

Social Entrepreneurship in selected areas. The “AITHIKOS” project in Greece

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ABSTRACT

Social Economy can play an important role in the development of social innovation in many policy areas, such as addressing the unemployment and the environmental protection, while it can combine profitability through solidarity and new job creation. European Commission places particular emphasis on the Social Economy sector during the current programming period (2014-2020). Main related policies focus to the promotion of the local and common interest, creation of new jobs, the enhancement of social cohesion and local and regional development by showing a particular emphasis on young unemployed people of mountainous areas. The paper presents a proposed supporting mechanism, under the name “AITHIKOS” for social entrepreneurship in mountainous areas of Greece. The project involves the development and implementation of a participatory methodology that requires the involvement of the beneficiary populations and the potential users of the infrastructure and services that the project will provide. The bottom - up approach nature of the proposed mechanism, will allow identifying the emerging tangible and intangible needs of the target group, developing appropriate recommendations and solutions.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Social Economy, Mountainous Areas, Aithikos Research Project, Mechanism For Social Economy

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper concerns the research project “AITHIKOS”, which deals with the pilot “Establishment of a Supporting Mechanism for the Development and Promotion of Social Entrepreneurship for Populations of Mountainous Areas”, which faces the consequences of economic crisis and do not have equal opportunities and the access channels to the job market and economic development, in relation to other social groups and geographic areas, especially due to the remoteness of their inhabitant places and the particularities of mountainous economy (traditional occupations, seasonality, environmental protection, cultural particularities, population’s age , low technology, tourism expansion, etc.). The project is implemented in Greece, region of Pyli Trikalon and is an ongoing research.

Social entrepreneurs and social enterprises, like any new entrepreneur and every small enterprise, need entrepreneurial support. However, the directly involved authorities and organizations (Central Government, Regional authorities, Municipalities etc.) have realized that information, consulting or mentoring services should be specialized and should deal with all the aspects of management, in order to help the social enterprises to fulfill their social mission and achieve economic viability. Therefore, the research aims to contribute to the development of a mechanism for the provision of “combinatorial support” in mountainous areas, which encompasses both, specialized and general business support along with the assistance of Universities and Local Authorities, to cover the needs of local communities for new job opportunities, the maintenance of the existing ones, the support of the existing social enterprises and the creation of new ones, as well as the securing of the existing local private enterprises, and the achievement of upwards social mobility. The research aims to develop a pilot mechanism framed by specified structures for business development and social entrepreneurship support in the mountainous region of the Municipality of Pyli - Trikala, which is the study area of the pilot establishment of the proposed mechanism, with special focus on tackling unemployment, creating new job opportunities, maintaining the existing ones and mitigating the effects of social exclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept and Motivation of AITHIKOS Project

The concept of the research is based on the systematic development of the Social Economy sector, focusing on the mountainous areas of Greece. Social Economy sector can provide important solutions for creating job opportunities and promoting social cohesion, which is threatened due to the adverse economic environment, by contributing to the preservation of the natural environment and the cultural heritage of these areas.

According to the Strategic Plan regarding the Development of the Social Entrepreneurship Sector of the Ministry of Labor, Social Security and Welfare (2013), the successful development of the Social Economy requires an approach that relies primarily on the local social dynamics and mechanisms which will play the central role for the manifestation of this dynamic. At the same time, the local dynamics can arise efficiently by utilizing the European experience in the field of Social Economy and encouraging transnational cooperation initiatives. European Commission places particular emphasis on the Social Economy sector during the current programming period (2014-2020), through the initiatives provided by the Social Business Initiative. Social Economy can play an important role in the development of social innovation in many policy areas, such as addressing the unemployment and the environmental protection, while it can combine profitability through solidarity, new job creation, enhancement of social cohesion, active participation and empowerment of local communities and generally, the development of an economy with democratic values, by giving priority to the people.

In Greece, because of the long lasting economic crisis, it also observed in a very intense way, the downwards social mobility phenomena. This is translated by the loss of thousands of occupation positions and minimization of the existing standard of living for major social groups of the country. The availability of at least some social mobility can be important in providing pathways to greater equality in societies with high social inequality. The proposed project will give this opportunity to the communities of mountainous areas and especially to the younger ones, in order to confront to this negative reality and to achieve an upwards social mobility.

It can be argued that Social Entrepreneurship is an emerging alternative form of entrepreneurship based on the Social Economy. Recently, a new legal form of entrepreneurship, the Social Cooperative Enterprise (SCE), has been instituted in Greece (Law 4019/2011) by setting the operating framework for these types of enterprises. The profit of this new form of entrepreneurship comes from the activities that serve the social welfare. The majority of revenues is reinvested aiming to create new jobs, because the entrepreneurial activity is been emphasized and not the profit.

2.2 Research on Social and Rural Entrepreneurship

Several researchers have attempted to analyze entrepreneurship in rural areas, by using a large number of theoretical research backgrounds from various fields of science, such as Business Administration, Economics, Sociology and Geography. Contemporary approaches of significant interest also have been developed, such as “Actors Network Theory” and “Culture Economy” in Economic Geography, as well as “Structuration Theory” in Sociology.

Lockie & Kitto (2000), claim that the Actors Network Theory constitutes a useful theoretical framework for understanding the entrepreneurial process in rural areas by asking through the relative survey the most relevant questions such as, who is able to promote his business objectives and to achieve the best result, which strategies or practices he uses, which technologies he adopts and which forms of institutions he develops. Therefore, the entrepreneur is an actor who plays the most important role in a network. Networks may include besides the other actors, also products, financial resources, technology, knowledge and infrastructure (Busch and Juska, 1997; Trigkas et al., 2014). The culture economy approach emphasizes mainly to essential local resources, networks and collaborations, the local character of the economic control, as well as to the social recovery. The term “culture” refers to a set of various types of places that are considered to be available resources for the social and economic control (Ray, 1998). The term “economy” expresses the ability to create and to establish relationships among the resources, the production process and the consumption (Ray, 1999), while it refers also directly to the ability of business establishment. Besides products’ territorial identity, places can obtain a commodity character (Cloke, 1993; Marsden et al., 1993).

Entrepreneurs of rural areas can “trade” the countryside as ‘culture’ either by idealizing the lifestyle in these areas or by creating landscapes of preindustrial form, or by reproducing pre-industrial goods, services and leisure activities (Mitchell, 1998). Taking into account that landscapes are volatile, multifaceted, dynamic and heterogeneous, researchers conclude that the commercialization offers a wide range of business opportunities (Ray, 2000). According to Giddens (1984), entrepreneurship is a social and economic embeddedness process, i.e. a process that comes from the social context which forms the entrepreneurial

results (Jack and Anderson, 2002). So, the concept of embeddedness, recognizing the form, the depth and the extent of a person's links with the wider environment and its accordance with the social capital and the mutual trust (Portes and Landholt, 1996), is converted to a determinant factor of entrepreneurial process (Uzzi, 1997; Dacin et al., 1999) or more specifically of entrepreneurial process in rural areas (Bristow, 2000; Hinrichs, 2000; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998, 2000; Nygård and Storstad, 1998; Sage, 2003).

The research proposal will contribute to further definition of the factors that influence entrepreneurship in rural areas, and more specifically in mountainous areas of Greece, so that a holistic view regarding entrepreneurial processes will be adopted, by seeking a more realistic approach and consolidation of business processes in these areas. The theoretical frameworks that have been analyzed emphasize the need to take seriously into account the environment in which the entrepreneurial process is implemented, as well as the mechanisms by which the entrepreneurs interact with the wider environment.

Besides the Basic Research that will be carried out through specific activities of the project, the development of Applied Research will be also achieved, since an integrated suite of methodological and technological knowledge management tools will be proposed regarding Social Entrepreneurship in the area along with an integrated Entrepreneurial Policy for these areas, in order to address the phenomena of social exclusion and unemployment. The above factors and the procedures implemented in mountainous areas should be taken into account in any effort of planning an integrated entrepreneurial policy for these areas (Lowe and Talbot, 2000). Storper (1997), highlights that economic activity is based on the real need to coordinate the actions of a person with the actions of the other people. So, the coordination among the people appears to be the main problem of the economic life, while it is the basic objective of policy. An example of local and regional coordination activities occurs in obtaining official copyright for the commercialized local culture (Ray, 2001), such as the certification of PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) products and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) products. The organization and the management of social conflicts constitute another issue while the consequences on rural entrepreneurship are crucial (Karlsson and Karlsson, 2002; Karlsson and Acs, 2002). Information dissemination in remote areas constitutes a strategic objective at national level also. Ray (2003), argues that the mechanisms that support regional, national and the international dissemination of information is of significant importance regarding the role that a State plays in relation to production on fragile rural economies.

A third objective of an integrated entrepreneurial policy for the mountainous rural areas will address the issue of endogenous and exogenous territorial redistribution (McRobie, 1994). This issue arises from the different ability of the areas to stimulate sustainable business activities. Therefore, national policy has to control and ensure that all the areas and all the local actors have the possibility to participate in emerging business opportunities and activities and benefit from them. Finally, the implementation of European Policy and the recent decentralization trends have contributed to the involvement of local government in the development of the mountainous rural areas. The growing conflict regarding the rural development policy supports the need to design a policy which is adapted to the internal and external conditions of the rural areas (Marsden, 1998). Central institutions do not have the resources to operate flexible support programs, or the necessary know how and experience at local level, for the understanding of specific supporting tools that are required in each territorial

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The present case, deals with a targeted initiative which contribute to the establishment of a mechanism for the provision of «combinatorial support» of Social Entrepreneurship and Economy in mountainous areas, which includes both general business support and specialized support by the involved Universities /Research Institutes and Local Authorities. Furthermore, ensures the participatory of all local stakeholders and resources and the interdisciplinary and transnational approach of Social Economy. These goals are achieved through the careful planning of partnerships. This ensures a balanced development of a multidisciplinary research collaboration based on the needs of the region.

Additionally, the project involves the development and implementation of a participatory methodology that requires the involvement of the beneficiary populations and the potential users of the infrastructure and services that the project will provide. The bottom - up approach nature of the proposed mechanism, will allow identifying the emerging tangible and intangible needs of the target group, developing appropriate recommendations and solutions and shaping the social capital of the region. The focus that the project has to identify emerging needs and to develop appropriate solutions, dues mainly, as mentioned, on the existence of multiple and disparate stakeholders in the region, ensuring that new services and products that could be developed as a field of social business activity, are close to the needs of the local communities.

Also, the overall project strategy includes the connection of the proposed social business network with a knowledge management system and technocratic tools, in order to provide services for the development of social entrepreneurship in the area. Access

for residents in this knowledge management system in the future, could be based on the needs that arise and the fields chosen for entrepreneurial activity, through the provision of easy, fast and understandable data on Basic and Applied Research, representing an institutional innovation of the proposed project.

The project includes both R&D activities and other activities (feasibility studies, business planning, etc), in the form of Working Packages, which are separated into two main categories as shown below. These categories relate to the mechanism's development activities and its promotion activities (Table 1).

4. RESULTS – DISCUSSION

4.1 Policy Implications

The scientific excellence of the research lies in the fact that through the mechanism that will be developed, a multidisciplinary approach will be recommended, with emphasis on the target group needs, the adoption of best practices and knowledge that have been developed in Norway, Greece and internationally and finally, the adjustment of the mechanism to the specificities of the mountainous populations and of the related economic activities, by proposing an integrated support mechanism of Social Entrepreneurship for mountainous areas and communities, contributing to positive social mobility for local communities. Another distinguished field of scientific excellence promoted by the research is the setting the framework of the requirements for more extensive and better research in this field in Greece, having as a starting point the systematic collection of data. A better building capacity for social economy organizations could derive by improving related research studies (EU 2013). The research provides exactly this possibility through the mapping activities of entrepreneurial, social and other productive dynamics of the area, the specialized market research and the activities of networking, measuring social capital and monitoring of Social Entrepreneurship in the area, in order to set the directions for similar research studies and to create a framework for the development and promotion of Social Entrepreneurship in several social groups and areas. The research, achieves the coordination among the productive, social, administrative and research dynamics in the area, aiming at forming a concrete policy proposal for the development of Social Economy in mountainous areas

The research is about people who think of innovative solutions for the most pressing social problems of mountainous areas, such as the unemployment and the creation of job opportunities, the mitigation of the social exclusion, social and income inequalities. The project contributes to addressing the social problems through providing new ideas for large-scale change in the economic and business model that prevails in the area. It ensures the participation of local society in social entrepreneurship, which combines the use of inactive human resources in the area by leveraging the social needs. The use and transfer of best practices and know-how of social entrepreneurship in similar areas and social groups from Norway, will provide basic tools for the motivation of human resources, while similar motivation is expected to be observed at the level of local authorities. The development of the mechanism is accompanied by a greater emphasis on the social impact of the economic activities that can be developed in the area in various sectors of mountainous economy and society. This is very important, if we consider of the gradual withdrawal of the public sector from the provision of several services of general interest (health, security, education, etc.), especially under the context of the present economic crisis in Greece. This, results to the emergence of new social needs, especially in areas where the project is focused, proposing solutions for the self-organization of local communities and undertaking of relative initiatives.

Table 1: The distinguished phases of the AITHIKOS supporting mechanism

Development activities	Working package	Type of activity
1	Mapping of the entrepreneurial and other dynamics	R&D – Basic Research, Feasibility Studies
2	Market research on social entrepreneurship	R&D – Basic Research, Feasibility Study
3	Training/consulting on Social Entrepreneurship – Bilateral relationships	R&D – Basic Research, R&D – Experimental Development
Promotion activities		
4	Networking (including short mobility project)	R&D – Basic Research Experimental Development
5	Design and development of incubator and one-stop-shop services structure	Feasibility Studies, R&D – Experimental Development
6	Publicity	R&D – Basic Research, Feasibility Studies, Experimental Development

As it was previously mentioned, in Greece, because of the continuous economic crisis, it also observed the serious problem of downward social mobility. This is translated to the loss of thousands of jobs every year and reduction of standard of living for a great number of social groups all over the country. The AITHIKOS project will provide the possibility for the local communities in the mountainous areas and especially to the young people to deal with this negative situation and achieve a positive social mobility. Know how transfer and best practices using case studies from Norway, a country with the highest social mobility globally (Blanden et al., 2005), is expected to contribute toward the cultivation of entrepreneurial culture based to social economy and the achievement of an upward social mobility in the region.

Furthermore, increased access to information through the use of ICT will be provided, by helping to raise awareness of local people about social problems, influencing their behavior as consumers, and putting pressure on the private companies, which will be able to respond to the social problems of the area by adopting more responsible business practices. So the project will contribute to the dissemination of business practices which are usually attributed to the term ‘corporate social responsibility’.

It is also expected that the socially responsible consumers’ behavior which will be developed for the local people of the area through the project, will not only be limited to the purchase of goods and services, but they will be socially responsible to other activities like investments. In other words, the entrepreneurs, the consumers and the local people will be aware not only of what they buy, but also where to invest their money. Another important effect of the project is its contribution to the growth and differentiation of supply of products and services based on the actual and implicit needs of the target group. Due to the bottom - up approach of the proposed mechanism, the emerging needs will be identified and solutions will be suggested. The ability to identify the emerging needs and suggest appropriate solutions occurs, because of the existence of many incongruous stakeholders in the area, ensuring that the new services and products that could be developed as a field of social entrepreneurial activity are close in meeting the needs of local communities. Therefore, the project contributes to the development of social innovation in the area, creating incentives for new products and services to meet social needs, which is a unique feature of collaborative research effort for Greece regarding the population in the specific areas.

However, there are some challenges that the project has to face. Several major obstacles that hinder the development of the forms of social entrepreneurship still exist. As a result, the “dominant” economic mindset continues to focus on self-interest and personal initiative, rather than on collaborative behavior. The lack of awareness stems from the lack of education on the specific issues. Typical education and training in social entrepreneurship issues is absent, especially in the area and the population that the project focuses. This implies that it is much more difficult for social economy enterprises to find personnel with the required culture, skills and capabilities, comparing to conventional enterprises. The research includes activities of training of local people in the area focusing on this cultivation of social entrepreneurial culture and acquirement of skills in specific fields (production of forest goods, agro tourism, wood products, food and dietary products, livestock production, cultural heritage, etc.).

Another important dimension which is deficiently developed for social economy organizations and social enterprises compared to conventional ones, is that of developing supporting networks and infrastructure, which could provide the appropriate business development services. These services can range from strategic planning and consulting, to enterprise incubators to cover the needs of social economy organizations and social enterprises. However, these services provision is still far from meeting the demand. The access to funding is another key issue for the social economy organizations, which often find major difficulties in gaining access to the same financing opportunities that are available for the conventional enterprises, because of their characteristics. Thus, the project focuses on the development of networking in the area in order to provide supporting services and to the planning of incubator’s and a one-stop service, with the contribution of local authorities.

4.2 Sustainability of R&D on Social Entrepreneurship

AITHIKOS project results contributes also to the sustainability of R&D activities in the field of Social Entrepreneurship in the area and in the wider region and have direct benefits for the target groups and relative stakeholders, deal with the following fields, as they are further analyzed.

Firstly, the research proposal serves the complex task of human resources mobilization and networking of all the stakeholders - citizens, consumers, professionals, producers, social agencies and Local Authorities. At the same time, it contributes to the motivation of all social economy factors in the area, by contributing to the constitution of social capital, the accumulation of investment capital and contributing to knowledge dissemination, aiming finally at the enhancement of

social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, competitive advantages in the area can be highlighted and motivations to emerge, for social entrepreneurship in fields that till today remain inactive. On the other hand, the enterprises have to become knowledge hives, providing a department or an activity that deals with knowledge and know how management. Since the enterprises in the area are small and very small in size and cannot develop such activities by their own, they will be able to achieve this goal through the cooperation with the participating research institutions. Knowledge is deemed to be the main resource for the development of social economy. For this reason, the supporting mechanism will be able to contribute further in creating a knowledge generator and management mechanism, the organization of knowledge creation and consequently, knowledge dissemination.

The participation of research institutions and local authorities, also creates the appropriate conditions for the design and development of specialized structures in the area that can contribute to the accumulation and management of social, intellectual capital and investment capital in the area, which through the development of digital content, manuals and the planning of business incubator and one-stop shops services for Social Entrepreneurship, can create viable social enterprises in the future. This constitutes an institutional innovation of the project, i.e. the connection of the proposed social business network with a management system of knowledge and technocratic tools for provision of services regarding the development of Social Entrepreneurship in the area. Thus, access in this knowledge management system for the local people will be in the future achieved, based on specific emerging needs and fields for entrepreneurial activity, through the provision and utilization of Basic and Applied Research data. Furthermore, the contribution of the research/academic institutions is important in establishing lifelong learning structures, as one of the basic project's axis. Therefore, under the project's context, the establishment of networking mechanisms, the development of collaborations and the feedback processes with the key stakeholders in the field of educational, research and entrepreneurial process in the area, will support the ability to monitor the progress of the project and its results for a long time of period after that it will be finished, contributing to the sustainability of future R&D activities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through specific activities, which such a supporting mechanism takes into account, methodological and technological tools for the gradual establishment and networking of information and knowledge sources, could be developed and implemented, that deal with the evolution of the Social Entrepreneurship in the area and the leverage of the needs of local people and entrepreneurs, constituting the basis for the future development of Social Entrepreneurship actions in the region. Furthermore, the contact with the research and education institutions and the dissemination of the results will support scaling imparting value to the project and thus, the maintenance of the results. In particular, the project results that contribute to the sustainability of R&D activities in the field of Social Entrepreneurship in the area and in the wider region and have direct benefits for the target groups and relative stakeholders, deal with the following fields, as they are further analyzed.

Firstly, the mechanism serves the complex task of human resources mobilization and networking of all the stakeholders - citizens, consumers, professionals, producers, social agencies and Local Authorities. At the same time, it contributes to the motivation of all social economy factors in the area, by contributing to the constitution of social capital, the accumulation of investment capital and contributing to knowledge dissemination, aiming finally at the enhancement of social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, competitive advantages in the area can be highlighted and motivations to emerge, for social entrepreneurship in fields that till today remain inactive. On the other hand, the enterprises have to become knowledge hives, providing a department or an activity that deals with knowledge and know how management. Since the enterprises in the area are small and very small in size and cannot develop such activities by their own, they will be able to achieve this goal through the cooperation with the participating research institutions.

The participation of research institutions and local authorities, also creates the appropriate conditions for the design and development of specialized structures in the area that can contribute to the accumulation and management of social, intellectual capital and investment capital in the area. This constitutes an institutional innovation of the mechanism, i.e. the connection of the proposed social business network with a management system of knowledge and technocratic tools for provision of services regarding the development of Social Entrepreneurship in the area. Thus, access in this knowledge management system for the local people will be in the future achieved, based on specific emerging needs and fields for entrepreneurial activity, through the provision and utilization of Basic and Applied Research data. Furthermore, the contribution of the research/academic institutions is important in establishing lifelong learning structures, as one of the basic mechanism's axis. The training packages, meet the structuring of explicit knowledge about social entrepreneurship and will create knowledge hives to the prolonged supporting structures. It also contributes actively to socialization of knowledge

and know how in specific fields, aiming simultaneously to knowledge dissemination through cooperation and networking among stakeholders.

The policy proposal lies in the fact that through the mechanism that will be developed, a multidisciplinary approach will be recommended, with emphasis on the target group needs, the adoption of best practices and knowledge that have been developed in Greece and internationally and finally, the adjustment of the mechanism to the specificities of the mountainous populations and of the related economic activities, by proposing an integrated support mechanism of Social Entrepreneurship for mountainous areas and local communities, contributing to positive social mobility. Another distinguished field of policy promoted by the mechanism, is the setting the framework of the requirements for more extensive and better research in this field in Greece.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research leading to these results has received funding from the [EEA] Mechanism 2009-2014 under Project Contract n° 3580 - «AITHIKOS - Establishment of a Supporting Mechanism for the Development and Promotion of Social Entrepreneurship for Populations of Mountainous Areas».

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