

# The Role of Cooperatives in the Interconnection of the Agri-Food and Tourism Sectors, Kyllini, 14/09/2023 <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** The interconnection of cooperatives with tourist products is the assumption of the quality of their products as an incentive for tourists to visit the country and propose it further through their gastronomic experience. The high quality of this gastronomic experience is the proposal to link tourism (tertiary sector) with agri-food (primary sector). The research questions that arise through the analysis of the agri-food and tourism industry, concern the finding of the reasons that hinder the interconnection of agri-food and tourism through gastronomy as well as the advantages arising from the interconnection between them. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research has been chosen as a research methodology.

**Keywords:** social and solidarity economy; cooperative enterprises; agri-food; gastronomy; tourism

## 1. Introduction

Tourism, from 2019 onwards, due to the COVID-19 crisis, suffered a severe blow [1]. This volatile situation that has emerged due to the ongoing economic, geopolitical, and health crises raises questions about the channeling of both tertiary sector services and the distribution of primary production, creating a vicious circle of crises of economic inadequacy. The existing tourism model of development of over-tourism, appears saturated, with its consequences visible in the ecological destruction of entire regions and the cultural degradation of local communities. The UN, as stated in its “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, aims (goal 8) “by 2030, to design and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products”.

As an alternative approach to the problems presented above, a new trend has emerged in recent years, that of “Gastronomic Tourism”, based on food, which becomes an important incentive to travel [2]. Traditional products and dishes become new tourist attractions shaping the choice of a destination or even the type of agricultural production [3]. This new relationship between agriculture and tourism is being studied because of the positive effects that can result from their effective cooperation. This cooperation requires differentiation of the final product produced and offered as the consumer-tourist is interested in quality. This qualitative difference is possible within agricultural cooperatives through their quality systems [4], ensuring fresh products with a low environmental footprint and strengthening the social fabric through the branching and interconnection of several different economic sectors.

The different facets of gastronomic tourism, including food ethics, social bonding, hospitality, local development, and sustainability make it the subject of further research.

Thus, the challenge of (a) gastronomic tourism, which does not expose the local environment to its limits, but is integrated into local communities aiming at gastronomic satisfaction and the economic regeneration of the local community, and (b) the development and strengthening of agricultural cooperatives that satisfy the demand for fresh products of high nutritional quality from tourists, promoting the strengthening of the primary sector,



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which in the long run, through appropriate actions and networking, can lead the primary and tertiary sector to new cross-sectoral cooperation.

This research examines precisely this interconnection of the agri-food and tourism sectors and the role that cooperatives can play between them. The research is limited to the region of Western Greece (P.D.E.) and more specifically to the Regional Unit of Ilia (P.E. Ilia) due to the particular characteristics of the primary and tertiary sectors there [5]. The purpose of this analysis, in P.D.E., is to understand the reasons why cooperation between the agri-food and tourism sectors has not yet flourished to the extent needed and to highlight the advantages for both sectors.

## 2. Materials and Methods

For the scope of this analysis, qualitative and quantitative research was used also primary and secondary sources such as statistics, scientific books, journal articles, research presentations, and websites. Good practices were also sought in Greece and abroad. Particularly important was the use of quantitative data by ELSTAT, DAOK ILIA, and the Chamber of ILIA.

The sample included:

1. the total population—number (87) of hotel accommodation in the Prefecture of Ilia and 9 of the type “Rented accommodation”
2. the total population—number (27) of active cooperatives in the Prefecture of Ilia and
3. 39 production units (in the sector of fresh fruit and vegetables, beverages, standardized products such as dairy, yeasts, pastries, juices, jams, sweets).

The total sample is 162 respondents.

As instruments for measuring the research process, 3 different questionnaires were designed and compiled. The design of the three different questionnaires aimed to find detailed results for each sector. The first concerned tourist units. This was followed by the questionnaire for the cooperatives and finally the questionnaire for the production units. Each of them consists of sections and each section of questions in the form of short completion, multiple choice, and Likert scale. The conduct of the interviews and completion of the questionnaires took place from 15 June 2022 to 31 December 2022.

## 3. Results

Summarizing the key features of the 3 sections, we find that:

- in the 87 tourist units, food, and drink revenues, in all-star categories, constitute 1/3 of their total revenue. Food and beverage purchases exceed 50% while domestic food and beverage supplies exceed 60%, especially in 5-star and 4-star hotels. The largest influx of supplies is served by intermediate wholesalers.
- Of the 27 cooperatives in the region of Ilia, only 2 cooperate with tourist accommodation as they all have exclusively export activity (over 90%).
- On the contrary, out of the 39 production bodies, 61.50% cooperate with tourist units, especially in the category of local wines and fresh fruits and vegetables.

As concern «the difficulty of cooperation between all three sectors» the main reasons are:

- Limited or unreliable distribution network,
- Lack of certification (quality assurance systems),
- Incomplete/ineffective cooperation,
- Unfair behaviour, ineffective cooperation,
- The low prices offered by hotels,
- The inability to cover the range of products that tourist units want.

The research has also shown that solving the above difficulties is feasible and as solutions are proposed:

- the existence of a certification program for the locality of products at the regional level,

- the existence of a thematic tourism programme within which a local quality pact operates,
- easy access/updating/ordering of products through an online platform,
- the use of a networking program of different partners at the regional level,
- the existence of advisory support from a body of the Region like an Agri-Food Partnership.

Finally, regarding the development of gastronomic tourism for all three categories of respondents, despite the different degrees of priority that has been given, common points are distinguished such as:

- the absence of networks and synergies between agencies,
- the absence of a coordinating body at the regional level,
- the insufficient staffing of tourist units,
- the ineffective promotion of gastronomic wealth,
- the difficulties with quality labels (although the tourist units as a whole do not have quality labels, except 5\* and 4\*, there is a Greek breakfast offer. On the other hand, cooperatives, due to their export orientation, have great quality production systems as a whole).

#### 4. Discussion

The research highlighted the important role that P.D.E. acquires in coordinating a series of actions both for the development of cooperation between all sectors and actions for the development of gastronomic tourism. It appears as a conscious choice and can be transformed into a tool for creating added value in the distribution cycle to tourist accommodation, forming a first gastronomic identity.

In the above challenges, P.D.E., understanding its role, is already undertaking actions towards the connection of agri-food with gastronomic tourism with the participation of all 27 cooperatives, the 87 tourist units, and the other productive companies in the region of Ilia.

#### 5. Conclusions

The research in P.E. Ilia revealed many encouraging elements of conditional cooperation. The acquisition of a new sustainable tourism consciousness, in cooperation with all involved companies, seems feasible. Any barriers and knowledge deficits can be overcome through educational activities related to sustainability. In addition to the above proposals, this paper was an occasion, for those who participated in the research, for new reflections and further thoughts on what kind of tourism we are looking for, how this event affects our future prosperity, and the role of everyone in its realization. The promise by the majority of respondents for an annual repetition of the survey and their participation in it, with the development of proposals, to monitor the degree of maturation of gastronomic tourism as an alternative and sustainable way of development, is for the region of Ilia an element of hope and future development with a social orientation.

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