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Challenges of Tourism Sustainability in Greek Mountain Regions in Decline

Vassiliki Delitheou, Spyros Alexiou,

*Department of Economics and Regional Development, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, As.
Professor*

**Agricultural University of Athens, Greece Phd Candidate*

ABSTRACT: Mountains play a crucial role in the life cycle. They are also characterized by extreme vulnerability due to the sensitivity of biodiversity elements, environment, and natural resources. Sustainability is a component that affects these sensitive areas. Mountain regions often find themselves less extroverted, and as they lack developmental options, face the danger of desolation. Effective developmental programs and projects connected to various possible directions referring to sustainable agriculture, alternative resources schemes, and tourism activities, in particular, will be agents of revitalization policies towards a growth trajectory through many interesting choices according to each region unique characteristic.

In this article, we intend to approach the concept of mountain areas and mountain tourism in combination with the content of a development model for degraded mountain areas in Greece. We conclude that local authorities should promote development projects in these areas following the principle of sustainability acting in a systematic and planned way, through cooperation, social acceptance, and consensus.

Keywords Mountain areas, mountain tourism, tourism, sustainability, community-based development, Greece

I. INTRODUCTION

Mountains play a crucial role in the life cycle because they provide man with tangible and intangible resources. What is more, the biophysical processes that take place in these landforms have a vital impact on the entire earth. They cover 27% of the planet's land and are areas inhabited by a significant part of the world's population which is estimated at 22% (Blyth S. et al., 2002). Moreover, many lowland areas are highly dependent on resources of the highlands, and because of their distinctive characteristics, the latter would constitute interesting case studies specifically "spatial transformations and disparities more clearly than other types of territory" (Perlik M., 2019).

In the 21st century, mountain ecosystems are facing multiple challenges and "exogenous" interventions arising either from development and land use diversification, or threat due to climate change. In turn, the new data affect the lowland areas associated with mountainous ones as well as their communities, causing changes, unfavorable outcomes, threats but opportunities as well (Makino Y., et al., 2019). The aftermath of these changes is a series of impacts on local communities regarding the economy, society, and culture. The most important impact, however, is the one concerning the environment of mountain areas themselves, natural resources and ecosystems which are the building blocks of a healthy system that has survived and retained much of its authenticity to this day.

Due to the sensitivity of biodiversity elements, environment, and natural resources in general, mountain areas are characterized as particularly vulnerable. Biodiversity is considered a crucial component of sustainability because it plays an important role in maintaining human life through the provision of goods (food, timber, raw materials, etc.) and services (climate regulation, air, and water purification, etc.) (Babanasis S., 2014).

II. MOUNTAINS AND TOURISM: A FRAGILE RELATIONSHIP

Regulation 1257/1999 (art. 19) of the European Union has adopted criteria used to distinguish mountain areas to support rural development. Mountain areas are characterized by limitations regarding the ability to grow at a similar rate as non-mountain ones, due to adverse factors and climatic conditions (steep slopes, high altitude, low temperatures, long winter season, etc.). The above conditions are natural obstacles resulting in increased cost of land use, shorter growing season, and difficulty in using the usual mechanical production equipment. Therefore, mountain areas face (i) severe difficulties in developing productive activities, (ii) burdens due to

increased cost of intervention and investments that could end their isolation (Loulakis A., 2011) in render them ready to control imminent threats.

According to Valaoras G. (2000: 69-70), the threats that mountain areas face are: (a) the abandonment of the area by its inhabitants (degradation of the rich cultural heritage, erosion of the formerly cultivated areas, expansion of wild vegetation), (b) human intervention, such as road construction, fires, quarries, poaching, uncontrolled grazing (habitat fragmentation, slope erosion).

Developments in economics, society, and technology have affected spatial units in different ways. They favored some, mainly the urban ones, and hindered others, including the mountain areas. As a result, the traditional organization structures of such regions experienced a crisis, each of them differently. Regions sought, or are seeking, alternatives to overcome this reality, accordingly, based on product characteristics of each one, their dynamism, and potential. Thus, a "plural typology" of landscapes and mountain areas emerged with new orientations and forms of exploitation (Bachiller Martínez J. M., 2008).

III. MOUNTAIN-BASED ALTERNATIVE TOURISM DESTINATION

Tourism is one of the activities that claim space and resources in the mountain areas turned into a tourist destination which is a separate geographical area that has distinct characteristics for each potential visitor. The development of tourism in that area may have happened accidentally or enhanced intentionally. This passive or active process is influenced by the prevailing social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political context in the region where it has developed, as well as by the choices and initiatives of businesses and other entities wishing to develop tourism for their own commercial benefits or other reasons.

The WTO (2007: 1-2) defines the destination as the physical place where a tourist spends at least one night. It includes tourist products and supporting services and tourist resources in a range that can be reached and returned within the day. It has physical and administrative boundaries, which define its management, and an image that determines its competitiveness in the market. The various stakeholders connected to the local host community play an important role at the destination and can coexist and network.

The central importance of the destination is that the consumption of its tourist goods and services can only take place at the destination (which is also the place of production) and the buyers must move to it, as opposed to material products which can be transferred to the place of the consumer residence (Kotler Ph. et al., 2017). The movement of tourists to the place of production of the tourist product (or experience) causes a series of issues of multiple nature (economic, social, environmental, planning, marketing, etc.). This is because the repeated presence of tourists at a destination causes significant changes in the long run, which can completely transform the structural characteristics of the host society. These changes are not always desirable, resulting in - besides the benefits - significant costs caused by the development of tourism in the region (Mason P., 2008; Delitheou V. et al., 2020). These issues, related to the impact of tourism and the changes it generates, are in turn called upon to be managed and addressed by local communities.

Since its first systematic implementation, tourism has been used as a "key-tool" to promote regional development. Three key-elements contributed to this assessment: i) consumption takes place at the place of production, ii) development of numerous interconnections with the local production system (agriculture, construction, handicrafts, trade), and iii) significant multiplier effects in the region and the country. In the case of mountain areas, this "function" of tourism is estimated to be a catalyst for their development, under appropriate conditions (appropriate economic and environmental planning) (Vlami A., et al., 2012). With the emergence of demand (a market willing to consume), supply will follow, i. e. the "quantity, quality and variety of tourist products, goods and services available for sale in the tourism market at given prices" (Komilis P., 2001: 27), facilities, equipment, and infrastructure. Thus, space acquires its productive dimension ("means of production") and becomes a tourist destination.

In recent years there has been a promotion of inland tourism due to, among other factors: (i) pressures exerted by mass tourism in coastal areas (increased occupancy, negative effects, saturation), (ii), desire for diversification & enrichment of mass tourist product, (iii) need to extend the productive base of societies located off the coast, rural and mountain areas, (iv) change of travel stereotypes, (v) need to mitigate seasonality.

In a mountain area, tourism has the potential to take advantage of a wide variety of ecological and cultural characteristics and to integrate these areas into the international tourism system turning mountains to "one of the most popular destinations for tourists" (Nepal S. & Chipeniuk R., 2005). For mountain areas, the most appropriate forms of tourism that can, under certain conditions, ensure the sustainability of their environmental and cultural elements are the alternative or soft forms of tourism. These are tourist activities "oriented to the special aspects of attractions related to special interests of particular market segments" (Anastasiou S. & Alexiou Sp., 2001: 48).

The development of alternative forms of tourism began at a time when people were looking for a change of attitude towards tourism seeking different experiences associated with the natural environment. The natural and cultural conditions an area offers are remarkable attractions for visitors and tourists. However, a large

number of visitors are likely to cause sweeping changes in an ecosystem and several negative social phenomena such as the loosening of family bonds, prevalence of the culture of big, immediate and short-term profit, gradual loss of the main cultural elements that actually constitute the identity factors of a place and of local people. For this reason, special attention should be paid to the concept of carrying capacity as a tool to avoid possible negative and unexpected impacts on local community and environment (Coccosis H. & Tsartas P., 2001).

Due to the diversity of mountain areas, mountain tourism does not show any uniformity but can vary between destinations and sometimes specializes in a unique feature or activity (e. g. Himalayan mountaineering, Alpine skiing, etc.) (Duglio S. et al., 2019). The interest is mainly focused on the mountain destinations' natural and social environment, on the possibilities for a variety of activities but also on the use of leisure time. Winter sports, for example, are a crucial element in ski-based destinations. Other elements that visitors seek are authenticity, the enjoyment of natural landscapes, fun, social contact, gastronomy, tranquility, wellness and relaxation, i.e. elements that could compose a complete experience (Araújo A. et al., 2019: 153-154).

Alternative forms of tourism are constantly evolving and multiplying, expressing the multitude of tourist needs and preferences. The inhabitants of a local community response to new developments must be collective. Cooperation and solidarity among bodies related to tourism and Local Government are necessary and must be based on honesty and parity. Development should start from a "bottom-up" process, with the residents themselves playing a crucial role since they are those who know their area better, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the focus points of their initiatives when deciding options and policy measures regarding their community.

The development of special forms of tourism leads the inhabitants to face a great number of situations that can be successfully dealt with only through local cooperation and awareness by all, considering the needs of the local community, as well. Local Government plays an important role in deciding about the tourist investments to be implemented in an area, directing its policy towards those specific forms of tourism that it considers more appropriate for considerable development (Andriotis K., 2008: 246-247). In general, a tourism development plan on a local scale, especially in mountain areas, needs to be based on a methodological approach where participation of the local community should be "sine qua non" (Pitarch - Garrido M. et al., 2017).

In modern society, a large part of the population of developed countries is concentrated and lives in cities. For these residents, non-urban areas, especially mountains, lakes, uninhabited islands, and other places with the features of "wild" and "unexplored" are evaluated as areas offering excitement, motivation, and opportunities for adventure (Beedie P., Hudson S., 2003). "The pleasure of changing things and switching routines impels the tourist to travel" (Rojek C., 1997: 56). Within this context, new attitudes and perceptions have influenced their general needs and consequently the way they wish to meet their specific tourism needs (Dwyer L., 2015).

Marković J.J., Petrović M.D. (2013: 82-83) believe that people seek experiences that rejuvenate their health and well-being in an environment with fresh and cool air, varied topography, beautiful landscapes, and cultural elements, which are some of the special features on which mountain tourism is based. In these areas a different model of tourism development is proposed which is based on different characteristics of the tourist experience, focusing on issues such as the environment and clean nature, events and activities, entertainment and recreation, the educational content of the experience, culture, and acquaintance with local history and society. This new model is dominated by 4, not "s's" this time, but "e's", which correspond to the "four dimensions of the experience" model, as cited by Pine and Gilmore (1999, in Oh H. et al, 2007), namely:

- education (learning something new)
- escapism (diverging to a new self)
- esthetics (indulging in environments)
- entertainment (being entertained)

A transition from one model to another undoubtedly requires a different approach to planning, connection with other sectors (and especially agri-food), the role and training of human resources, the possibility of extending the tourist season, the production of quality and diversified products, the protection of resources and the environment and other minor but not insignificant elements of tourism development. It should also be emphasized that the development of the new standards must respect and incorporate the principles of sustainable development (Oh H. et al, *ibid.*, Tsartas P. et al., 2020).

The body of views and concepts attempting to explore this model appeared in the international tourism literature and articles since 1980s onwards. These concepts have many features in common often confusing due to their multiplicity. The most famous are alternative tourism, agritourism, soft tourism, green tourism, ecotourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, ethical tourism etc. What is sought to be expressed with these concepts is essentially the opposition to mass tourism and especially its negative effects, and at the same time (as mentioned above) the promotion of a tourism development model based on the principles of respecting and protecting the natural environment and local communities as a whole.

In general, the term "alternative tourism" refers to:

- (a) small-scale tourism development where the role played by the local population, and local community in general, is particularly important.
- b) based on the natural and cultural resources of the area, and
- c) aiming to deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to the people of the area (Wearing S. & McDonald M., 2002: 204) while it "would appear much more in tune with the principles of sustainability" (Bramwell B., 2004: 16).

Figure 1. Percentage of mountainous land within Mediterranean Countries (Data from Fé d'Ostiani, 2004 and UNEP, 2002), Regato P., Salman R. (2008), own elaboration

Mediterranean countries	% of mountainous area within a country				
	0-10	10-25	25-50	50-75	75-100
Andorra, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Italy, Lebanon, North Macedonia, Montenegro					
Albania, Greece, Morocco, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey, Palestinian Territories					
Croatia, Cyprus, Israel, Portugal, Spain					
Algeria, France, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia					
Egypt, Libya, Malta					

IV. GREEK MOUNTAIN AREAS AND THEIR STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Greece is one of the most mountainous regions among the Balkan and Mediterranean countries, with 65% of its territory occupied by mountains where 13% of the population lives (Regato P. & Salman R., 2008, Figure 1). They are both a dynamic part of the economy and the cultural development of the country (Maravegias N. & Doukas G., 2014: 95). As in the rest of Europe, in Greece agricultural production is "an essential element of mountain areas and cultural identity" (NORDREGIO, 2004).

Although its importance was never questioned, however, the mountain space of Greece was not in the priorities of national planning for a long time and the country did not have a policy for mountain areas (Tsiglifisi A. & Christopoulou O., 2009). The reasons are, among others, the rapid and unbalanced post-war development of a limited number of urban centers and the desolation of the mountain area which did not favor initiatives and political pressures for development interventions. The national policies, especially of the first post-war decades, particularly favored urbanization while the mountain area remained attached to old economic and social structures and its existing infrastructure (technical and social) was gradually degraded (Delitheou V., 2007: 91). This degradation is associated with the unequal access of these areas to the development axes of the country but also to the tendency of their inhabitants to move towards the coast (Zambelis Ch. & Gialiris Th., 2001). The reasons for these movements are the restructuring of production, where mountain areas do not benefit, and the urbanization, which presents better living conditions and more employment opportunities. The mountain areas of the country are classified into three types, each of which present different problems, perspectives, and needs for political intervention (Zambelis Ch. & Gialiris Th., 2001):

- areas with a sufficient permanent population and a sustainable economic base relied on activities such as livestock breeding, forestry, tourism, traditional handicrafts as well as economic and social services, that support local communities. These are areas with a potential to address the arising problems.
- areas that have some important agricultural, cultural, and environmental resources and a significant population, but gradually decreasing. As a result, their economic base is degraded due to a partial abandonment of economic activities (agriculture, livestock breeding).
- areas that are almost deserted by their population, which may have significant agricultural and environmental resources, but gradually degraded due to erosion, lack of maintenance of settlements, and their other infrastructure.

The saturation of large urban centers and the need to decongest them in some way brings the countryside back into focus. Although there is no reversal tendency of urbanization through planned policies, at least the latter seems to have made a significant contribution to the revitalization of mountain areas, the reconstruction of their economy, and the awakening of productiveness. It sought to channel development dynamics to mountain areas through incentive development policies and laws to attract private investment, enhance local incomes (agricultural, livestock) and reduce migration (Delitheou V., 2008: 68). In this context, tourism was recognized as a tool for the development of mountain areas, especially from 1981 and onwards (Delitheou B. 2008, Vlami A. et al., 2012).

This restructuring of production involves spatial changes of economic activities, which, in combination with technology and information development, shifts the economic base of rural areas transforming them from primary production to development of products, services, and activities (Sotiropoulou H.Ch., 2007) now serving needs of urban centers, while at the same time affects the operational and social structure of the local community. Thus, some areas, which, due to their non-involvement in the development process of previous periods, have retained key elements of their cultural, social, and physical authenticity, have the potential to turn "the disadvantage of backwardness into a usable advantage" (Sotiropoulou H.Ch., 2007: 43).

V. MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF TOURISM SUSTAINABILITY IN SELECTED GREEK MOUNTAIN AREAS IN DECLINE

The concept of an area decline is mainly related to its economic activities which sustain local communities. It includes economic downturn, decrease in alternative employment opportunities, gradual reduction of the standard of living, increased rates of population impoverishment, inability to promote growth prospects (Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés, 2017). The consequence of this for these regions is the strengthening of deviation tendencies from the national average of the criteria set on a case-by-case basis. The answer to this reality is attempted through regional development policies (Georgakopoulou St., Delitheou V., 2018), part of which is the promotion of tourism for mountain areas. Mountain tourism is defined as "the alternative form of tourism that develops in a mountain environment characterized by spatial dimension and wide variety of activities" (Apostolopoulos K. & Sdrali D., 2016: 144). It refers to a set (or grid) of tourism activities that are developed in these areas. This set includes a wide variety of activities often depending on season and trends.

This sector of economic production is characterized by the temporary use of the space since tourism is generally defined as "the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence" (Matthieson and Wall, 1982, in Mason P., 2008) having as a main purpose to carry out activities non remunerated by the destination such as a series of recreational activities using the relevant resources provided by the place visited. Thus, since the 21st century and onwards, there have been changes in the "spatial organization of tourist flows and development" (Coccosis H. et al., 2011: 31), which have led to a significant increase in the tourist flow to those mountain and rural areas, which have remarkable natural resources, beautiful and attractive landscapes, cultural-religious monuments as well as other attractions. The development resulted from the "differentiation" of part of the tourist demand and the "introduction" of new economic activity in the mountain regions, proved to have dynamic economic and business characteristics whilst leaving a strong economic imprint in these areas (Gourgiotis, A., 2007).

The kinds of tourism resources, in general, are divided into two major groups (Ibáñez Pérez R. & Cabrera Villa C, 2011: 132-135): (i) direct tourism resources, and (ii) indirect or supportive tourism resources. Direct tourist resources are characterized as those being essential for the creation of a tourist influx in an area, that is, the factors that attract visitors. Supportive tourism resources, on the other hand, cannot stand on their own as autonomous tourism resources capable of bringing tourists to the destination. Their importance stems from their connection to certain main resources, to which they have a complementary role, contributing to the attraction of visitors. Therefore, each destination's ability to promote and establish itself in the international market depends on the variety of attractions it possesses and the ability to attract visitors (Fúster, 1981: 52-55). As for the residents of developed regions, mountains have evolved into areas that «offer excitement, stimulation, and potential adventure» (Beedie P., Hudson S., *ibid.*). The "discovery" of such areas by tourism, or the "configuration" for it, creates some key-issues to be addressed related to destination planning, control, and management, before a certain situation consolidates, in order to avoid consequences which may put the whole venture at risk. This is because tourism has the potential to bring in both beneficial and detrimental effects on societies and the host environment (McKercher B., 1993). The local community's proactive participation in the planning and organization of the whole effort is therefore important (Jenkins C., 1991) since any choices and development directly concern it while, at the same time, it is asked to play not only an active but a leading role. Tourism is not a completely separate productive sector, but a complex of interdependent resources and their combination forms the tourism product of the destination in the market (national and international). The total supply of the region is completed by including additional elements related to the destination area, quality, specialization, and management (Triantafyllou D., 2010).

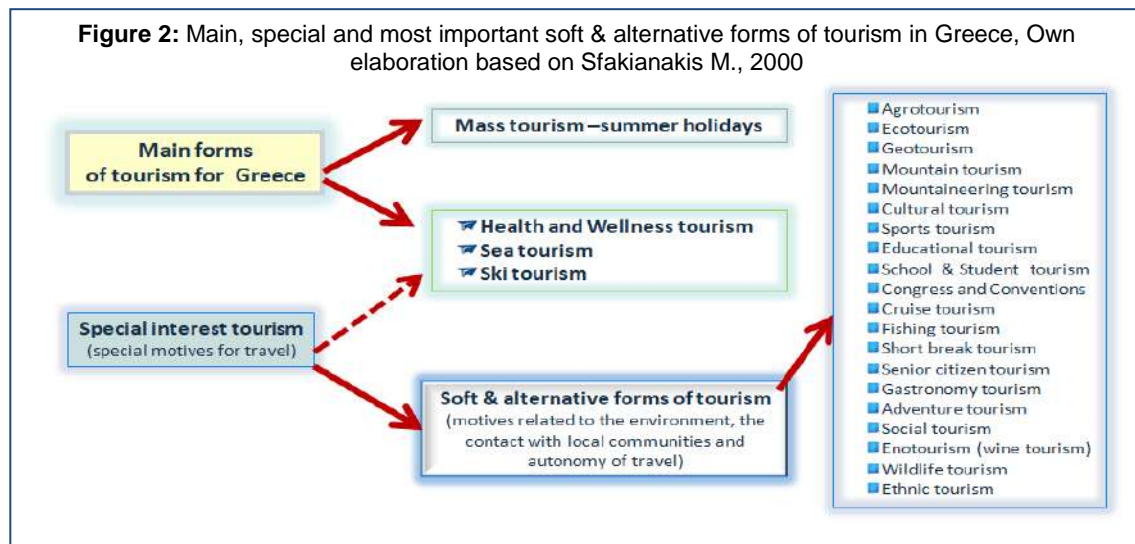
Especially for mountain areas, the development aimed at through tourism should have sustainable characteristics and a long-term horizon. To achieve this, there must be a close link between tourism development, protection and conservation of the resources supporting it, and local population interests. As noted by Menegaki A. (2021: 180) the externalities caused by tourism must be considered for the calculation of income and prosperity resulting from tourism activity, as well as the way the income is distributed among the social groups of the destination. Regarding the negative effects on the natural environment, she points out that most of the times they are «irreversible», while in the social environment they can sometimes have significant dimensions causing "a perpetual alienation of local societies".

It is worth noting that not all mountain areas can develop tourism activities. Prerequisites are the availability of a sufficient number of attractions (natural and/or manmade), as these are the "pull factors" (Kotler Ph. et al., 2017: 527), the motivation that will lead a potential tourist to visit the area and to spend money for it and in it. The resources are the ones triggering the tourist development, determining its degree of attractiveness and uniqueness (Varvaresos S., 1998: 92, in Triantafyllou D., 2010). As W.T.O. (2018) cites "the willingness of visitors to pay for these attractions determines the potential and hierarchy among mountain destinations".

The key-element of alternative tourism is its mild impacts on local economy and society. For this reason, it is synonymous to soft tourism, which manifests itself in various forms of mild nature. The "soft forms" of tourism, as a concept, are added to the already existing ones for decades now, prevailing, or main forms of tourism in Greece. The following are considered as main forms of tourism: (i) the mass tourism of summer vacations, and (ii) the historically established forms of health-therapeutic, sea, and ski tourism (Sfakianakis M., 2000) (Figure 2). According to the Greek National Tourism Organization (G.N.T.O., 1985, in Sfakianakis, *ibid.*), the necessary infrastructure of the above-mentioned forms constitute a "basic tourist infrastructure of long-term perspective and state duty", while their development responsibility rested exclusively with G.N.T.O. The main forms of tourism have developed steadily to the present day mainly through state-funded policies and programs to further highlight their prime economic value, i.e. the economic benefits of tourism. Kouzelis A. (2000: 64) describes the priorities of the country's policies about tourism as "both gaining a sufficient share of the European market on the part of the Greek tourist product and strengthening of the foreign exchange reserves of the country". The special forms of tourism are those based on special motivation that leads to the trip, while the alternative or soft forms of tourism (part of the special forms) are based on motivation especially related to the environment, the local communities and travel autonomy (Tsartas P. et al., 2020). Although, in general, there seems to be a difficulty in clearly defining the terms "alternative", "responsible", "soft", "green", "sustainable", "responsible" tourism, etc., the essence of soft forms must do mainly with respect for man and the environment.

Mountain tourism offers experiences related to special and alternative forms of tourism. Alternative is defined on a different basis and in terms of compatibility with the environmental and social values of the visiting area (Karagianni M. et al., 2018, in Georgakopoulou S. & Delitheou V., 2020: 432). At the same time, through alternative tourism, positive and substantial interaction and experience between tourists and local community is promoted. Alternative or soft forms of tourism are a set of activities that correspond to specific motivation, which as a common denominator have: (a) concerning the destination: respect for the environment, the local community and its culture, (b) as regards to the way it is portrayed: non-mass form, independent; (c) in terms of accommodation: the use of small and family accommodation usually located in rural and mountain areas, or small villages.

In Greece, many attempts have been made to reverse the trend of degradation and decline in many mountain areas through European programs mainly. The following is a summary of three such cases with the results recorded.



(a) **Taygetos mountain area.** Papadopoulou H. A, Stratigea A. (2013) focus on this mountain and semi-mountain region and its development goals. The area is described as "problematic", a situation that was intensified due to the economic crisis. This is the area occupied by the mountain range of Taygetos, which extends along with the Region Units (R. U.) of Arcadia, Laconia, and Messinia (Map 1). The area extends to 2,500 square km, has a length of 115 km, and a maximum height of 2,407 m. It is divided into four parts, the

northern (towards the area of Megalopolis), the middle eastern (towards Sparta), the western (towards Messinia), and the southern (the Mani Peninsula) (Georgakakis et al., 2011, in Papadopoulou H. A, Stratigea A., *ibid.*). The development of the area was attempted with a planning approach which aimed at "the mild utilization of the natural and cultural resources of this mountain massif and its settlements" (Papadopoulou H. A, Stratigea A., *ibid.*: 32). The future development scenarios used were based on: (a) the comparative advantages of the region, (b) the development, opportunities, and risks arising from the external environment. For the local communities, an attempt was made to create a "vision" that would mobilize them but would also commit them to its achievement. To explore the development prospects of the mountain area in question two alternative scenarios were created. Both scenarios were based on sectors that had a long tradition in the region, such as agriculture, and new ones such as alternative tourism, eco-activities, organic agriculture and livestock, renewable energy sources, etc. The aim of these choices and interventions is "the creation of a spatial model, which supports the interaction and the development of complementarity relations between regions and sectors of the Taygetos Mountain range" (Papadopoulou H. A, Stratigea A., *ibid.*).

(b) Pieria Region Unit mountain area. Triantafyllou D. (2010) refers to two mountain villages in the R. U. of Pieria, Paleo Elatochori and Paleo Panteleimon (Map 2) that experience several structural difficulties, as "two examples being an important frame of reference, since the problems characterizing the Greek mountain areas appear in it. At the same time, they constitute the wider basis for finding ways of their development". These are settlements whose local communities base their development now-a-days on mountain tourism. The first is a settlement on Mount Pieria that belongs to the Municipality of Katerini. It is an old settlement built at an altitude of 800 m., at 29 km from Katerini, inhabited by 533 people (2011 census). The main activities of the inhabitants used to be tobacco growing, domestic livestock and forestry. Today, it is a popular mountain resort with visitors all year round. A ski center is operated near the settlement (at an altitude of 1,450 m.), both with a high-level tourist facilities network. There are also theme environmental parks in the area used for sports activities, as well. An important advantage of the area is "its exceptional natural environmental capital" (Tsiaras S., 2010: 67). Regarding the benefits from this development, Triantafyllou D. (*ibid.*) states that the ski resort operation was a source of income "for a small part of the population, as the majority of investors do not come from the local population".

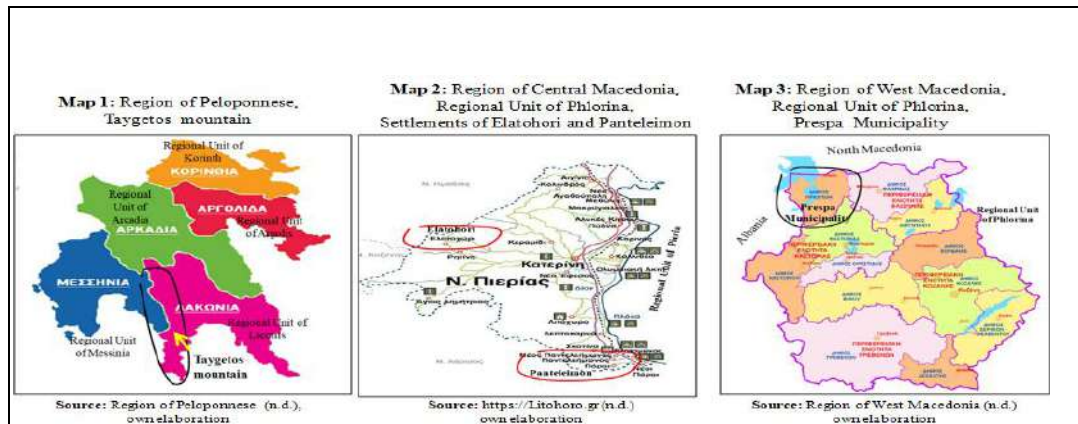
The second settlement belongs to the Municipality of Dion-Olympus, the municipality seat of which is located at Litochoro. Characterized as a traditional settlement built at an altitude of 700 m., on Mount Olympus, it presents "one of the best examples of traditional Macedonian architecture in northern Greece". The settlement was abandoned in the 1950s with its inhabitants moving further south to Neos Panteleimon, only to return in the 1980s. The conversion and restoration of the settlement started with the beginning of its rapid tourist development. Having the advantage of its local color, the environment, the short distance from large urban centers, and the tourist resorts of the area, the settlement was launched as a tourist attraction offering the motivation for developing other small handicrafts producing local products. According to the 2011 census, its inhabitants amount to 1,187.

(c) The protected area of Prespa lakes. The Prespa area includes the lakes Mikri and Megali Prespa, the part located in the Greek territory (Map 3). Both belong to the R.U. of Florina in the West Macedonia Region, located at the northwestern tip of the mainland country. Key-elements of the region are the operation of an Environment Management Body, the mild land use in the study area, its cross-border importance, since it borders two other countries, Albania and North Macedonia, and the "Prespa Cross-Border Park" (established there in 2000), as well as the important ecotourism activities developed in the region (West Macedonia Region & Eypolis, 2018). The area of the lakes belongs to the Municipality of Prespa, which consists of two Municipal Districts, Krystallopigi, with 359 inhabitants, and Prespa with 1,201 inhabitants. The Municipality covers 504.19 sq.m. in total. Both lakes are located at an altitude of 853 m. and are surrounded by mountains heighted of more than 2000 m. (Prespa Protection Company, n.d.).

By the 1980s the region was lagging significantly behind in development as its production was based on the primary sector (the main product was beans), and on low-income dry crops. At the same time, at social level, social and professional mobility was limited and any initiative for innovation or change of social standards was treated conservatively (Anthopoulou Th. et al., 1998). Its geographical location resulted in conditions of isolation, while due to its limited productive possibilities the younger members of the families were leaving the area in search of work opportunities either in big cities or abroad.

The successful example in the Prespa region (Anthopoulou Th. et al., *ibid.*), which reversed the negative trend and revived it economically, provides a series of "principles" (Valaora G., 2000) that could be transferred to other areas in decline, such as the following: (i) The role of the local community in any development effort proved necessary for a successful combination of environmental protection and tourism. The ownership of the businesses providing tourism services is in the hands of the residents of the area, while the development of tourism is on such a scale that it does not violate the ecological cohesion of the areas, (ii) Attracting visitors from other areas contributed to additional revenue. Women, who had no alternative employment options, became

active through the two Agrotourism Cooperatives of Women (Psarades and Agios Germanos), and additional income was obtained for their families, (iii) The building of basic infrastructure created an incentive for private entrepreneurs to operate in the area, offering overnight accommodation, food, and other services, which generated multiple benefits in it. Additional public investment and funding from the EU have been attracted, boosting growth of the local economy. The area, that possesses valuable habitats of great importance for biodiversity, has been oriented towards ecotourism and established as such a destination.



VI. CONCLUSION

Mountain areas are characterized by significant developmental weaknesses which are due to a set of factors, mainly economic, physical, and social, as well as the tendencies and needs of modern societies which led a large part of their population to move to other areas, mainly urban. As a consequence, a significant part of the productive base of their societies was gradually lost, both with a large part of their population. Their marginalization followed due to the difficulty of access and distance from the centers, where the modern productive activity takes place, where administrative and political decisions are made, and innovation is introduced, "lobbies" are created to promote local or special interests. The mountain areas in Greece are divided into three types: (a) those that have the potential to deal with the problems, (b) those that, although they have resources, gradually decline due to the continued abandonment by their inhabitants, (c) those that have already been abandoned by their population and degradation of their resources is more pronounced.

Although for many decades development priorities in Greece focused on urban areas and in terms of tourism to the island and coastal areas, in recent years there has been an extensive effort to promote development options to mountain areas and bring them back on a growth trajectory through revitalization policies (e. g. incentives, development laws, and European programs). Mountain tourism is a key-tool for activating a new production process, a new production cycle for mountain areas, which undoubtedly modifies their "classic" productive base, as it now focuses on the natural and cultural resources of each mountain society as well as their service production. From the variety of forms of tourism that can be developed in mountain areas, ecotourism, sports tourism, adventure tourism, ski tourism, agritourism, cultural tourism are more adequate (Sfakianakis M., 2000). These are soft forms of tourism (excluding skiing) preferred by sensitive people concerning ecology and protection of the natural environment and contact with nature and the socio-cultural environment of mountain societies.

The promotion of sustainable development is possible through a network of economic activities, both new (tourism) and those traditional ones still maintaining dynamism or adaptability. In this context, the role of local government is of particular importance. Key-issues for the proposed projects should generally be environmental impact minimization and maximization of the socio-economic benefits. More specifically: (a) the duration of development programs (not short-termed or of an opportunistic nature), (b) the activation and participation of local communities in the full range of processes, planning and decisions concerning the region and their future, (c) the priority in ensuring the health of the resources to be utilized and their strengthening to maintain sustainable characteristics, (d) the local community to be first and foremost the recipient of the benefits.

The above elements fall under the concept of sustainability and sustainable tourism. The principle of sustainable tourism was proposed by the World Tourism Organization (1988) referring to tourist activities "as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (WTO, 1988 in UN, 2001). In this sense, Local Authorities should undertake development initiatives to promote the local tourism product and especially the variety of rural tourism products provided that are based on

holistic and modern tourism research and planning (Andriotis K., 2008). The highlands have the right to a "second chance" to meet with a developmental future. Their possibilities and prospects can be favorable as they accept the challenges of the modern era acting in a systematic and planned way, through cooperation, social acceptance, and consensus. The three examples of approaching development issues in mountain regions in decline presented in short in this paper show that there is an optimistic effort in progress.

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