourism Organisation* was interested in this project as an answer to the already saturated mass tourism, an answer that would enable to meet the growing demand without destroying the quality of the offer. Its involvement was in providing courses in tourism, in setting standards of operation, and in controlling the cooperative in its function as a touristic enterprise.

The *women of Petra* got interested mainly because of the promising opportunity of a supplementary income.

The women's agritouristic cooperative was examined under three different aspects, namely as a women's project, as a cooperative and as an agritouristic enterprise.

As a women's project, the cooperative is tightly connected with the GSE. A remarkable campaign by the GSE created a good name for it abroad (France, Holland, Ireland, Italy and Germany) while in the interior, part of the program of social tourism was directed toward the cooperative. As above mentioned, the main objective of the Secretariat was to provide the women of Petra with their personal income and to make known the economic importance of the rural householding.

This objective has been achieved to a great extent. Women with small capital and no particular training, just by using their already existing but underestimated knowledge of householding, have managed to run more or less successfully their own project for more than ten years. Through this project the household work has been recognized as having not only users' value but also exchange value and the women released themselves from the dependence on their husbands' income.

However, a point deserves further attention. The economic importance of the

householding is recognized as long as the tourist period lasts. With the return to "normal" life in the winter period, householding becomes again the "natural thing to do" for the women. The question arises whether with the development of such projects that do sustain the "traditional" role of the women as housekeepers, the result is to enhance this role. Further research on the subject is required.

As a cooperative, this project presents two sides, the economic and the social one. To ensure the economic survival and even more its success, a modern cooperative must be competitive and able to show a positive economic balance (Papageorgiou, 1996:48-51). Within its ten years of function, the agritouristic cooperative of Petra has limited itself to the operation of serviced rooms and only occasionally has undertaken other activities (*e.g.* preparation and provision of traditional food) without significant success. The only other sub-project that has been seriously attempted - the restaurant - proved to be quite a hindrance.

Nevertheless, both the families and the households that have been involved in the cooperative have shown considerable changes in their daily functions. The main influence has been observed in the accumulated supplementary income by the women cooperators. This income has been used primarily for the enhancement of the household and the further education of the children. Beside its economic value, this personal income has given the women a feeling of self-respect and achievement and has proved the economic importance of the rural household.

A significant socio-cultural influence on the members of these families has been their contact with the tourists, particularly on a daily basis. This contact has opened new horizons to them and new ways of looking at various aspects of life.

The women cooperators have showed the possibility of developing a social bond as members of the same association. Nevertheless, this bond has strengthened only in the last years and after some very strong conflicts that almost tore the association apart. Partially responsible for this situation has been the fact that all the operational procedures are being handled by the central office instead of the cooperators individually. Although this procedure was meant to be – according to the administration – its strongest tool in avoiding conflicts among the members, it proved to be one of its weakest points, by causing accusations of favoritism and unfairness.

Another characteristic that has played an essential role in the development of the cooperative is its administration where the dominant personality of the Head of the cooperative seems to have concentrated all the knowledge and power in her hands. The positive side is that the decision-making is quick and efficient. However, the effect on the relationships among the members is mainly negative in terms of active participation and team spirit.

As an agritouristic enterprise, the cooperative was examined within the framework of the agritouristic development. In Greece, agritourism has been a type of tourism that emerged as an offspring of circumstances rather than of a

conscious effort. For this reason agritourism has not been under the umbrella of a central agency that would carry out the policy design and the implementation of the program. The various agencies responsible for the development of agritourism respond to different initiatives and needs with the minimum of communication among them.

As a result, there is almost no awareness among the local population of the existence of this particular type of tourism or of some special advantages that it could derive from it. Consequently, the product offered by the cooperative is not distinct not only to the customers but also to the very members of the cooperative. This creates confusion among the members about their roles as providers of the agrotouristic product and as cooperators.

Further to the above analysis, the future course of the Petra cooperative seems rather uncertain.

### ***The contribution of the agritouristic cooperative to the development of the area***

Petra is situated 55 km north of Mytilini, the capital of the island. It lies along a 800 m sandy beach, surrounded by a mountainous zone. The village has 1100 inhabitants. Approximately 80 percent of them constitute its manpower. More than 50 percent are occupied in agriculture but not on a permanent basis. The majority of the inhabitants carries on a combination of occupations such as farmers/fishermen, fishermen/tourism, stock-farmers/tourism, etc. (Vafiadis, *et al.*, 1992:58).

Before the development of the cooperative, Petra was a rural community facing economic difficulties. Farming and fishery were neither as intensive nor as profitable as to keep the local population to a desirable level of living. This, along with the lack of state interest in the area resulted in a high rate of migration and to the degradation of the existing economic sectors.

Despite the natural beauty of the area and the high numbers of tourists swarming the nearby town of Molivos, tourism in Petra was developed only on an occasional basis. A small hotel and some private rooms were providing hospitality to the few tourists stopping there on their way to Molivos. This situation changed with the establishment of the cooperative.

This development brought Petra to the center of public attention. Due to the good advertisement campaign and the vigorous efforts of its administration, the cooperative became quickly known, at national and international levels, as an original project of the local women offering homely and low cost vacations, and more importantly, authentic experiences in the rural life and the rural family. Little by little the tourists came to the village, the tourist agencies became interested and the local people who did not participate in the cooperative recognized the economic advantages of tourism and started their own tourist enterprises. As Long (1984:9) points out "the system of linkages that developed gave the considerable space for the local groups to pursue their own paths of development."

Within a few years the change of the village was radical and the development of the tourist infrastructure quite impressive. From one small hotel to seven hotels, from two cafés to ten bars and two discos, from some passing-by tourists to six thousand tourists per season (Municipality Records, 1994). At the same time, new roads were constructed, the existing houses were improved and many new were erected, either for private use or for small hotel units and for entertainment shops. Clearly, in this case, the pursue of own paths of development had “a feedback effect on the wider structure and thus influenced the wider processes of change often in unexpected ways” (Long, 1984).

Undoubtedly, the cooperative greatly influenced the turn of the community to tourism. It was also responsible for the introduction of small-scale tourism as well as the attraction of tourist customers of the agritouristic product. The paradox is the afterwards silent deterioration of the fame and image of the cooperative within the community while the tourism development was reaching a high point.

This deterioration can be briefly attributed to the lack of a definite character of the agritouristic product, to the weak promotion undertaken by the cooperative and to the antagonistic relation between the cooperative and the municipality. Nowadays the cooperative is regarded by the local community as one of the many tourist enterprises in the area, with no particular meanings attached to it.

## **Conclusions**

The development of the women’s agritouristic cooperatives in Greece has been accompanied by expectations not only connected to the “awakening” of the rural women but also to the development of the rural areas in such ways that would enhance the local economy and respect and upgrade the natural, cultural and social environment.

These cooperatives were meant to make known the economic importance of the rural household and further prove the underestimated abilities of the rural women to successfully enter the free market, running their own projects. To some extent, this effort can be considered as successful. However, two points seem to challenge this success. The first one arises from the observation that the women cooperators do return to their “traditional” roles as housewives when the tourist season ends. This takes place not only in real terms but also in the social consciousness of their families and communities. This is a question that does deserve further research. The second point arises from the role that the agritouristic cooperatives have played in the development of the rural areas.

The new women’s agritouristic cooperative movement failed to yield the expected results either from the aspect of its expansion to the broader Greek rural space, or from the aspect of the local benefit to the areas where it has been organized. The main reason to this development “weakness” seems to be the top-down origin of these projects that hampered their incorporation into the socio-economic fabric of

the local areas. This situation should be of concern to those involved in matters of cooperation as well as local and regional development.

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