

Rural development and businesswomen: the case of agritourism in Greece

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Abstract

The paper is a progress report of a research project undertaken by a research team consisted of scholars of 'Alexandriou' Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki and of other Greek Institutions. Target population is the women all over Greece involved in agritourism either running agribusiness as individuals or as members of women cooperatives. The primary purpose of this study was to assess innovation tools in agritourism in order to promote rural development and specific objectives include the identification of respondents' attitudes in producing local, traditional and/or biological products, to research the safekeeping of susceptible to insects products and whether they are stored in proper conditions for satisfying the customers-visitors. To identify educational needs of the target population relevant to agritourism and to make the findings available using GIS to all interested. First findings deriving mainly from researchers' visits and from Local Development Agencies are presented showing among other information the locations and concentrations of private and cooperative business all over Greece. In this paper effort is put to introduce how rural development can be accelerated if change agents are provided with information, about women occupied in agritourism either as members of cooperative or as individual businesswomen, useful for future action,.

Introduction

In many regions across the globe, farmers are recognizing the need and desire to diversify their farm products and supplement their agricultural incomes. With an agricultural economy that has been subsidised for the last 25 years in many areas of Europe, Greek farmers have tremendous opportunities to diversify their list of product and service offerings with agricultural tourism. Agricultural tourism increases the potential for higher margin, on-farm sales of value-adding products and services, further diversifying the product line of the farm operation. Agritourism or agricultural tourism is defined *"the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation"* (Lobo, R. 2000).

In recent years, the trend in devolution (placing funding burdens and decisions for programs at more decentralized levels of government) has not only taken shape, but has accelerated. With changing priorities for the European Union, it is clear that higher portions of funding for agriculture must be born by smaller units of government-if they are going to be provided at all. This commentary argues that Extension conducted at the local level can keep the organization relevant and vital in this new era of devolution. This can be true if extension service of each country is reoriented and its orientation would be most profitable if researchers working in rural areas studying supplementary sources of income for rural people provide information to them. Agritourism is also a case and in this paper effort is put to introduce how rural development can be accelerated if change agents are informed, for future action, about women occupied in agritourism either as members of cooperative or as individual businesswomen.

This paper is a progress report of the research applied by the Technological Education Research Team consisted of faculty members of the Department of Farm

Management together with other scholars from various Institutions. It aims to present the objectives of the research and the methodology applied having as an ultimate goal to help technology transfer experts providing rural people with basic information on how to use tourism as an additional product offering on the farm. This as a practical tool can help farmers decide whether or not to enhance their incomes with tourism activities.

In general, agritourism is the practice of attracting travellers or visitors to an area or areas used primarily for agricultural purposes. Very often, the idea of tourism stimulates images of mass-produced travel that attracts a large number of travellers. These images may discourage small business owners from considering tourism as an option for enhancing their agriculture revenues. However, agritourism can be viewed much like eco-tourism in that it is small-scale, low-impact, and, in most cases, education-focused.

Because the majority of farms in Greece are operated by small landowners, opportunities for uniqueness and customization are limitless. Many agritourism activities require only a small farm crew in order to be successful. For instance, farm tours, bed and breakfasts, petting zoos, donkey-riding, folk-dance festivals and many other activities may be operated with little additional investment in labour. Blacka et al. (2001) present a list of things that a farm operator may offer to tourists. Activities falling into categories such as lodging and camping, special events and festivals, off the farm activities, recreation activities and events, and fresh products and value-added products are mentioned - the list goes on. The business operator is limited only by his or her own creativity.

Agritourism is a new, rapidly-growing industry in Mediterranean area. By taking advantage of the favourable climates and popularity of the vast recreational opportunities, agricultural entrepreneurs have discovered the benefits of entering into the local-market place. These tourist-oriented facilities may take many shapes and forms to fit the needs of the market. This research project is looking forward in helping farmers through extension and other technology transfer agencies to grasp with optimum way this opportunity. It is important farmers to perceive that Agritourism –is a value-added agricultural activity that provides recreational, educational, and/or entertaining experiences or services for which the visitor pays a fee or admission to participate in and/or make a purchase of an agricultural product or activity, and make it a part of their activities the better way possible.

In the framework of rural development, women business dexterity plays an important role. Women in rural areas acting either as individual or as members of cooperatives have contributed a lot in agritourism promotion. Women cooperatives have been studied in Greece (Tsartas and Thanopoulou 1994, Koutsou 2002, Koutsou et al. 2003) regarding their contribution to rural development in general and specifically for agritourism. Unfortunately there is not much research on local country products and services and especially on agritourism dealing with the active involvement of visitors in farm activities and life of farmers. This gap is hopefully going to be narrowed with the findings and the proposals of this research.

Purpose and objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to assess innovation tools in agritourism in order to promote rural development.

Among specific objectives of this study were:

- To research the attitudes of the respondents in producing local/traditional and/or biological products

- To research the quality and mainly the safekeeping of such products damaged from insects and other harmful causes and whether they are stored in proper warehouse conditions for keeping them healthy and in the best possible quality to satisfying the buying visitors.
- To asses the educational needs of the respondents in order to make proposals for the proper educational material.
- To present, using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the data collected which will be available for any change agent or educational organization.
- To study how selected variables are associated with certain demographic characteristics of the target population.

Methodology

Target population and sampling. Target population is the women all over Greece involved in agritourism and running agribusiness either as individuals or as members of women cooperatives. Condition is that they are supported with the European Union program LEADER. Effort is put to collect information from all falling into above population.

Data Sources. The data to be selected consists of three parts. First to search from Local Development Agencies of each prefecture the existing women cooperatives and businesswomen falling into target population. Second, to contact and interview them for collecting the data for meeting research objectives. Third, to have randomly selected samples of the raw material they use in producing goods they are selling in order to identify the presence of insects in all stages (egg, larva, pupa and adult) in them. For this, the samples will be examined in the laboratory of entomology of School of Agricultural Technology.

Instrumentation. Data for this study is also collected using an interview questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers acting as a panel of experts, using related literature and previous research as a basis. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. In Part I respondents are asked to provide background information and relevant economics of the enterprises. Part II consists of various questions dealing with products and services offered, and their quality and storing, protection of insects and molds, packaging, promotion, pricing and marketing. Part III contains questions relevant to employment, personnel education and training, and to future plans of the businesswomen and/or the cooperative members. The instrument was reviewed by the panel of experts and revisions were made according to their suggestions. It was pilot tested for content validity.

Data collection

The questionnaire has started to be administered beginning of 2005 and interviews continue. As interviewers students of the Department of Farm Management are used after having been trained in interviewing. Research team members have also personally undergone this interviewing in order to have their own view of the situation. Interviewing is expected to be completed by the end of 2005.

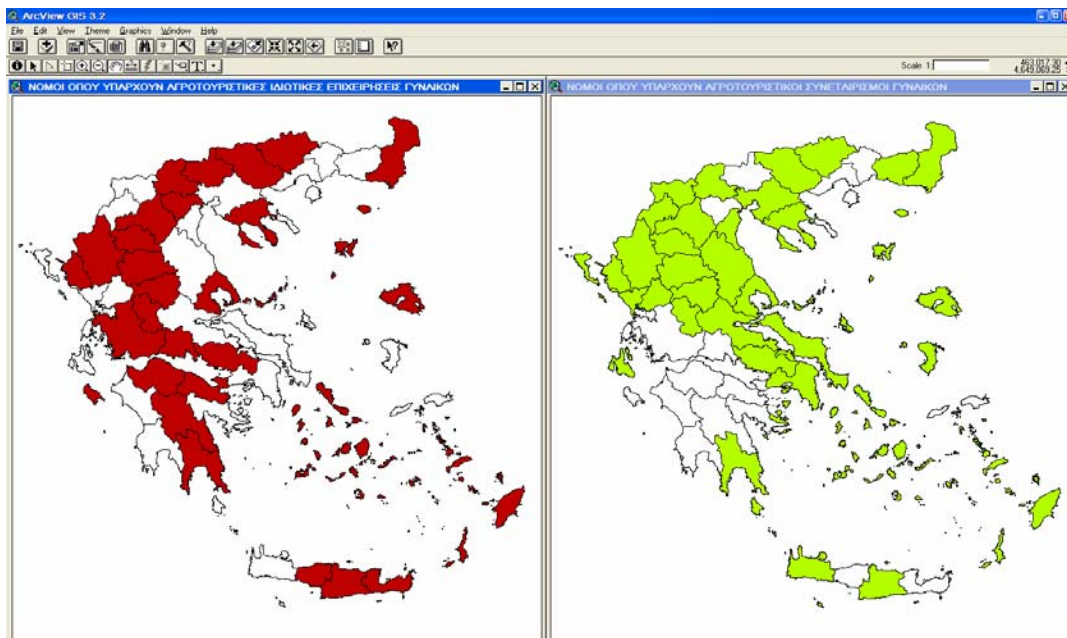
Provisional findings

Since the collection of data continues, only little information is reported herewith. This information is mainly an outcome derived from the Local Development Agencies of each prefecture, and from researchers' own observations.

Local Development Agencies, from all Greek prefectures, reported 115 women cooperatives matching with the target population. Out of them, 62 have been visited already by the interviewers and/or members of the research team. Eight of them are

shutdown and 62 valid questionnaires were collected. Same source provided information about 305 individual private businesswomen. Seventy nine (79) were excluded as not fulfilling the definition of agritourism. From those left (226) 85 had been interviewed by July 2005.

In GIS chart 1 is shown where in Greece individual businesswomen and women cooperatives dealing with agritourism are located. In GIS chart 2 information about the percentage of women' agritourism cooperatives in each Prefecture compared with the total in Greece is presented, and GIS chart 3 shows similar information about individual businesswomen. More charts have been created with the use of specific information such as individual business in agritourism serving food and/or refreshments (GIS chart 4). Among the activities of the cooperatives/enterprises are included: pastry, marmalades, drinks, pastry, other food items, herbs, dried flowers, cafeteria/tavern, catering, clay items, textile / canvas work, folk costumes, biological products, lodging (number of beds and services). Similar GIS thematic charts are under construction in order to include most of the data collected from Local Development agencies, from the researchers or through the questionnaires. They will be available to those interested through Internet or through other means.



GIS chart 1. Businesswomen (left) and women cooperatives (write) in agritourism

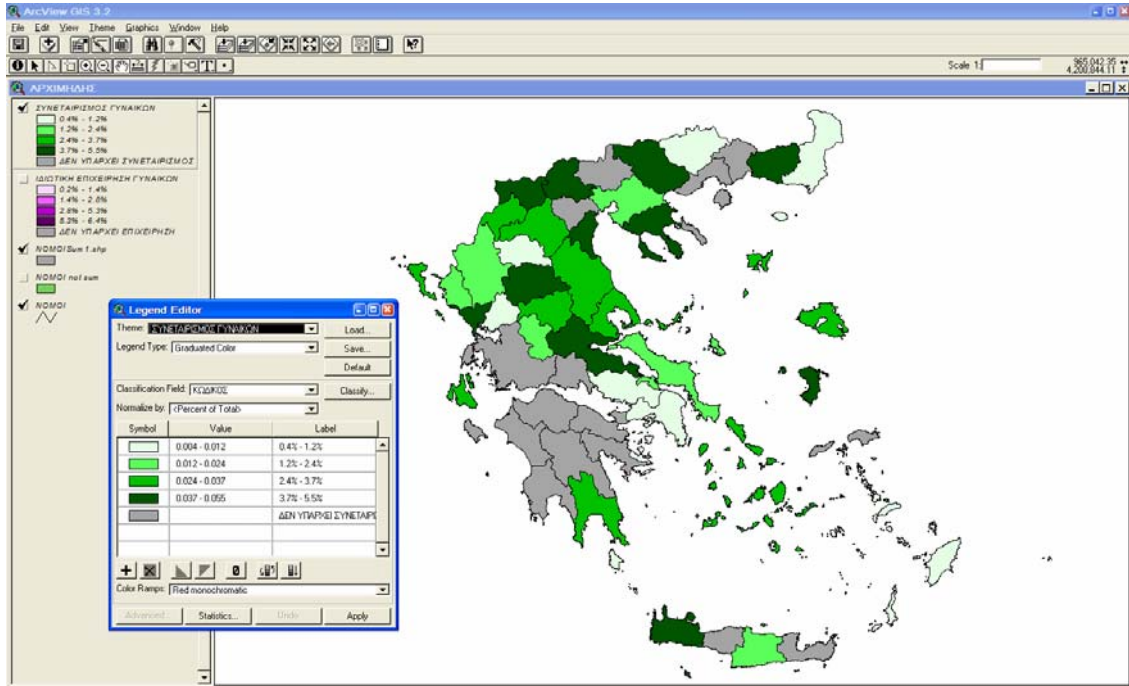
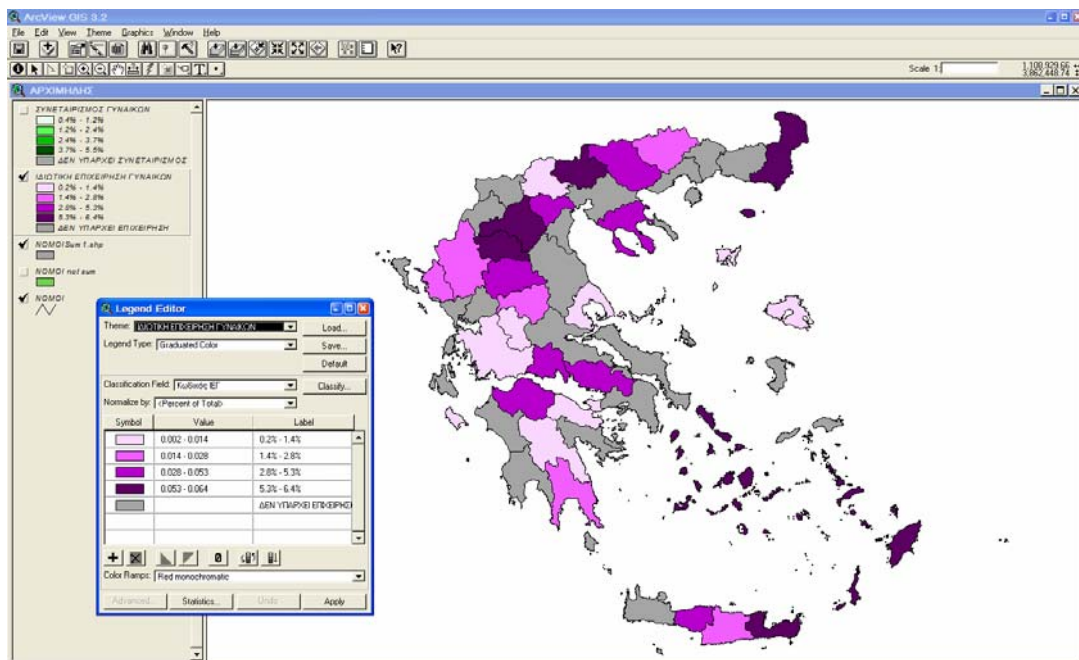
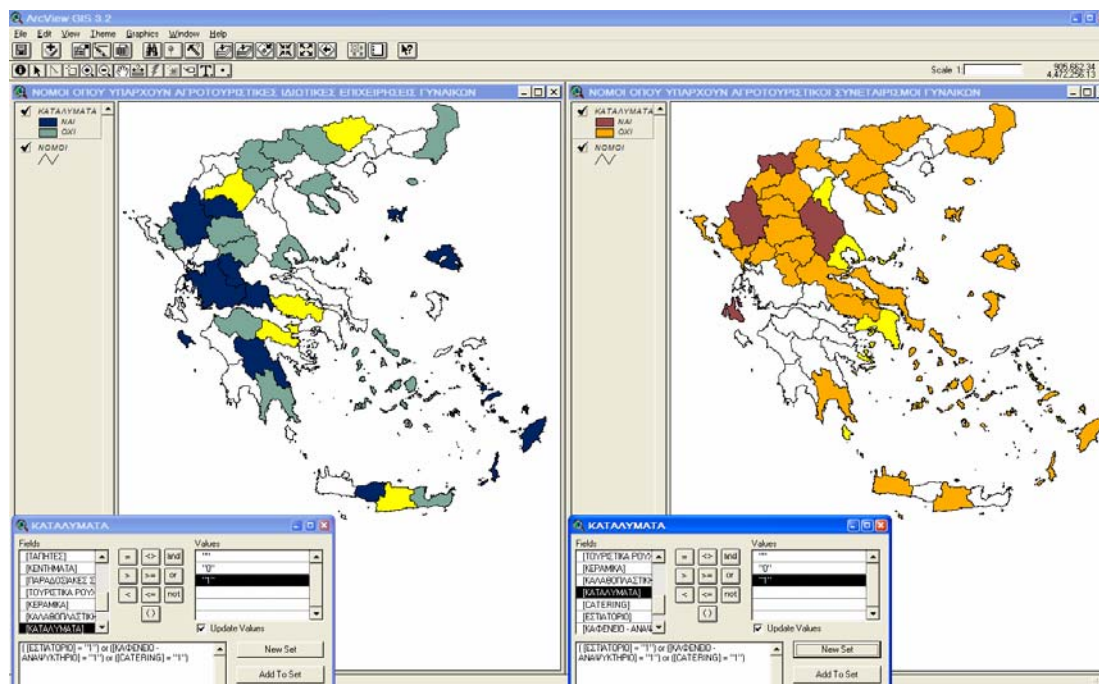


Chart 2. Women Cooperative Percentage in each Prefecture as compared with the total in Greece



GIS chart 3. Percentage of Individual business women in agritourism in each Prefecture as compared with the total in Greece



GIS chart 4. Women coops and individual business in agritourism offering food and/or refreshments among other goods available to visitors

Data, collected up to now, shows that the women cooperatives were established mostly (61,3%) during the '90s which is the decade EU programs LEADER were fostered. Similarly is the women private business establishment year (table 1).

Table 1. Year of cooperative and private business establishment

Year of establishment	Cooperative		Private business	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Up to 1990	8	14,5	7	8,3
1991 - 2000	38	61,3	64	66,2
2001 to 2004	16	24,2	13	24,8
Total	62	100,0	84	100,0

Regarding the number of partners when each cooperative was established, 16,1% of the cooperatives were formed with a small partnership (up to 10 members) and 37,1% of them when formed had more than 20 (minimum 5 maximum 76) members (table 2). As shown in table 2, a small reduction in membership is observed. Personal observations showed that fewer members in each cooperative are really active in business. The rest are followers. Regarding the private business, 62,7% of them have one owner, 13,3% two and 24% have more than 2 (maximum 7).

In an attempt to identify the women's sources for receiving new ideas to be innovated, a relevant question was addressed and as shown in table 3 the local agents, including the extension agents, share a low portion in innovating the target population.

Table 2. Counts of members of women cooperative in the establishment year and in 2004

Counts of members	Cooperative members during the			
	establishment year		year 2004	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
5 to 10	10	16,1	23	37,1
11 - 20	23	37,1	24	38,7
More than 20	17	27,4	15	24,2
Total	62	100,0	62	100,0

Table 3. Where the idea of the cooperative establishment came from?

Answer	The idea of the cooperative establishment came from:		
	Seminars	A member	Local agency
	%	%	%
NO	57,4	82,0	72,1
YES	42,6	18,0	27,9
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

Since the interviewing continues, only provisional findings can be reported in this paper and they will be limited only to findings needed for presenting the purpose of this report. Thus, these findings include that 60% of the coop presidents are aged (over 45 years old) and only 6,8% is below 35 years. In contrast, private business owners are younger in age (63% are younger than 45 years old). Their education is 40% of elementary, only 30,5% have completed lyceum and 12% higher education. Private businesswomen have 23% elementary, 15% of gymnasium, 29% of Lyceum and 14% of higher education. Marketing of goods and services by both categories is not a product of any training but based on their experience. It was also interested to be found that more than 50% of the cooperatives are selling their products abroad although 50% of them are selling outside Greece less than 30% of their production if any. Private ones sell out of Greece much less of their goods.

Information, from this research relevant to protection from insects of raw material and of the stored goods produced by the target population to be sold, is presented separately in this conference (Papadopoulou, 2005).

Agritourism and the role of Agricultural Extension

Extension has an impressive history of providing combinations of educational programming and applied research that have had important impacts on the lives of people throughout the world. Its traditional operation is out of date. Agricultural Extension should take in to account how to help in fostering an educational outreach program on agricultural tourism in the country. It is well known that many agri-tourism activities are going strong in rural Europe for decades. But there is a need to widen participation and especially in Greece by having Extension serving as a catalyst for developing the institutional framework to enhance the spread of agritourism across the country. In particular, Agricultural Extension must have interest in seeing how family farmers can benefit.

The Ministry of Agricultural Development must facilitate the creation of a state wide Agricultural Tourism Working Group authorities who must meet periodically to define an education and research agenda that can expedite the development of agritourism in the whole country. The extension agents should play very important role in this. For this, Extension must develop a number of partnerships with the Local Development Agencies in each Prefecture to support pilot projects in different parts and with a wide diversification regarding the kind of products and services to be offered which must match with the special opportunities and dynamics of each area. Each area must create a core of key people taking the lead in organizing steering committees; developing plans; including visions, goals and objectives; and designing an educational program that can empower family farms and rural communities to meet a growing consumer demand for the rural and agricultural experience.

It is highly recommend having strategic plans for agritourism education, and coordination of collaborative efforts of tourism, agriculture, business and government participants. Among the objectives set should be included efforts to limit the widespread use of chemicals and powerful mechanical equipment that make problematic to bring unfamiliar visitors or tourists onto many farm-work environments. For this, it is recommended to provide information on how insects and other causes deteriorating the production in field and when it is stored as processed for agritourism purposes. Available research can help in identifying and controlling insects with the minimum use of pesticides (Papadopoulou 2001). Furthermore, information is needed in many areas. Such information is already created by researchers e.g. insect traps proved as most efficient of those in the market have been studied on insects harmful in storage food as well as in the fields (Papadopoulou and Buchelos, 2002). Other information is to be available as an outcome of this research project presented here. It is in researchers' intension the information gathered either with personal contacts or through the questionnaires to be available to all interested (change agents, technology transfer authorities and customers) with the use of GIS, with publications and through other means.

After all, an effective and dynamic agri-tourism program could significantly enhance agricultural sales in the area, particularly for small operations. Such a program would also create additional jobs in the County to provide these tour services. The researchers of the Technological Education Institute of Thessaloniki, School of Agricultural Technology hope to add a milestone in it.

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