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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREEK ISLANDS

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Greece is the country with the most extensive coastline among all Mediterranean countries. The coastal area is evenly distributed between the continental part and the islands. The insular space of Greece is quite fragmented with a few thousand islands, quite dispersed geographically, 227 of which are inhabited.

Although there are great differences in terms of characteristics and context of development certain common issues and problems seem to underline the need to give special attention to islands. Such issues relate to the relationships between development and environmental management in terms of dependence, self-sufficiency, isolation, peripherality, diversity, risks and fragility. These types of issues seem to be accentuated in small islands:

1. From an ecological perspective, isolation from continental areas and small size contribute to a greater diversity in island ecosystems but also to greater vulnerability and risks to disturbances (external or internal).
2. From a social and cultural perspective local societies seem to display distinct characteristics in organization and values/attitudes as a result of isolation and size. They also tend to display sharper responses to change and higher vulnerability to disturbances. Empirical evidence is not conclusive abounding with cases of greater flexibility or stronger reactions to change.
3. From an economic perspective, small size and remoteness seem to influence substantially local development opportunities. A narrower resource base, small size of local markets and higher costs of access to external markets seem to affect significantly the efficiency of local economies rendering small islands more vulnerable to competition and risks from disturbances.

Many islands are among the more disadvantaged areas in the country. They face problems of peripheral location, higher transport costs, lack of economies of scale, higher costs of accessibility to information and services, higher administrative and organizational costs and uncertainty which influence locational decisions. These problems affect not only the costs of living but also quality of life in general. As a consequence in many cases there has been population decline which affects local societies but has also significant consequences for the environment.

Although from a cursory point of view such developments would seem beneficial to local resources reducing the pressures on land and water, in reality they have led to negative effects as a result of abandonment. Agricultural practices of cultivating the

land with alternating crops, maintaining soil resources with intensive labour, protecting vegetation with alternating grazing zones, etc. were abandoned as the most active part of the labour force fled. Furthermore the opportunities for higher income at lower efforts, through tourism, exacerbated these patterns leading to abandonment of local patterns of cultivation, local products and local resources.

Most of the Greek islands experienced significant population decline, in the decades of the 50s and 60s, the times of strong rural to urban exodus leaving for a long time local societies barren of their most dynamic elements. Economic decline, due to broader technological and structural changes, accelerated further these outward movements, a process which slowed down in the 1980s basically due to tourism development. In certain islands, mainly the large ones, these patterns were reversed and an increase of population and economic activities has been observed. Several islands face still a declining population. Furthermore in most cases fluctuation of population is significant across seasons: during the winter a significant part of population leaves for the mainland returning in the spring. So during summer the population multiplies basically due to tourism.

Still this revitalization hides several threats for local environment and quality of life in general. Opportunities offered in the tourist attraction areas drain further local labour from other sectors leading to monoculture and increasing dependence on imports for living and higher costs. Tourist development is concentrating in a few sites and especially along the coast, leaving the hinterland empty.

The demand for land for tourist development rises along the coasts and near the major towns resulting in rising real estate prices. The provision of infrastructure and services improves the attraction of coastal lands for vacation houses and new development for tourism leading to a spiral effect of concentration of development and expansion of built-up areas.

Furthermore, the development of tourism creates a demand for water which in many cases is scarce, inadequate even for domestic uses. Local patterns of water consumption change as standards of living rise due to tourism income. In many places water is transported from the mainland.

The increasing numbers of tourists and vacationers creates large volumes of traffic but also waste which has to be managed. Huge investments are necessary in small places to cope with such waste. These investments are from a planning and programming perspective difficult due to the short periods of high load and long periods of underutilization. Maintenance costs are high.

The worst is that most local communities do not have the administrative and financial capacity to cope with such problems. In addition they face significant threats from eventual fluctuations in world tourist markets, shifts in destination preferences, etc.

Particularly the small islands depend on tourism for their future. The main factors of attraction of the islands of Greece are their natural assets: the sun, the beaches and clean seas, the beauty of the built environment: the picturesque villages with a human scale, the architecture well adapted to the landscape, and of course the people: their open attitude and friendliness, the lifestyle. A possible degradation or loss of such assets is certain to affect tourism itself and consequently the future of social and economic activity on the islands in an irreversible way.

Many of the islands face nowadays increasing risks of sustaining their economy, society and environment. Islands, more than other localities depend on a delicate balance between environment, economy and society. They are particularly vulnerable to shifts in any of these factors due to their small scale and difficulty of recovery which can be costly in many respects but may also take much longer in time.

Management of water resources, land development control, preservation of traditional settlements, provision of adequate infrastructure, assurance of a satisfactory level of services are of high priority

The development of tourism in the Greek islands had beneficial effects as well offering development opportunities for other sectors of the economy, in spite of its strong competition to them. Technological innovation, institutional and organizational changes can alter significantly the living conditions on the islands making them attractive for the development of new activities. The small size and lifestyle can become significant competitive factors. Such options require high quality of the environment, infrastructure and services. To achieve these preconditions an integrated way to plan for future development is necessary.

Islands require most than any other area integrated management. in the context of sustainable development, meaning a strategy of integrating islands in european and global markets through maintaining local identities and a balance between economic efficiency, social equity and environmental conservation.

Some of the major issues which emerge in the above perspective area: protection of natural ecosystems, management of local resources, integrated planning, local capacity to sustain growth, stimulation of local production patterns, linkages of economic activities, practices of rural management, adapted and appropriate technologies, preservation of local identity and cultural heritage, public awareness, participation in decision making, institutional mechanisms, co-operation and networking, concertation of actions of local, regional, national and international actors.

Socio-political (European integration, geopolitical relations in the wider Region, etc.) and technological (transport deregulation, telecommunication advancements, etc.) changes suggest that islands as well as most localities will have the opportunity, more than in previous times, through technological and institutional innovations and in response to economic integration patterns, to participate in a broad network of exchanges, each place identifying its role in the broader system.

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