

## RURAL ENTREPRENEURS IN MOUNTAIN AREAS: THE CASE OF PYLI IN GREECE

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### ABSTRACT

In Greece the majority of rural holdings are located in mountainous and rather problematic areas. According to literature, the study on the entrepreneur in the economic sense and, especially, the sub-issue of rural entrepreneurship are subjects of significant theoretical production and empirical analysis.

The present field research focuses upon the individual rural entrepreneur of the mountainous Pyli area, in Greece including one third of the existing enterprises of the area and thus providing an adequate sample for its purposes. The data of the study was captured using structured questionnaires and analyzed via the statistical package SPSSWIN ver 20.0.

Rural entrepreneurs are locals that run mainly family business. However, they lack relevant entrepreneurial knowledge and culture; they own underdeveloped entrepreneurial skills, are introvert and seem to depend on subsidies. They are not willing to innovate but they are hard workers who focus on the everyday living. On the other hand, a small but critical percentage of the respondents appear to be very active and invest in differentiation in an effort to resist the long-lasting socioeconomic crisis in Greece. These constitute the dynamic part of rural entrepreneurs of the area extracting real value from their mountainous environment against business owners who merely subsist. However, they still act in a rather closed entrepreneurial eco-system characterized by a myopic approach of the entrepreneurship issue in total.

Findings confirm existing literature and contribute to efforts for the development of policies to regenerate rural areas in Greece which is still in the severe fiscal crisis. They further add to the empirical evidence on the traits of rural entrepreneurs and their clear distinction from business owners.

**Keywords:** *rural entrepreneur, rural regions, mountainous areas, rural entrepreneurship, AITHIKOS project*

## INTRODUCTION

Research on entrepreneurship in rural areas remains relatively sparse especially within a crisis framework which produces further constraints in rural regions. Relevant literature is so far replicate of directions, policies and views while a recent but emergent stream focuses on the actual actor of rural entrepreneurship; i.e. the rural entrepreneur (Stathopoulou et al.,2004; Mitchell, 1998). For example, Lockie and Kitto (2000) explore the personality of those able to promote their business objectives and achieve the best results in rural areas; the authors conclude that rural entrepreneurs delve into the strategies or practices they use, the technologies they adopt and the forms of institutions they develop. In spite the recent efforts, there are admittedly significant knowledge gaps regarding the reality of rural entrepreneurship addressing agricultural and non-agricultural entrepreneurs and particularly the ones in the less favored mountain areas.

Using a field study approach and encompassing a complex set of traits and individual issues, the present paper purports to add to the knowledge on the driving force of the rural economy; i.e. the actual entrepreneur. Specifically, the research maps the characteristics and traits of rural entrepreneurs in the mountainous area of Pyli in Central Greece. Findings confirm existing literature and add to the empirical evidence on the traits of rural entrepreneurs and their clear distinction from business owners. Therefore, it contributes to the better understanding of who the real rural entrepreneur in mountainous areas is and what the identical type should be. EU political practice should pay more attention to the suggestions of this, as well as similar empirical efforts, in order to decode the real needs and address critical issues such as the multi functionality of the agriculture-bases entrepreneurship or the variety of the non-agricultural business. Policies should be further specified at national and even regional level.

The following section of this work contextualizes the study in the literature. Section 3 introduces the reader to the methodological considerations and presents the area of investigation. The empirical part constitutes actually a mapping exercise placing the rural entrepreneurs of the specific Greek mountainous area (Pyli, Region of Thessaly) under the microscope within the current and long-lasting crisis framework. Statistical data will be discussed in order to produce useful insights and observations about the future of rural entrepreneurs and ways of advancing their entrepreneurial behavior, culture and identity. The concluding section includes future research, limitations and some policy recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Rural Entrepreneur*

Rural entrepreneurship constitutes a subset of the entrepreneurship literature and an emerging area of research (McElwee and Smith, 2014). 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, 2005; Skuras, 1998). Furthermore, rurality, as defined by Stathopoulou et al (2004), reflects a “territorially specific entrepreneurial milieu with distinct physical, social and economic characteristics in which location, natural resources, the landscape, social capital, rural governance, business and social networks exert dynamic and complex influences on entrepreneurial activity”. Besides its name as “rural entrepreneurship” the field covers “a myriad of other activities (namely industrial activities)”, according to Miljkovic et al. (2010). In essence, rural entrepreneurship is keen to offer added value to rural resources rendering in this process rural-based human resources (North & Smallbone 2000).

In the same vein, it is quite problematic to define rural enterprises too. In general and according to the relevant definition of McElwee and Smith (2014), rural enterprises are located in rural settings, employ local people and generate income flows to the local environments. Business 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, even in such cases, profitable entrepreneurial choices are strongly related to social capital and more precisely the rural entrepreneur (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2004). In spite the quite vast literature on traits and characteristics of entrepreneurs in general, rural entrepreneurs’ profile remains a highly under-researched research topic. Hoy (1983) delineated their profile as “. . . independent, risk-taking, achievement-oriented, self-confident, optimistic, hardworking and innovative”. Stathopoulou et al (2004) note that rural entrepreneurs choose to derive personal satisfaction from business, while, according to Mitchell (1998), they can “trade” the countryside as 'culture' either by idealizing the rural lifestyle as a promotion strategy or by re-creating landscapes of preindustrial form, and reproducing pre-industrial goods, services and leisure activities as a diversification strategy. On the other hand, Smith (2008) suggests that they adopt slow paces of life and run relatively stable business. McElwee and Smith (2014) highlight the need of further research on the background of the rural entrepreneur and whether growing up in a rural area influences the entrepreneurial characteristics. Another stream of literature draws attention on the capabilities issue (Winter, 2003; Teece, 2007). Rural entrepreneurs seem to be unable to cultivate entrepreneurial capabilities or absorptive capability or even a

strategically based mindset in order to address the environmental dynamism and achieve business growth.

In general, rural entrepreneurs have been studied in regard of distinct but in many ways interrelated topics: a) the research on 'entrepreneurs' demographic traits' includes aspects such as age, gender or origin of the entrepreneur (Pato and Teixeira, 2014); b) research on the 'entrepreneurial psychological traits' regards mainly motivation and lately lifestyle (e.g. Hollick & Braun, 2005), tendency for innovation and marketing (Polo-Peña et al., 2012). A recent stream has also focused on the role and importance of embeddedness as the identification of the relation of rural entrepreneurs with their location, the networks they develop and the collaborations they build (e.g. Kalantaridis and Bika, 2006; Gerasymchuk, 2009).

Regarding the human aspect and thus the entrepreneurs' issue, in-migrants have also received considerable research attention. Several recent studies have highlighted and attempted to understand their skills, expertise, resources and network relationships that they bring. A number of studies have focused even in differences and similarities between them and locally-born individuals (Kalantaridis, 2010).

In addition, the exceptional characteristics of rural areas and more precisely of mountainous areas appear to set a quite different background than the usual one where usually the entrepreneurship issue is examined. Rural economy is constantly changing and is vulnerable to global changes. The ageing population is not normally replaced while outcomes of relevant policies do not seem to pay back (McElwee and Smith (2014). The authors argue that due to the lack of specific entrepreneurial culture and the existence of strong introversion, rural entrepreneurs do not trust advisors for financing or strategy or other issues. On the other hand, family is central to the rural business; support is sought in family, or business is "inherited" by family members.

Rural entrepreneurship especially in mountainous areas is quite under researched but it has started attracting the interest of researchers (e.g. Moreira et al., 2000; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006) mainly after 2000. Furthermore, sustainable mountain development has remained marginal in the international development agenda and in national and sectoral policies (e.g. Jodha, 2008). Mountain communities and their environments are still vulnerable to growing demand for natural resources, expanding tourism and the pressures of industry, mining, and agriculture.

#### *Mountainous Greece*

In general, rural regions represent more than half (57%) of the European territory and 24% of its population (EC, 2012). Especially mountain regions are dominated by the agricultural sector, present a rather poor socioeconomic environment and a rapid decline in employment (López-i-Gelats, Tàbara, and Bartolomé, 2009), while they suffer from distance to markets and services.

Greece is largely mountainous; actually 80% of the country is covered by mountains making the country the third most mountainous country in Europe after Norway and Albania. The main sources of wealth are agriculture and livestock (around 61.7%) as well as tourism especially after 1995. However, the population of these areas suffers of isolation and remoteness, with direct effects on their economic and social development. According to Sergaki and Iliopoulos (2010), the main weaknesses for the development of mountainous areas in Greece are the intrinsic geomorphic conditions; the structural problems of local economy and the institutional and organizational weaknesses, which affect competitiveness of these areas. The mountainous topography and the spatial distribution of natural resources define the structure and location of manufacturing activity (Kiritsis and Tampakis, 2004). The ageing of the primary sector's workforce, the infrastructure deficiencies of the secondary sector, the inadequate use of natural resources, the increase of part time-employment and the decrease in competitiveness of locally produced goods and services, the rural depopulation and the high dependence of rural income on subsidies constitute significant problems of the Greek rural entrepreneurship (e.g. Papadopoulos and Liarikos 2003). For example, extremely high transportation costs enhance isolation and remoteness with negative impact on workforce mobility as well. On the other hand, the same disadvantages, i.e. remoteness and isolation, have favored the preservation of the natural environment, the unique landscapes and basic traditional production methods. In the less developed mountainous areas, cultural traditions can be found, while social trust, solidarity rules, cooperation networks and support mechanisms are absent. Rural entrepreneurs have a quite significant role to play as contributors in new venture creation, as well as catalysts in enhancing prosperity in these areas while preserving the untouched beauty of the environment.

## **EMPIRICAL PART**

### *The socio-demographics of the Pyli area*

The investigated mountainous area is situated in the rural heartlands of the Municipality of Pyli, at Trikala Prefecture in the Region of Thessaly, Central Greece. The area is characterized mountainous or highland (percentage 87.38%); it is comprised by a 9.90% of cultivated land, a 12.55% of grassland and a major 75.95% of woodland. It has a population of approximately 14,000–15,000 (HEL.STAT., 2011) and it has thirty-three distinct rural districts. Besides the natural beauty and attractions of the mountain, a significant number of sparsely monuments of historical, cultural and aesthetic significance enhance the touristic value of the area. At times of prosperity (2000-2008), the increased domestic tourism led to a significant increase of tourist accommodation units supporting the development of other entrepreneurial activities in the area, as well. The area was not considered an economically fragile community before the severe socio-economic crisis; on the contrary it was an

example of a prosperous rural entrepreneurial eco-system based mainly on primary sector, handicraft and tourism. However, the eight years of recession have caused significant negative changes in the area's entrepreneurial life. Today, forest exploitation is limited to the production of forest products, especially timber and forage production, with 24 wood and wood products micro and small firms, 24 furniture manufacturers and one paper pulp- paper and paper-products plant which serve mainly the local and national market. The majority of the rest manufacturing business belongs to the food sector; they are small family enterprises that satisfy the local needs. Tertiary sector still constitutes the 43.8% of the entrepreneurial activity; however, the severe decrease of domestic tourism caused the ceasing of tourism operations.

#### *Methodological approach*

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 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 ver 20.0 and the appropriate tests for frequency (Frequencies), descriptive statistics (Descriptives) and variable comparison analysis (Crosstabs), were conducted. When correlation tests were required logistic regression was used since the response variables were bivalent categorical. The statistically significant -or non- effect of factors was estimated, based on the p-value (sig.) at 5% significance level and the related odds ratio was estimated, too. The goodness of fit of the models to the questionnaire data was tested by conducting Hosmer-Lemeshow tests. Additionally, the predictive ability of the models was estimated via validation tables (Classification Tables).

For the processing of responses to questions measured in Likert scale, methods of graphical visualization were used, as well as non-parametric tests (e.g. Friedman Test) to evaluate the statistical significance -or non- of the differences presented in the graphs. Non-parametric tests were conducted, due to the normality test resulting in that the data were not normally distributed, an outcome that was expected.

## RESULTS - DISCUSSION

Sampled firms represent quite satisfactorily rural entrepreneurship in the selected mountainous region; services appear to be the dominant economic activity area and more specifically tourism (mainly accommodation, restaurants and bars) with a 55,7% and trade with 21,4% while manufacturing companies are really scarce (4,6%). The primary sector covers an 8%, while a 6% falls under the special group called “mixed activity” and regards firms that combine the above sectors (e.g. farming and hospitality). Almost half of the enterprises were established before 1990 and one quarter of them before the new millennium. Most of them are run by the second or third generation.

Mountainous Greece is not famous for its strong enterprise culture - few Greeks purported to know an entrepreneur. While most of them possess entrepreneurial skills and are indeed hard working by nature, they seldom present as stereotypical businessman-entrepreneurs. Especially those working in the primary sector; they work hard in order to produce and sell quality goods but they cannot see the entrepreneurial side of their activities. It is quite interesting the fact that 95% have stated above average satisfaction from the course of their business (Likert scale, 1 to 5) while no-one stated “not satisfactory at all” (Figure 1). Taking into consideration that the year of the field research is the eighth year of the severe crisis in Greece, these answers denote the lack of entrepreneurial attitude and culture, as well as the lack of specific business targets and strategies. This view was further confirmed by the fact that no statistically significant relation was found between the level of satisfaction and the yearly turnovers. It appeared that rural entrepreneurs were very satisfied no matter the turnover level they belonged (even with turnovers less than 100.000€).

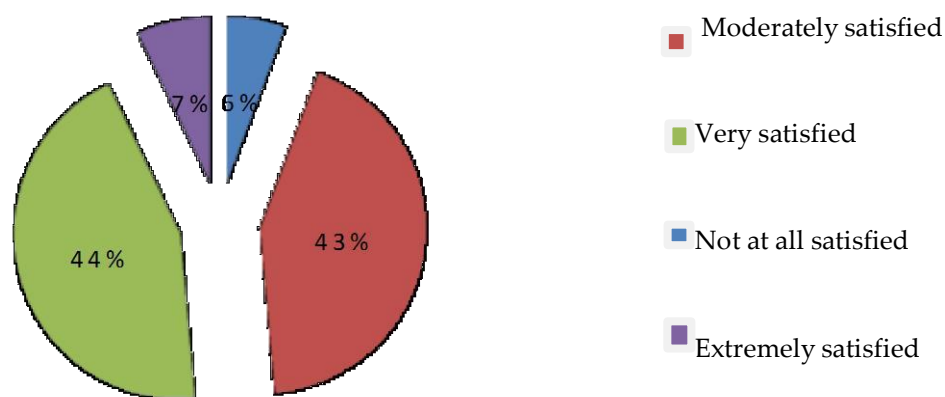


Figure 1: *Level of satisfaction of the business's course*

The majority (70%) of the respondents state that they are not intending to add or diversify products or expand the business in the following three years, indicating a rather passive attitude against the crisis framework that imposes the need of action. It is only an 11% of respondents that indicated their new product / service orientation by marking 4(=strong) and 5(=very strong) in Likert scale. This

result, in combination with the satisfaction levels discussed above, seems to explain the main difference between entrepreneurs and mere business owners; the first group decodes the dynamics of the environmental uncertainty while the second ones are just happy to earn their everyday living and remain static. Going even further, adherence to local conditions and markets (65,7%) and the non-existent exports denotes the intense introversion. On the other hand, those that extend at least at national level appear to seek out opportunities and act in more entrepreneurial ways. It should be mentioned that all of respondents are of a good reputation, known as diligent agents who contribute significantly to the local community; however not all of them are conscious of the entrepreneurial side of work.

However, the large percentage of the passive respondents may also reflect to a certain point, the general defensive behavior against the decline of viability of the mountainous areas in general, the closure of public infrastructure such as local post offices and tax offices due to the crisis as well as the closure of pubs, hotels and shops. Yet, against the threats of the deep recession, 80% record no intention to cease their business supporting further the good image of the sample as hard-workers and people of strong will. Retirement constitutes the most reported reason of ceasing business (n=9) well ahead of the other reasons mentioned; i.e. financing difficulty (n=3), a new job in another place (n=2) and personal reasons (n=2) while all other reasoning was reported by only one respondent each.

Why, then, these individuals run their own business? Besides the 4% of new businesses started by immigrants, the rest of the sampled firms were well-established ones. According to the results, people were rural entrepreneurs in the area 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 2). The finding confirms relevant literature (e.g. McElwee and Smith, 2014); regarding the lack of conscious development of entrepreneurial culture, the existence of strong introversion, and, eventually, the core role of family. It is worth mentioning that necessity entrepreneurship seems to be non-existent.

The importance of family is also highlighted by the fact that the 95% of the sampled firms are micro-firms occupying only family members. This is in line with relevant literature; e.g. Smalbone (2009) states that rural areas are dominated by micro businesses and they mostly consist of solo owner/managers.



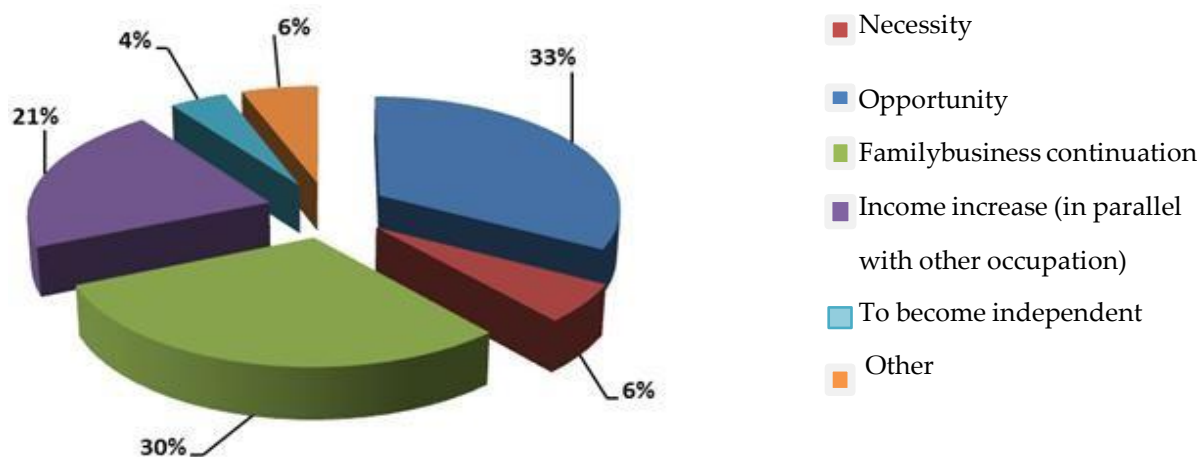


Figure 2: *Reasons for entrepreneurial activity*

Within this framework, it is worth noting the lack of knowledge regarding entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills. A significant percentage of 58.6% stated that they have received no education or any kind of training regarding their business or any type of managerial and entrepreneurial knowledge. 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 entrepreneurial knowledge as well as more special knowledge issues (e.g. hospitality) has been mentioned. However, it is important that the respondents could locate the relevant weakness. This denotes that the questioned entrepreneurs are not the “narrow-minded” rural agents described in several papers and have definitely leaved behind the rural “comfort zone” (Smith, 2008). They appear to have recognized the local socio-economic dynamics and the deep recession has surely played its role in overcoming them. Cooperation with knowledge agents and access to information and advice have been recognized as 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. Therefore, investment in building the necessary entrepreneurial culture appears to be in top priorities of the local business population of the mountainous Pyli area; the development of entrepreneurial skills and capabilities was among the higher rated proposals for the improvement of the community’s wellbeing (rated second after the taxation reduction proposal).

A significant finding regards the tendency for innovation. The majority of the respondents (88%) consider innovation and marketing as vital for the creation and sustenance of strong competitive advantages and a means to reach foreign markets. The respondents consider the use of ICT as well as the development of differentiated products and services as their most powerful innovative efforts so far. However, they appear to hand on the state support since the last decades subsidies (mainly programs such as Leader and Leader+) have been the main financing sources for rural mountainous

investments. Some of them take advantage of the exceptional countryside and the combination of cultural-religious-social environment of the mountainous area and create innovative activities overcoming the disadvantages of location. Then the mountainous lifestyle becomes “an experience” translated into leisure activities for all seasons for those involved in tourism or it becomes the background for the reproduction of pre-industrial goods and services promoting retro-innovation as the core diversification strategy. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents think positively on greening their current enterprises in order to enhance growth and competitiveness. Actually, more than the half of them believe that they own green business although it was quite obvious that they were not well acquainted with the concept.

According to the field research findings, a small but critical percentage of the respondents appear to constitute the dynamic part of rural entrepreneurs of the area extracting real value from their mountainous environment against the percentage of business owners who merely subsist. However, they still act in a rather closed entrepreneurial eco-system characterized by small-scale nature of most business, a high degree of locality, interconnectedness of personal, business and social life and a myopic approach of the entrepreneurship issue in total.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has been conducted within the framework of rurality, as defined by Stathopoulou et al (2004), i.e. “a territorially specific entrepreneurial milieu with distinct physical, social and economic characteristics in which location, natural resources, the landscape, social capital, rural governance, business and social networks exert dynamic and complex influences on entrepreneurial activity”. The study purported to contribute to the understanding of the actual profile of active entrepreneurs in rural and more precisely in mountainous areas which are far more disadvantaged than the rest, for a series of reasons such as accessibility, whether conditions, cultivation opportunities and so on. A deeper knowledge of necessary traits, behaviors and skills fostering or inhibiting rural entrepreneurship will bridge the existing research gap and will certainly assist the design and implementation of future development policies.

It appears that in mountainous Greece there is no cultural affinity to the entrepreneurial ideal. Local people invest on the business they found by their families such as livestock and farming or they exploit EU initiatives and subsidies to expand their residences to agro-tourism lodgings. Businesses are in their majority family affairs that grow and mature together with the owners and cease working when the owners are too old and have no descendant to take over.

According to the results, all rural entrepreneurs are hardworking actors. It is actually the entrepreneurial spirit that is missing and most of them are actually passive business owners that

genuine active entrepreneurs. Therefore, it appears that the most important challenge to tackle is the creation of distinctive entrepreneurial identity. Practicing and perpetuating entrepreneurship in this context requires the initiation of new behaviors, values and practices. This can be done by building “entrepreneurial capacity” (North and Smallbone, 2006); i.e. by training people on entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, offer well-organized knowledge on entrepreneurship and relevant capabilities as well as create links and easy access to knowledge providers. On the other hand, the organization of a rural enterprise incubation park, the upgrade and further support of the necessary infrastructure and the creation and sustenance of a relevant business association could create the necessary dynamism for the local rural entrepreneurs to transcend local borders and export or attract the interest of other countries’ consumers as well.

In a more general approach, the study contributes to entrepreneurship theory by examining rural entrepreneurs within their mountainous entrepreneurial eco-system in which they put effort in creating and extracting value from an environment in perpetuity. Consequently, a main contribution of the study seems to be its indication that there is a significant difference or rural entrepreneurship even at local level which is highly influenced by specific individual characteristics instead of only the territorial ones suggested by Stathopoulou et al (2004).

According to the findings, economic development seems to reside essentially in the actions of this particular type of genuine economic agents. This can form a critical mass to lay the foundations for novel types of entrepreneurship such like innovation-based, network-based or social entrepreneurship. Here comes also the role of the State and the EU; the transformation of business ownership to actual entrepreneurship requires the implementation of actual, precise, integrated and competent policies.

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.

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 questionnaire did not address the critical issues of embeddedness, networks and collaborations which have been addresses as significant components in the relevant literature. Furthermore, this research could not

assess the role of immigrants in local rural entrepreneurship since it appeared that the eligible percentage in the sample could not allow for useful insight.

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.

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