

RURAL WOMEN AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A CASE STUDY IN HERAKLION CRETE PREFECTURE, GREECE

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This article investigates the entrepreneurial beliefs/attitudes, ambitions, expectations, goals and visions of rural women who choose to cooperate and found Women's Rural cooperatives in the Prefecture of Heraklion on the island of Crete. The results of a qualitative study involving a sample of eight chairwomen of rural women's established Traditional Food Production cooperatives indicated that the traditional domestic roles (housewife, mother), the low level of education, the lack of professional skills, enterprise experience and mostly the unwillingness of rural women to undertake enterprise risk, have turned them toward an enterprise model that lacks modern business methods in the use of quality control production systems, in the production of Protected Geographical Identification Goods and/or Certified Local Traditional Food and/or Organic Products, in the use of new organizing and managing technologies, in advertising and promoting products and in administrative renewal.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship of rural women; rural women's cooperatives; development of less favored areas; Heraklion Crete Prefecture; Greece.

1. Introduction

Historical identification of the countryside almost exclusively with agricultural activity (Clove and Little, 1997) has not benefited the development of entrepreneurship in the countryside and, as a result, has not helped the development of enterprise culture in rural men and women. The European Commission has as an important priority the development of enterprise culture, which includes administrative, social, personal and enterprising skills. These skills include the ability to resolve problems, planning, decision making, communication, undertaking responsibilities, collaboration, networking, undertaking new roles, critical and independent thought, a will for autonomous learning and confrontation of dangers concerning the materialization of ideas (e.g., European Commission, 2003; 2002; Gopinath and Sawyer, 1999; Hansemark, 1998; Hayton *et al.*, 2002; Herbig and Miller, 1992; Leitch and Harrison, 1999; Rae, 2000).

The purpose of this research is to contribute to a successful design and implementation of projects and training programs that will develop the entrepreneurial skills of rural

women who are willing to engage in business, or are already active in rural women's cooperatives in the Prefecture of Heraklion on the island of Crete.

2. Framework

Researchers agree innovation is essential for a business in a modern business environment (Kirzner, 1985; Schumpeter, 1934). Innovation can be achieved either by innovative production methods or by the improvement of existing products and production procedures (Schumpeter, 1934). In addition, most researchers believe the main asset of a businessman/woman is risk taking (Brockhaus, 1980; Johnson and Storey, 1993; McClelland, 1987). Research has shown that businesswomen are the least willing to take business risks (Brush, 1992; *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor*, 2004; Sexton and Bowman-Upton, 1990; Watson and Robinson, 2003).

Following the qualitative research approach, this case study researches the entrepreneurship of rural women who participate in Rural Women's Traditional Food Production cooperatives, and focuses on the perceptions and values of the rural women about entrepreneurship as well as the factors that influence their enterprise choices.

We hold that on one hand, there are policies that support the establishment of rural women's cooperative and on the other hand, there are barriers to public policy's implementation such as the lack of innovation and the lack of undertaking entrepreneurial risk.

2.1. Policies supporting cooperative entrepreneurship

Rural women decide to enter the job market and entrepreneurship between the ages of 35 and 45. At these ages, professional life coincides better with family life because of reduced family obligation, such as child care; by this time their children are ten years old or older (*Global Entrepreneurship Monitor*, 2007, 2005).

Rural women decide to become actively involved in business to:

- (a) Provide themselves with additional income consistent with the characteristics and needs of a family run rural operation (Castelberg-Koulma, 1991; Cavounidis, 1983; Gourdomichalis, 1991; Kalantaridis and Labrianidis, 1999; Koutsou *et al.*, 2003).
- (b) Claim their independence (O'Hara, 1998).
- (c) Have equal participation in the decision making of the rural household (Rogers and De Boer, 2001).
- (d) Socialize outside their residence (Stratigaki, 1988).

In Greece, the first Rural Women's cooperative was founded in 1984 in Petra on Lesvos Island. It was followed in 1985 by the cooperatives of Ampelakia in Thessaly, Mastichocoria in Chios, Arachova in Viotia, Agios Germanos in the region of Prespes and Maroneia in Rodopi (e.g., Iakovidou, 1997; Papadaki-Klaydianou and Giasemi, 1991). Today, there are over 120 Rural Women's cooperatives (*Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food*, 2008). Most of them produce and sell traditional food products made with raw materials from their regions of activity (oil, wine, milk, eggs). A smaller number of cooperatives are active in the agro-tourism sector, as well as in the home

handicrafts' sector, producing folk art items such as embroideries and traditional costumes (Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food, 2007).

The establishment of less favored areas was implemented with Directive 75/268, (Official Journal of European Commission, 1975), as a support program for farmers and cattlemen in areas where rural production is bounded by restrictions of geographical (mountainous, semi-mountainous, barren), political, social and economic constraints (such as areas with demographic shrinkage, isolated locations, areas in borders). The definition of less favored areas was later extended to areas where natural disadvantages prevent them from equal competition with other areas (European Commission, 2001). The making of a national and European support program is necessary for their further development (e.g., (European Commission, 2004, 2000).

The continuously increasing number of cooperatives results from the promotion of cooperative entrepreneurship by the public policies. Market challenges in less favored areas deprived of enterprise culture are better dealt with through this type of entrepreneurship. At the same time, in these particular areas, the production of certified quality traditional goods is promoted through the use of specific or traditional raw materials, specific production methods and by linking these products with their geographical origin (e.g., Barham, 2003; Loureiro and McCluskey, 2000; Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Official Journal of European Commission, 2006, 1992; Tregear *et al*, 2003, 1998). Combining traditional products with "cultural symbols"³ or local representations is believed to result in an even greater symbolic quality and increase of the final value of the products, which leads to their higher added value (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999). This price differentiation is essential in mountainous and/or less favored rural areas because the cost of production in these areas is higher. Therefore, these areas cannot compete with goods produced in urban areas or by mass production (Sage, 2003).

The most recent Greek law on the foundation and operation of cooperatives, 2810/2000 "Rural Cooperative Organizations" (Official Journal of Greek Government Statement, 2000), is considered to focus cooperatives toward an enterprising direction. It is beneficial for rural women because only seven individuals are required for the constitution of a cooperative. Thus, it can be based in the wider area of its members' residence and rural women can unify their efforts to select their economic activity (European Commission, 2005).

2.2. Barriers to public policy implementation

Despite the positive public policies, Rural Women's cooperatives still face many problems. They also lack the ability to implement and develop innovations such as updating technology and improving product quality, hygiene and product safety (Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food, 2007). Experiential research has shown that rural women who are members of cooperatives do not build the cooperative based on business criteria,

³The "symbolic" product quality refers to the quality that is given to the product because of certain cultural, ideological or social characteristics. There are cases where products become symbols because of strong historical and traditional bonds between areas where food, tradition, mythology, values and lifestyle can be accessible to consumers through these products. As a result, the consumer is attracted to the certain product and searches for it (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999).

and they are extremely cautious about taking risks and readjusting their products based on the requirements of the market (Kazakopoulos and Gidarakou, 2003). Most Rural Women cooperatives have been founded with a very small cooperative share. They have low income and the surpluses of their management are insignificant or negative (Papageorgiou *et al.*, 1999).

Other problems detected are that few young people participate in cooperatives, members are not informed about modern business methods issues, products are not promoted, collaboration between the members is relatively weak, labor is not distributed equally and conflicts among the members are not resolved (Koutsou *et al.*, 2003).

2.3. Heraklion Prefecture geographic area

In the region of Crete, the per capita GDP did not exceed 75 percent of the average of the 25 countries of the European Union during the three year period of 2000–2002. Because of this, the region of Crete was included in the Target 1 “Approximation” Program for the period 2007–2013.

The Heraklion Prefecture makes up more than 50 percent of the population of the whole island, produces the largest per capita GDP, provides most of the rural production and hosts more than 50 percent of the industrial enterprises (Centre of Entrepreneurial and Technological Development of Crete, 2004). Nonetheless, the agricultural sector of the Heraklion Prefecture faces the same problems as every other rural region in Greece. The division of farmlands into small lots located at great distances from one another, limited natural resources, aging of the rural population and the low education level are few of the problems (Centre of Entrepreneurial and Technological Development of Crete, 2004). At a national level, the Heraklion Prefecture has one of the highest percentages of junior and senior high school dropouts. The highest percentage of these dropouts occurs during the first year of junior high school and senior high school respectively mostly among boys. Thus, the majority of dropouts are either elementary school graduates or junior high school graduates. These are the people who continue residing in the rural areas and go into farming, animal husbandry and agricultural production (Greek Ministry of National Education and Religions–Pedagogic Institute, 2006).

Additional economic constraints in the Prefecture Rural Sector are high production and transport costs, poor agricultural cultivation methods, high dependency on agriculture subsidies, limited processing and packaging of farm products, weak cooperative organizations and rural enterprises that do not promote their products as having high added value. Most enterprises have limited possibilities for innovative actions — such as the use and assimilation of new technologies because they are active only at a local level using a familial cooperative style (Centre of Entrepreneurial and Technological Development of Crete, 2005).

3. Method

This research is a case study conducted during a two-year period (2007–2009). In addition to the literature review and review of official policy documents, the data was collected through three processes.

In the first stage (2007), we reviewed papers and documents of official institutions involved in programs to promote, support and aid rural women wanting to participate and maintain Rural Women's cooperatives in the Heraklion Prefecture. During the research period (2007–2009), the Heraklion Prefecture assembled 14 Rural Women's cooperatives in its region, which were established in mountainous and/or less favored areas with less than 2,000 residents. The cooperatives were at different stages of development because of factors such as different founding date, amount of foundation capital and sectors of activity. As a result, the cooperatives had different economic and organizational needs.

By the end of 2008, nine of these Women's Rural cooperatives were in business for over 42 months paying wages and generating profits and they could be categorized as "established"^b enterprises. The remaining five Rural Women's cooperatives were in business from 3 to 30 months and could be categorized as "new" enterprises. Eight out of the nine "established" Rural Women's cooperatives produced local traditional food products and one of them with the produced regional traditional attire. Thus, the case study research focused only on the eight established Rural Women's cooperatives that produce local traditional food products.

The second stage of the research was based on empirical data collected from these cooperatives. A questionnaire of closed-ended questions was created (at the beginning of 2009). Its aim was to:

- (a) Collect information about the organization and function of the cooperatives from the date of their foundation (between 2000 and 2009) such as cooperative shares, funded by national and/or European programs, distribution of products, certified products, use of new organization and management practices (e.g., quality control systems, organization and management of e-programs and web sales, association and collaborations with other businesses, ways of publicity).
- (b) Determine the number and the ages of members, members' educational level, members' knowledge and use of personal computers and the Internet, amount of continuing education and training.

The third and main stage of the research was also based on empirical data. It focused on the enterprising behaviour of the rural women who participated in the Rural Women's cooperatives of the Heraklion Prefecture in Crete. Considering the objective of the research was to describe, comprehend and analyze the social processes, answering the questions "how" and "why," the cooperatives engaged in their business activities, the qualitative methodology of a case study was particularly useful (Mason, 1996). In addition to the questionnaire, data collection was obtained through individual semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1987), which targeted the perceptions and values of the rural women about entrepreneurship and factors that influenced their enterprise choices.

^bBased on empirical research, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor has determined that when an enterprise has operated for more than 42 months by paying wages and generating profits, it is more likely to survive and develop. These enterprises can be categorized as "established" (Reynolds *et al.*, 2005).

Each interview lasted for 40–50 minutes and took place in the offices of the cooperative's Chairwoman, without the presence of other members. Following the transcription of the interview recordings, a pen name was given to each interview to ensure the anonymity of the chairwomen. A second meeting/interview that lasted for 10–15 minutes was arranged with each chairwoman to clarify initial answers and to ask follow-up questions. After the second transcription of the recordings, there was telephone contact with some of the chairwomen (3–5 minute duration) to clarify certain vague points. With this procedure, the questions and answers of the original interview were enriched.

Content analysis of the interviews was applied to draw results from the qualitative interviews (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). The texts from the answers were used as the initial data base. They were then divided into smaller sections and analysis units were created. These units were parts of the texts that contained a piece of information that was comprehensible even outside the context. This information was then classified in axes, starting from the specific to the general (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

3.1. Research limitations

Because this research is a case study that followed the qualitative research approach, the data is context-specific. This implies that there cannot be a generalization of results; however, the conclusions are confirmed — at the theory level — through the literature review. This research can give some useful prompts for further study of its results in other regions of Greece, as well as provide some insights about the gap between formulating public policy to facilitate entrepreneurial enterprises, and the barriers associated with implementing those policies.

The qualitative method approach often elicits criticism about the lack of subjectivity, the difficulty of reproducing it and the lack of transparency (Bryman, 2001). To offset these disadvantages, processes and methods were used that ensured, as much as possible, the applicability, objectiveness, reliability and validity of the research. During the research, a diary on every step and action taken was regularly updated (Eisenhardt, 1989; Riege, 2003; Yin, 2003). Before beginning the research process, the cooperatives were informed orally and in writing about the aim of the research and how the anonymity of each chairwoman would be guaranteed (Lincoln and Cuba, 1985). Also, they were given instructions about how to answer the questionnaires and interviews — with real and not merely agreeable information. The questionnaire was sent as a test to two cooperatives to ascertain its ease of use. It was reviewed, and after editing, a trial interview was conducted with a chairwoman to conclude that the user friendliness of the semi-structured questionnaire was acceptable (Yin, 2003). During the interviews, experiences and perspectives of the interviewee were recorded without personal opinions of the researcher being involved (Judd *et al.*, 1991; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In addition, the chairwomen verified the transcripts concerning their answers (Lincoln and Cuba, 1985).

The triangulation of the research results (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln and Cuba, 1985; Yin, 2003) from the closed-ended questionnaire, interviews, literature review and official documents provided consensus and congruence about the Rural Women's cooperatives in Heraklion Prefecture.

4. Results

4.1. Enterprise profile of cooperatives

All of the established Rural Women's cooperatives in the Heraklion Prefecture were founded in 2000 and after, under the national law 2810/2000. From the date of their foundation until the beginning of 2009, the total number of their members was reduced from 108 members (13.5 members on average per cooperative) to 83 members (almost 10 members on average per cooperative).

According to the answers to the questionnaire of closed-ended questions, 71 percent of the members were between 41–67 years old. Not even one cooperative had members aged 18–25 years old, but 28.91 percent of the members were between 26–40 years old. Only 66.3 percent of the members were graduates of elementary school or had attended a few classes, and 19.3 percent had attended the first three years of high school. Only 14.4 percent had education that reached the final classes of high school, while not even one member had graduated from a higher education institute. A percentage (44.6%) of the members stated they had attended seminars in the last two years concerning the new directions of European Policy in entrepreneurship (e.g., marketing, certification of products) and 36 percent stated they were involved, at the same time, in seminars concerning pastry making, and the production of traditional products. At the same time, 25 percent of the members indicated they had attended PC and Internet use seminars; however, none of them could use the internet and 10 percent admitted they could barely use a PC.

Cooperative shares, when the cooperatives were founded, ranged from 50 to 293 Euros (average 200 Euros per member). Each cooperative had been financed either at the period of its foundation and/or at the period of its operation by national and/or European programs, and half of them had not yet paid off their portion in those programs. At the beginning of 2009, every member of each cooperative was an active member (83 members). One cooperative had also employed two more people on a regular basis (an accountant and a product distributor), and a second cooperative employed one more person on a seasonal basis during periods when production was increased (mainly at Christmas and Easter). Members shared the surplus of the management, and according to the financial data of cooperatives, each member had a monthly income of about 380 Euros, part of which was the reward for their monthly work in the cooperative.

The products were distributed mainly in the local market of their area and the Prefecture of Heraklion and secondarily in the wider Greek market. None of the Women's Rural cooperatives had certified their products (e.g., as organic products under the Council Regulation No. 2092/91, and/or certified traditional goods under the Council Regulation No. 509/2006). It was also revealed from the research that four out of the eight cooperatives, although they responded to the specifications of certifying their productive procedures with quality control systems (e.g., hazard analysis and critical control points), had not taken any actions to implement the systems.

While running the cooperatives, there were no collaborations or association with other businesses. Three cooperatives participated in a higher level cooperative organization and

four took part in a professional, non-cooperative organization. None of the cooperatives were open to absorbing new members.

During the research, two cooperatives used organization and management e-programs (accountant parcels, registration of customers). Four cooperatives appeared in web pages, but none of them used the e-shop through their page because none of the 83 members could use the internet. Cooperatives, in total, used exhibitions as a publicity means, while a high percentage used registrations in the media (press, radio, TV).

4.2. *The profile of chairwomen and the decision to participate in cooperative*

Six chairwomen were between 37–47 years old and the other two were 62 and 67 years old. Based on their testimonies, it turned out they were raised in small agricultural areas of mountainous and distant areas, with difficult access to the city of Heraklion and with no road or social substructures (e.g., secondary school infrastructure, health care centers). They come from families with limited financial resources, which in turn limited their own choices. As Sofia mentioned, “*if you came from a farm family, you didn’t have the chance to do much.*”

Three of the eight chairwomen were either elementary school graduates, or had attended only a few classes. Two had graduated from junior high school and the other three had graduated from senior high school. All of them had married young (16–22 years old) and seven of them were mothers of three or four children. Only one of them was the mother of two children.

In the few cases where some of them worked before they got married, they usually worked for relatives or at home (embroideries) to ensure some income. As a result, they were deprived of education and the opportunity to integrate socially.

Although agriculture was considered a man’s job (“*boys at the village can do tough jobs, girls cannot, muscle is needed to drive a tractor...*”, as Niki mentioned), women helped their husbands with the farm work and still do to contribute to the family. Conditions under which these rural women were raised and reasons that led them to choose early marriage are reflected in Vaso’s story:

“I wanted to study, but my father did not have lots of money back then. He chose to help the boys with their studies. I stopped attending high school pretty soon and occupied myself with embroideries to earn some pocket money. I was then married at a very young age, at 18. Those days we all got married young. My husband had big plots and I helped him, although I did not like rural work at all.”

After their marriage, chairwomen were urged to search for a job because of the financial needs of their family, their restricted maternal role (after their children had grown up), and the negative feelings they experienced about their home and agricultural role, which did not satisfy them. In the beginning, their professional expectations had nothing to do with entrepreneurship. The initial objective was to find a steady job with monthly wages, but the lack of knowledge and skills, the lack of labor opportunities in the agricultural society, the absence of experience and socialization, and the favorable public policies concerning the foundation of Rural Women’s cooperative, prompted them into the partnership business.

To participate in a cooperative, the rural women had to ask for money from their husbands, who on one hand had to agree with their spouse's decision to participate in a cooperative, and on the other hand had to agree with the amount of money they intended to invest as a cooperative share. The low cost of the cooperative share was an appealing factor. Moreover, the financial support from the official institutions granted them a sense of security, which was an additional reason to participate in the cooperative without taking a great financial risk.

The story of one of the chairwomen, Yianna, depicts the progress until the day she decided to be a part of and play a leading role in the foundation of a cooperative.

"I needed to work. I wanted to have a wage and a steady job — the basics that is to say. I wanted to get away from the house and contribute without working out in the fields. Now that we have a job, our husbands do not tell us to do farm work. We found a way to avoid them. I attended a seminar and I met other girls from the village and then I proposed to found a corporation. In the village there aren't many other jobs to do, apart from the rural ones, and we are not very educated, so we had limited options. If we had been educated, we would be doctors or lawyers. We couldn't be even simple employees. I have finished the junior high school, but most of the other girls have only attended elementary school. We considered that a corporation would be a nice solution for us. But when the matter came to investing money, even a small amount, the others refused. Their husbands would not allow them and they didn't have any money of their own. They wanted to be part of the corporation without investing any money. I finally found some other women, from the village next to mine, and they agreed to found the cooperative. Thank God, when the cooperative was founded we had some funds from the Program of Local Initiatives of Employment and we were then able to buy some production machinery. That was a good turn, as it saved us a lot of money."

4.3. Strategy of avoiding risks: Consequences on the enterprise choices

Instability of the free market causes a sense of insecurity and fears to chairwomen. Their strategy is to avoid taking financial risks, and to reduce the enterprise dangers they see coming from the wider market; they have mainly directed their activity toward covering the demands of the local market where the cooperative is based. The local markets in mountainous and less favored rural areas are in need of bakeries, which produce bread, patisseries, cakes and pastries. Thus, the rural women have chosen to introduce modern pastry and bread making in the production of their cooperatives. However, this has had a negative effect on the traditional handmade production of regional goods and/or organic products. The rural women believe that by automating the production procedure they will reduce the cost of production, increase the produced quantity, cut their working hours and increase their profits. Their comments represent their views very clearly:

"There are many cooperatives producing traditional goods and there are times we are busy and times we are not as much. In the market, we meet competitors; there is instability in general. So we decided to import many new products of modern pastry (cakes, pastries). We sell them at the village. That way we get paid immediately, while with the traditional

products we have to wait until shops in Heraklion pay us. We intend to introduce more modern pastry products. These things sell. Apart from that, we have in mind to buy machinery which will produce leafy vegetables pies (chortopites) automatically. We will still use fresh products, but when the production is massive we cannot make them without machinery. Women are tired; we need to reduce the cost, to gain more with less effort. Automatization will help us” (Vaso).

“When we were founded, at first, someone suggested we should produce organic goods and sell them to him. But that wasn’t to our advantage. We considered it would be difficult to find more customers. It would be a great risk. The village did not have a bakery, so we bought machines which bake faster and now all the people from our village and from the neighboring villages come to us to buy. Our income actually comes from baking. And we are happy that way” (Niki).

Only two of the chairwomen declared they will keep producing traditional goods. Both cooperatives are based in the most mountainous and distant areas of the Heraklion Prefecture and they have linked their activity with agro tourism. As Eirini mentioned *“we have the forest here and people visit to go walking or climbing, etc. In the village, there are agro tourism apartments. We don’t care to run a retail shop. We also run a tavern with traditional Cretan cuisine, which is open from Friday to Sunday. So we intend to produce more traditional products like the Cretan Rusk. We will also apply for the system of certification Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points and we will expand more into the market.”*

Avoiding taking financial risk has a negative effect in adopting modern business options, such as implementing quality control systems in the production procedure, e-promotion of their products, and/or the production of goods with Geographical Indication. Taking favorable policies as a fact for supporting their entrepreneurship which they prefer, the members of cooperatives wait until they are accepted for a financing program that suits them best, rather than risk financially and invest on their own. As a result, they postpone the introduction of modern business methods for the future.

“The market is limited and we aren’t thinking of applying for the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points System of certification for the time being. If we come to a difficult situation we will see how we will deal with it” (Niki).

“I prefer taking small steps, like now, than making huge ones and then losing control. Thus we prefer to apply for the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points System of certification later in the future” (Marianti).

“The company ‘Development Agency of Heraklion S.A.’ proposed we participate as a cooperative in a common web page, which would be created by the company. However, other members were scared that we would have to pay money for the participation and they declined. Now they saw that no money was needed and we are trying to take part, but we don’t know if we will make it, because the project is probably completed by now” (Dimitra).

“We want to secure that we produce the original Cretan Rusk (kritiko paximadi). And we need help on how to produce it, as well as how we will patent it. These procedures are very difficult for us. We cannot cope” (Eirini).

Also, the low level of education and the lack of knowledge and skills of chairwomen and members of cooperatives negatively affect adopting modern business options enterprise. They cannot comprehend modern entrepreneurship and cannot evaluate correctly the advantages of business connections, collaborations and business possibilities new technologies and innovative processes and products offer.

“We are informed about everything (from the institutions), either by phone, or by fax. But there we face a new problem, because of the lack of education, and there are many times we do not understand well and certain things slip us.” (Yianna)

“No, we do not sell through the internet; neither do we have corporate organization and management e-systems. None of our members know how to use the computer well. It is difficult to follow these things. We have no knowledge, we cannot learn” (Eirini).

Avoiding risk strategies expands into the managerial responsibilities as well. Members of cooperatives refuse to learn how to act in management. Although the function of the cooperative is everyone’s responsibility, in most cases, members prefer to have only the responsibilities of a simple employee. Therefore, during the interviewing period, four out of eight chairwomen had already remained at their posts since the establishment of the co-ops and the length of their administration had lasted from four to eight years.

“Unfortunately, no one else wants to take the leadership. This year we voted again for the new Administrative Council and none of the younger women wanted to take over as chairwoman. They don’t want the responsibility, they say ‘we are mothers of young children’, and then they say that I am familiar with the procedures, and that I know the right people. They don’t want to have more participation. All of the members refused to take on the post of the cashier, a post that doesn’t require any commuting; someone works from the cooperative office. But, the members prefer to work as simple workers and leave ...” (Dimitra).

However, even chairwomen do not take any huge risks or initiatives as far as the organization or management matters of the cooperatives are concerned. They fear possible disputes with other members if they take managerial or administrative initiatives. Members’ perceptions about how a chairwoman should behave while managing in a democratic way means chairwomen do not take administrative initiatives, not even allocating jobs and responsibilities to other members. Chairwomen of cooperatives have almost the same administrative responsibilities as other members even for simple business procedures. So, they make decisions jointly on matters associated with the cooperatives progress.

“Make a major decision on my own? No way. I find it non democratic. I want the responsibility to be shared and, moreover, I don’t want them (other members) to think that I do what I want. For example, if we want to advertise a product and we are looking at the offers, we will decide together on which one to choose. I will not decide on my own because there are many opinions about whether we should choose the cheapest one or if other criteria should be considered. I don’t want to impose my opinion. I can only decide on my own about accepting an order, but that’s something anyone in the cooperative can do. Every other decision is jointly made” (Eirini).

5. Conclusions

It is with no doubt that the Women's Rural cooperatives have contributed to the economic development of Less Favorite Areas of the Prefecture of Heraklion. However, the limited education, risk aversion and age of the owners of the cooperatives have negative consequences on the function of the cooperatives. The rural women seem to wish to distance themselves from producing local traditional food products with the use of traditional recipes handed down from generation to generation, and they draw away from techniques and technologies that have to do with the skills of their culture. They aspire to make a product on the model of companies involved with the mass production of food. The productive model they opt for does not take into account the culture system, and to a great extent, it does not take advantage of the potential of traditional methods associated with the geography or ecology of mountainous and less rural areas.

At the same time, they do not use quality control production systems, new organizing and managing technologies, nor modern business methods in advertising and promoting products. The management of cooperatives is not renewed. This specific enterprise model of development, apart from being non-competitive and non-innovative in the global environment, opposes the strategy that the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Foods had in mind for the development of mountainous and less favored rural areas. The strategy of the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food is *"a multi-functional model, which would emphasize on the production of special goods (local products, of a special type and technology, products of high quality, etc), in a way that it wouldn't allow them to be displaced by cheaper products of other areas"* (Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food, 2007).

The question is: Can rural women who act in the Women's Rural cooperatives of Heraklion Prefecture adopt an enterprise model of modern business behavior (e.g., importing quality control systems and new technologies in organizing and managing the cooperatives, e-shops and more), that will also maintain cultural and traditional ways in the production procedures, in a way that would not harm the tradition and the character of regional products of mountainous and less favored rural areas in Heraklion Prefecture?

The answer could be positive under the condition that there would be proper planning and structures, which would support two objectives:

- (a) The members of the Women's Rural cooperatives, as well as the potential businesses rural women prefer and
- (b) The ability to obtain technical and social skills in modern and innovative business practices. In the local development plan, for example, the 9-year mandatory school attendance by students of the mountainous and less favored agriculture areas could become a prioritized requirement because the Heraklion Prefecture has a high percentage of school dropouts in these particular areas (Greek Ministry of National Education and Religions–Pedagogic Institute, 2006).

Moreover, education and training provided to rural women, either potential or existing business women, should focus mainly on the procedures of finding, evaluating and

developing enterprise opportunities and rather than being limited to teaching these women about business administration and managing (Charney and Libecap, 2000).

The current practice of producing traditional food by Women's Rural cooperatives suggests this particular type of business could be more involved in the local development procedures, thus contributing more to the enhancement of a cultural identity of the areas they represent and associating the cooperatives with tourism and agro-tourism. Entrepreneurship seminars for rural women and members of the cooperatives could be associated with training about the values and aesthetics of agro-tourism models, so that new values and aesthetics would emerge in the agricultural sector.

Under these conditions, it is possible to say that in the near as well as in the distant future, the entrepreneurship of rural women can become a factor of development and a "key" to expanding the role of the Heraklion Prefecture in the Region of Crete.

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