

Addressing Un/Under-Employment at the Local Level: Participatory Action Research in Greece of Crisis

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Abstract

The underutilization of human capital, reflected on shrinking job opportunities and employment deterioration, is the major crisis outcome and cause of socio-economic exclusion in Greece. Our research (EEA-GR07/3694 project), addressing un/under-employment at the local level during the country's downturn, identified wide discrepancies between labour supply and demand. Data analysis revealed that the type of employment required by locally prevailing business does not contribute to local employability, nor sustains labour market resilience and employment recovery. On this ground, the capability of local entrepreneurship to capitalize the existing qualified personnel was questioned; and Participatory Action Research (PAR) was carried out in order to set new accounts of entrepreneurship for inclusive growth and social innovation. The paper presents the collaborative process and tentative results of PAR undertaken at the target-locality of Sparta in Greece. The process of action planning and implementation engaged local key-stakeholders and empowered local actors (municipality, vocational institutions, business chambers, trade unions, cooperatives) to address the potential of the un/underemployed and particularly, the most vulnerable of the labour market (young and women). The action implemented as part of the PAR process, "Spartathlon - Routes of Taste, Trade and Art", sought to attract more tourists to the town and strengthen local business. Its presentation makes a contribution to the discussion for social innovation, cohesion and sustainable economic recovery.

Keywords: local entrepreneurship, skills mismatch, labour surplus, participatory action research

JEL codes: J24, P48, J64

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1. Introduction

The underutilization of skilled labour, reflected on shrinking job opportunities and employment deterioration, has been the major implication of the global 2008/2009 crisis and the main cause of socio-economic exclusion in EU debt-ridden economies and particularly in Greece. Consequently, much of related literature has recently focused on issues of regional employment resilience and recovery (Fingleton et al. 2014, Martin and Sunley 2014, Lagravinese 2015, Doran & Fingleton 2015). The labour market is the field primarily affected by economic downturn, as massive lay-offs and employment flexibilization are the main practices implemented by business in order to adapt costs and expenses to falling consumption.

In this context, our research (EEA-GR07/3694) addressed un/under-employment in Greece at the local level. Target-localities of different industrial structure and production specialisation provide diverse case-studies of labour market resilience or hysteresis. Our first objective was to explore the capacity of the local production systems – as reflected on the local business sector - to adjust to economic downturn. Analysis draws on data provided by secondary sources, as well as primary data retrieved in the target-economies. Results reveal persisting unemployment and deteriorating employment - in the sense of job opportunities, precariousness and earnings. Wide discrepancies between labour demand and supply indicate that the local production systems cannot take advantage of labour skills and qualifications to reverse decline.

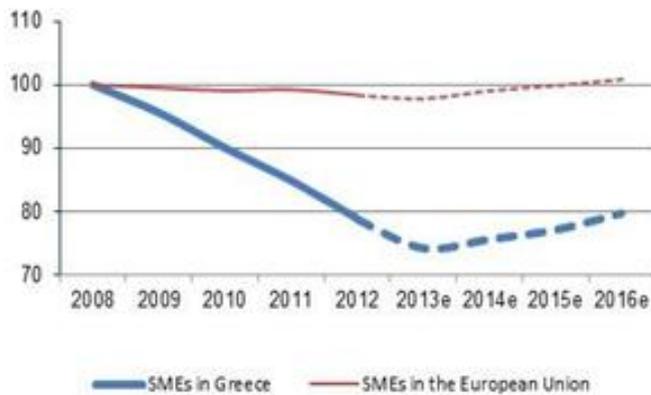
On the ground of our findings, the second research objective was to initiate innovative action towards sustainable socio-economic recovery and prosperity, through smart capitalisation of all available local resources. To this purpose, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted and applied in the town of Sparta in order to set new accounts of local ‘competitive advantage’ for inclusive growth and social innovation. PAR is an emancipating research methodology which connects theory and practice through collaboration between researchers and participants. Participants in this process are representatives of key stakeholders, relevant to the problem under examination, and people affected by it and therefore they are the ones with the capacity to generate the most appropriate solutions.

The aim of the PAR process was firstly to empower the un/underemployed themselves and other interested social actors / stakeholders in Sparta to transform and reconstruct views and practices they use in order to address the problem of underutilization and waste of human resources. The next step was to implement a joint intervention making good use of the town's territorial resources and highly-qualified human resources.

The PAR group in Sparta decided to work on the project titled "SpARTathlo - Routes of Taste, Trade and Arts" (from now on SpARTathlo) aiming at attracting more tourists and strengthening local business (in the services sector, such as restaurants and cafes and retail shops).

2. Exploring Labour Market Resilience and Employment Recovery

Seeking to explore labour market resilience or hysteresis (Martin 2012) in crisis-hit Greece, we examine local entrepreneurship (as a measureable factor defining local production systems) and its capacity to resist to economic downturn and/or recover, by maintaining or generating employment. Nearly seven years after the crisis outbreak, small and micro enterprises in Greece are still the backbone of the country's business sector, now struggling with an economic contraction unparalleled in the EU. In 2008-2014, SMEs employment fell by more than 450,000 employees to 1.8 million. Yet, data suggest a modest employment growth for 2015 and 2016. (Figure 1a, 1b)

Figure 1a. SMEs Employment change

*Index: 2008=100, estimates as from 2013 onwards
 Source: 2015 SBA Fact Sheet: Greece, EC 2016

Figure 1b. SMEs balance of hirings and layoffs

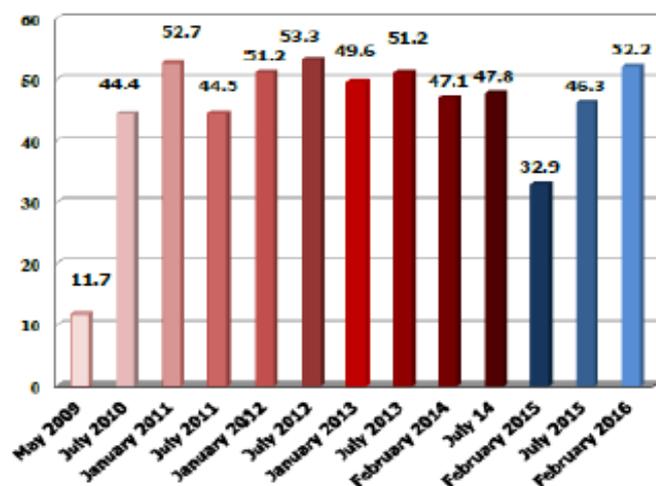
Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

A most recent survey of the Institute of Small/Micro Enterprises (IME-GSEVEE 2016), biannually conducted on national scale, records the decline of Greek SMEs in terms of turnover, demand and orders. Just 1 in 5 enterprises showed profits in 2015, while nearly 4 in 10 showed losses. Consequently, the number of SMEs facing the possibility of closure (according to own statement) is high - across all sectors/industries and regions - although the number of SMEs that do not share this fear is higher (Figure 2). Over the same period (2010-2016), the majority of surviving SMEs show stabilized employment rates, those of decreasing employment are becoming less, while a modest number show increasing employment (Figure 3). However, these trends cannot adequately establish a positive contribution of Greek SMEs to employment resilience and labour market recovery. A more thorough analysis is required to provide evidence on the issue.

To this purpose, our research focused on the significant labour market shifts illustrated by current expanding employment patterns. Post-crisis data reveal the increasing turn of SMEs towards employment of high flexibility (IME-GSEVEE 2016, Figure 4). As established in previous research across Greece's regional labour markets (Gialis and Tsampra 2015), flexible or atypical employment had resurged already before the ongoing crisis as a practice to

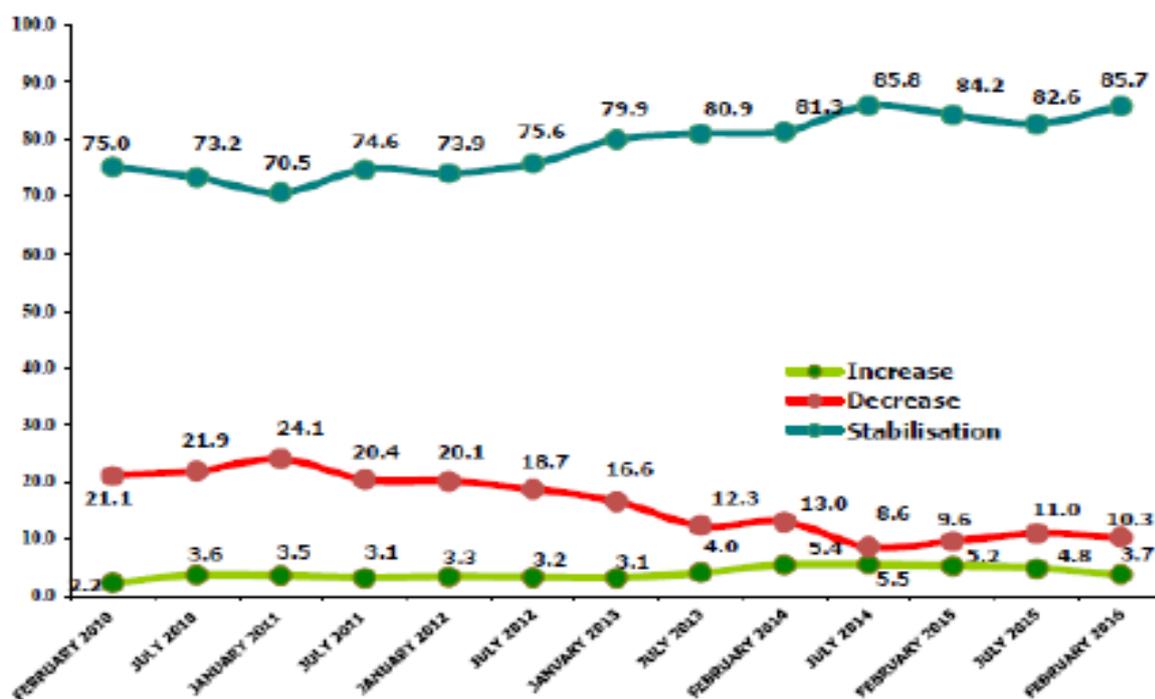
adjust working time and wages to global competition imperatives. Related institutional reforms have promoted atypical employment all over Europe, already since the 1990s.

Figure 2. SMEs fear of closure, 2009-2016



Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

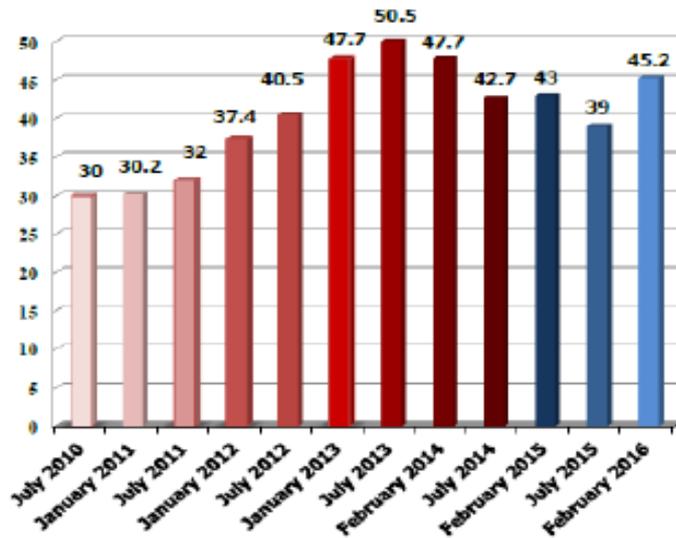
Figure 3. SMEs employment, 2010-2016



Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

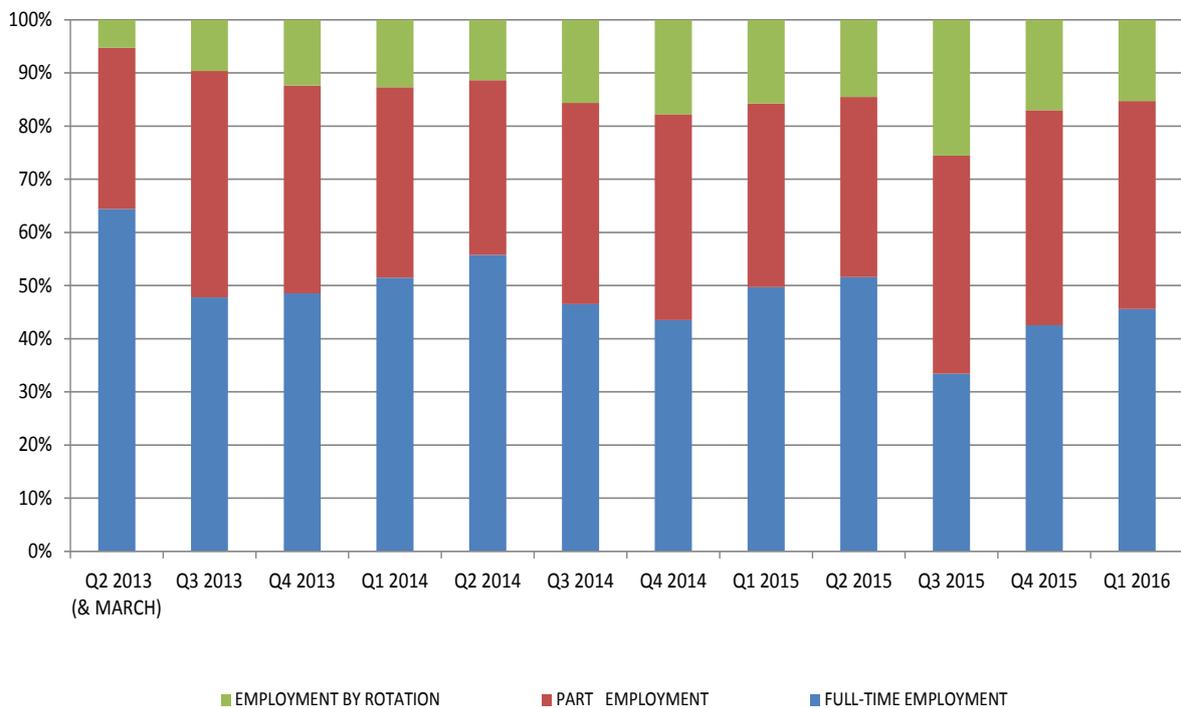
In Greece, related regulatory adjustments (as part of debt-relief memoranda) have given further impetus to flexible/atypical employment after the crisis. For the period of arguable employment recovery after 2014, data on hiring by type of employment contract (ERGANI Information System, Hellenic Ministry of Labour and Social Security) illustrate the increasing preference of employers for part-time and rotation workers over full time employees: the share of the latter in total hiring decreased from 64.4% in 2013 to 45.5% in 2016 (Figure 5).

Figure 4. SMEs turn to flexible labour, 2010-2016



Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

Figure 5. Hiring by type of contract, 2013-2016

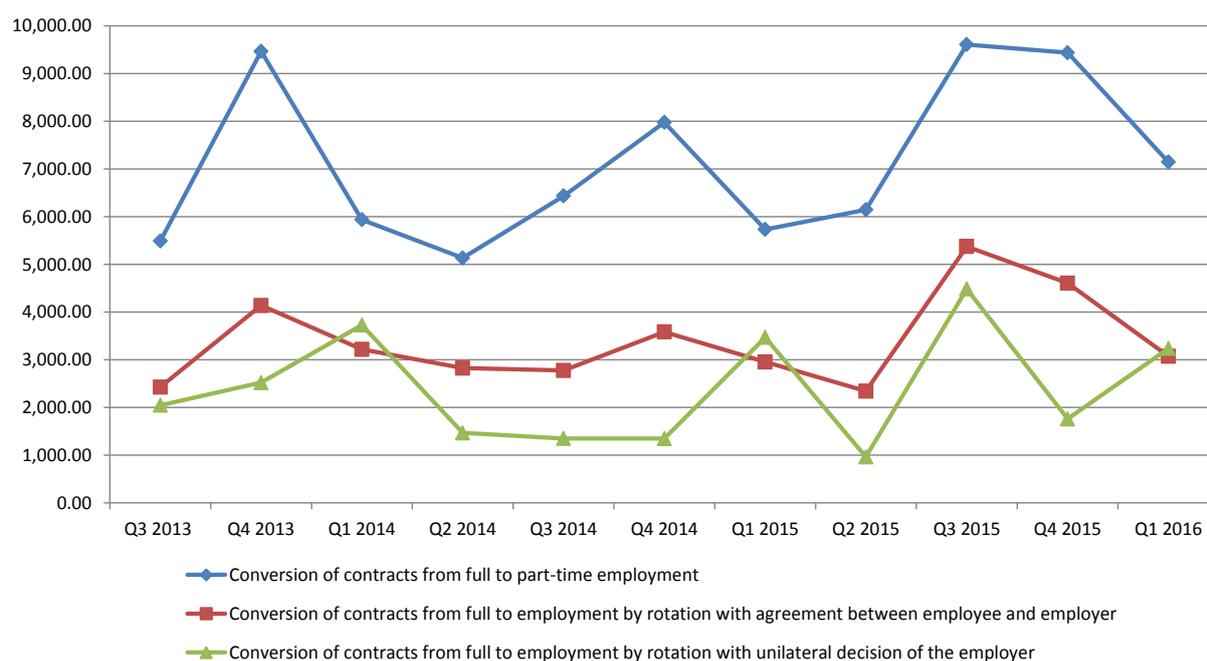


Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Monthly data on flows of salaried employment

According to ERGANI data for the same period (2013-2016), the number of employment contracts that converted from full-time to part-time and rotation work is significant and increasing (either with, or without the employee's consent) (Figure 6).

According to ERGANI data on working time show that, despite the predominance of full time employees (≤ 35 hours per week), the number of employees working for just 2-4 hours per week increased by 54.5% from 2013 to 2015 (the highest by far increase, in a range of ≤ 35 , 35-20, 20-10, 10-4, 4-2, 2-1 working hours per week). As expected, the percentage of part-time or rotation workers with monthly earnings $\leq 500\text{€}$ increased by more than 30% from 2013 to 2015. But in the same period, the percentage of full time employees with monthly earnings of 500-600€ (forming the group of lowest monthly earnings in a range of 2,500€ to 500€) had the highest increase of nearly 50%. The smallest group of employees with the highest monthly earnings (of $\geq 2,500\text{€}$) recorded a negative change of around 5% from 2013 to 2015, indicating the shrinking or deterioration of the most skilled and qualified.

Figure 6. Contracts converted from full-time to part-time and rotation work, 2013-2016



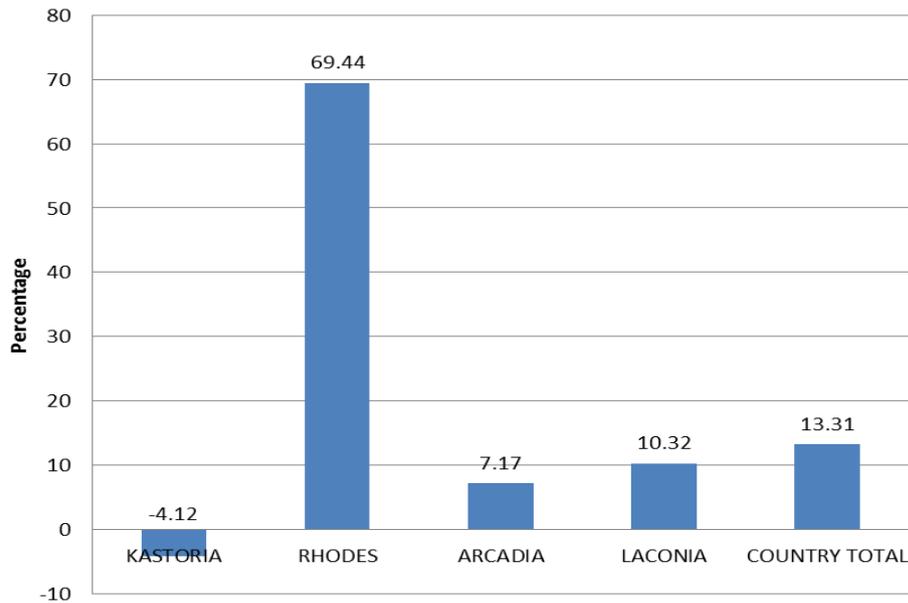
Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Monthly data on flows of salaried employment

Based on such findings, it can be argued that the expanding pattern of work flexibilization, adopted by the majority of Greek SMEs to cope with downturn, may lead to further labour market hysteresis, *instead of resilience*, as employment disintegration and persisting long-term unemployment endanger potential recovery. To further explore this assumption, we focused on the local level and traced (possible) diverse spatial patterns of employment in four different (typical in Greece) production systems. The regions (NUTS 3) of Arcadia, Laconia, Kastoria and Rhodes represent diverse economic structures and industrial specialisations (measured by employment and GDP in LQ και shift share analysis: Gialis and Tsampra 2015) in services, agriculture, manufacturing and tourism, respectively.

The analysis of predominant production structures in each target-area is based on data provided by ERGANI for entrepreneurship (enterprises with employees) and salaried employment in 2013-2015. As depicted (Figure 7), entrepreneurship in Arcadia and Laconia has increased moderately behind the national average (by 7.17% and 10.32% respectively). In contrast, Kastoria and Rhodes are found at extreme opposites: entrepreneurship in Kastoria fell by 4.12%, following the decline of manufacturing; while it increased by 69.44% in Rhodes, reflecting the flourishing activity in tourism. On national scale, entrepreneurship increased by 13.3% from 2013 to a total of 222,284 in 2015 (of which 97.4% in the private sector).

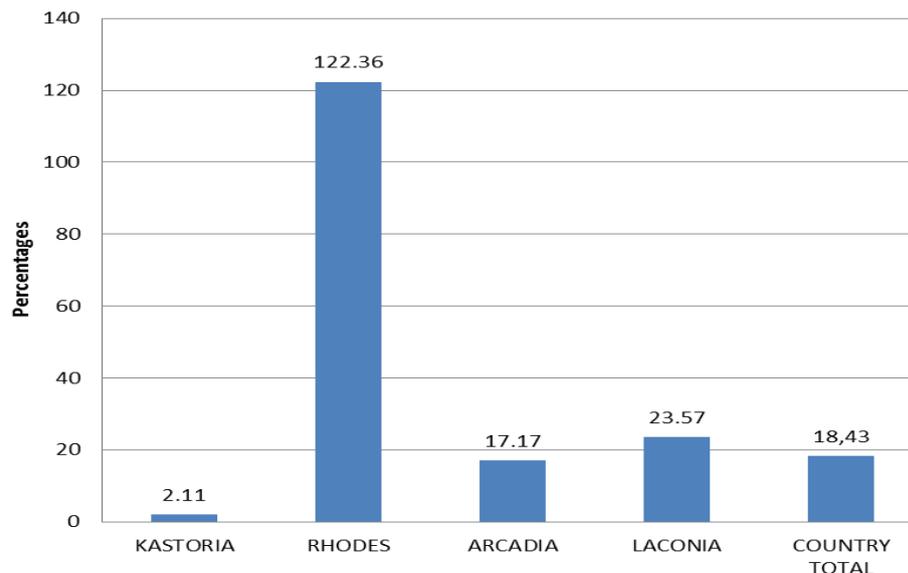
Changes in the number of salaried employees between 2013 and 2015 evolved accordingly (Figure 8): Arcadia and Laconia recorded increases of 17.17% and 23.57% respectively; Kastoria recorded a marginal increase of 2.11% and at the other extreme, salaried employment in Rhodes rose by 122.36%. On the national scale, the increase was 18.43% over the same period. These positive trends could be considered as evidence of labour market resilience attributed to local production structures and industrial specialization. Marginal employment gains in Kastoria are related to the decline of the dominant local manufacturing enterprises; while skyrocketing employment rise in Rhodes is the outcome of prospering local business in tourism.

Figure 7. Change (%) in entrepreneurship, 2013-2015



Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Annual data for 2013, 2014 and 2015

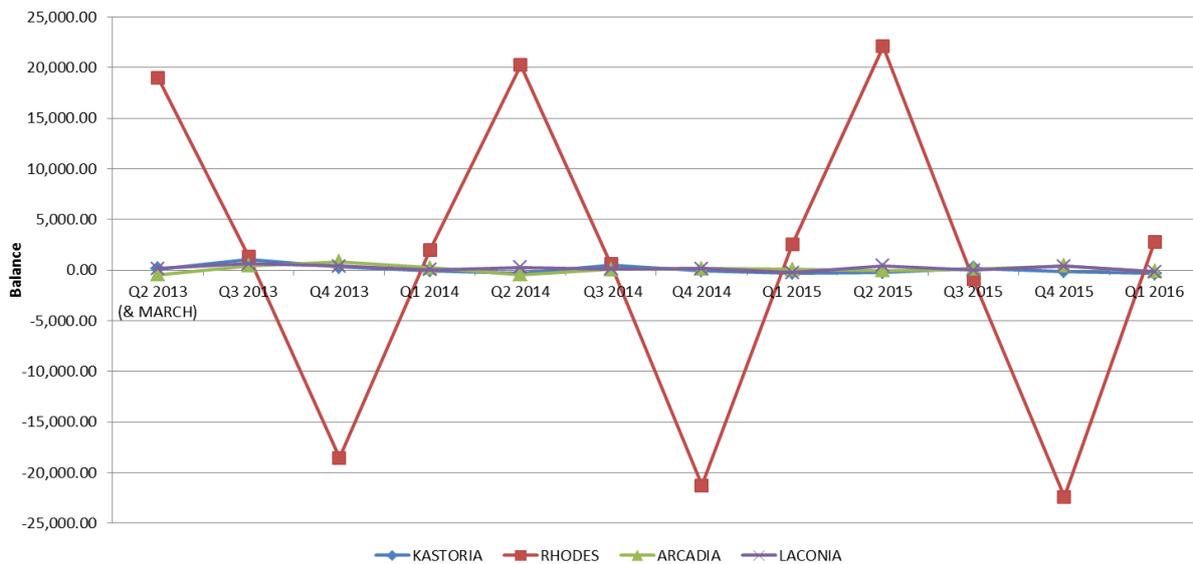
Figure 8. Change (%) in salaried employment, 2013-2015



Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Annual data for 2013, 2014 and 2015

Yet, a valuable contribution was provided by the analysis of ERGANI data for the balance of salaried employment flows (hirings and lay-offs) in each target-locality during 2013-2016. Results show that in Kastoria the balance is mainly negative as hirings are outweighed by lay-offs. In Arcadia and Laconia the balance ranges near zero values throughout the period of reference, as lay-offs counteract hirings. In contrast, the dramatic fluctuations depicted in Rhodes should be attributed to the seasonal pattern of employment in tourism (rotating between peak summer and low winter periods). (Figure 9)

Figure 9. Balance of salaried employment flows (hirings and lay-offs), 2013-2016



Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Monthly data on flows of salaried employment

As indicated, the consideration of qualitative dimensions regarding the pattern of labour relations, earnings and precariousness (among others), is necessary to safely verify, or not, employment resilience even in cases of high business and hiring rates – e.g. in the prosperous tourism economy of Rhodes.

3. Adopting PAR: methodology and results

Based on the above research results, representatives of different stakeholders in Sparta were invited by the researchers to participate in an action research group in order to first deepen the analysis of un/underemployment at the specific locality and secondly to discuss action plans to address this problem.

The PAR process starts with learning about and understanding the problem at hand through a collaborative process, during which researchers and participants co-construct knowledge. One of the differences of PAR and other research methods is that the subject of investigation is a problem which affects directly the participants in the process. The practices, attitudes and mechanisms, used by participants themselves in their everyday work and have an impact on the problem, are also investigated.

The aim of PAR is change, individual, collective and/or social, which comes as the result of the self- and critical awareness of the participants in the process which is empowering and eventually leads to action. Thus, action is an indispensable part of the PAR cycles (data collection, reflection, action, data collection...); researchers and participants collaborate in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process (MacIntyre 2008). Thereby, PAR is a research method where participants have the ownership

of the process, the information and the results produced are internalized by stakeholders-participants and therefore are able to use the knowledge produced.

It is important to underline here that this collaborative research requires a high degree of mutual respect and trust between researchers and participants that can be achieved through dialogue and ensured with the use of the appropriate methods and tools during the different stages of the process, namely the identification of participants, the initial investigation stage of the problem, the action planning stage, the implementation and finally the evaluation of the action implementation and its results.

Thus, in our case study and in order to ensure that participants consider issues thoughtfully and formulate appropriate responses which represent them, the researchers not only created the space and time for a meaningful dialogue but they employed common tactics used in action research practices in order to empower participants (e.g. interview questions were distributed to participants prior to all interviews conducted, all meetings were voice-recorded and transcribed after each meeting). The transcripts were not only a valuable source of raw data for the reflective analysis stage of the research but also assisted in the planning of future sessions.

Moreover, alternative evaluation techniques were used, with the evaluation criteria determined together with the participants who reviewed their own work, the results and the means used, in accordance to the aims set at the beginning of their research. It is important to underline here that in PAR the role of the researchers is not that of the expert who measures results. Their roles are: collaborators, advisors, tutors, coordinators, who enable participants to create a self-critical and thinking team of reflective and active citizens.

The PAR process created the appropriate environment for the group in Sparta to discuss collaborative local development actions which would address the problem of un/under/employment in a sustainable way. The group chose one of the actions discussed to implement: that was the SpARTathlo intervention. In what follows we provide some information regarding the synthesis of the PAR group in Sparta and the PAR process conducted; finally, we focus on the action designed by the group, its objectives, expected results and its evaluation.

3.1. Adopting PAR: methodology and results

The identification of participants is a critical step of the PAR process, as they become co-researchers, on an equal footing with researchers (McNiff, 2013). In our case, we identified stakeholders who could contribute to a meaningful discussion about the problem of un/underemployment at the local level and could also generate possibly innovative and collaborative action plans to address the problem.

The main criteria employed for the identification and final selection of the suitable participants were:

- Their position in organisations / agencies relevant to the research question and their power within these organisations to make changes. They were not necessarily the directors of the organisations but they had a degree of influence formal or informal to the decision-making level of the organisation.
- Their will to contribute to the process and undertake the role of co-researcher.
- For the un/underemployed participants of the group the main criterion was their will to actively contribute to the process. It should be added that although it was not considered as a

criterion from the beginning the two un/underemployed participants were also young (under 40 years old) highly educated (master degree holders) with some working experience.

The initial members of the PAR group were the following: two representatives of the Sparta municipality (both were members of the municipal council, one of them was the mayor's adviser for agricultural development, the other was the President of the municipal committees for primary and secondary education with extensive experience in local development project planning, the president of the Federation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (OEBEL), the president of the Chamber of Laconia, representative of Greek Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED), representatives of the NGO Activate Now, the CEO of a local company for community waste management with approximately 1.000 citizens shareholders (as this participation could also open a discussion about cyclical economy and the use of local resources for sustainable development), a representative of the local directorate of antiquities and cultural heritage, and two young women, one expert in digital marketing and unemployed and the other with a degree in economics and underemployed.

In the second meeting the group was enlarged after the participation of a farmer and President of a local cooperative of farmers and the President of the local workers' center. The President of Laconia's union of hotels was invited to participate but although he expressed his interest in the process he could not participate in the meetings as he lived far from Sparta. However, the researchers had several discussions with him and he was eventually added to the mailing list of the group, so as to be able to follow the work. This proved to be a good strategy as in due course he was engaged in the implementation of the action trying and partly succeeding in mobilizing hotels of the town to support the action.

3.2. The PAR process

After the identification stage the PAR group in Sparta conducted regular weekly meetings with a clear agenda every time. The first two meetings provided the space to participants to get to know each other better as persons and organisations. More specifically, PAR group participants collected and analyzed data about un/underemployment at their region. Data included the results discussed in the first sections of the paper as well as the results produced through their own research, about the role and actions of their organisations and their effectiveness or failures to address this problem. In the third and fourth meetings, the group was invited to put forward ideas of actions / projects they would be interested in organizing in a collaborative way and that could contribute to local development and thereby address the problem of unemployment.

3.3. The Action designed and implemented

In Sparta the action which was selected among other ideas and was actually implemented was "SpARTathlo - Routes of Taste, Trade and Art". In what follows the SpARTathlo intervention is briefly outlined.

SpARTathlo - Routes of Taste, Trade and Art

SpARTathlo was proposed by the NGO Activate Now, one of the participant-organisations in the PAR Group in Sparta which also led the implementation process. Activate Now was established by nine, young (under 35 years old) well educated (MAs and PhD) professionals from different fields (architecture, civil engineering, education, public lighting, digital marketing etc.) Eight of the nine members of the organisation are women and five of them are underemployed. The organisation was established with a double aim: firstly, to create new

ways and loci of co-existence through collaborative praxis organised with the participation (open assemblies) and in a non-hierarchical structure. Secondly, to address common problems (including the problem of the waste of human resources) by investing in local human capital and knowledge as well as other forms of intangible capital.

SpARTathlo was suggested as an intervention that could strengthen local business and boost the number of visitors in the town during the three days of a very special event: the ultra-distance foot race of Spartathlon that takes place every year at the end of September.

SpARTathlo intervention was named after the Spartathlon race and it involved the establishment of a network of different places in the town including restaurants, shops, architect offices, art galleries and crafts shops. The members of the network were invited by the project team to develop something special related to Spartathlon and if possible connect it somehow with the concept of the race. As an example, several restaurants and cafes in the town prepared special dishes and drinks named after the history of ancient Sparta. Architects' offices prepared to show maps of the ancient town of Sparta they had and special photos from archeological sites.

A total of 56 places responded positively to the invitation to participate in the network and they formed three routes in the town, namely the routes of Taste, Trade and Art, which were portrayed in a special map. Indeed, the network was communicated through a) a digital map, b) an analog map, c) special signs in the entrance of the shops with the logo of the action and d) an art installation in the center of the town. The printed maps were distributed to the athletes and their companions before they came to Sparta and maps were also available at selected spots of the town during the days of SpARTathlo.

Additionally, a promotional marketing campaign was organised through the communicational channels of social media and mass media. All the places of the network were photographed and short texts about their participation in the network were prepared which were used in a campaign for their promotion through social media (facebook pages of the shops, blog of Activate Now) and mass media.

SpARTathlo was selected on the basis of the analysis that small business in services and retail sectors in the town face serious challenges due to the forces of globalization (e.g. digital retailing, cheap imported products) and the detrimental impact of the regulatory adjustments applied as part of debt-relief memoranda (e.g. tax increases, difficult institutional environment for entrepreneurs). Thus, the SpARTathlo intervention advanced a strategy to address these challenges putting the emphasis on valuing local products, local producers, artisans and artists, and using innovative (by local standards) marketing tools and techniques (e.g. digital marketing, social media) to strengthen business. This approach involved the optimization of local human capital who could contribute to the above. Additionally, the SpARTathlo intervention was considered a key investment for future local development as the services sector dominates the broader region of Sparta and it also looks quite promising in terms of employment growth. This estimation is based on the analysis that there are available resources in the broader region of Sparta which are so far not exploited for social and economic development, such as the Spartathlon race. As a matter of fact, the Spartathlon race has been perceived by the PAR group as a territorial resource representing a competitive advantage for the town which has not been used until now although it has the potential to strengthen local economy and attract tourism.

Spartathlon is the historic race going from Athens to Sparta (246km) following the footsteps of the messenger Fidiades who went to Sparta to announce the victory of the Athenians against the Persians in the Marathon battle in 490 B.C. The Spartathlon race was revived in 1984 by John Foden, a British RAF Wing Commander and his colleagues and

takes place every year in late September. Since then it has been organised by the International Spartathlon Association (I.S.A), a company established for this purpose, which is not located in Sparta. Neither the town of Sparta, that is the municipality, nor its institutions and citizens, actively participate in this special event. Even the official awards ceremony takes place in Athens.

Another important local resource to be used in the proper way is the brand name "Sparta": the modern town is built on the location of the ancient Sparta, a prominent city-state in ancient Greece. Sparta also lies close to other famous archeological sites, like Mystras, a World Heritage Site.

Thus, the intended objectives of the SpARTathlo intervention have been the following: firstly, for the town and primarily its institutions and the local market to acquire ownership of an event closely connected to its historic past and creative present and capitalise on it. Secondly, to introduce innovation in terms of new products and new methods of marketing, successful advertisement and promotion of the 56 members of the network. Thirdly, to revive the town's market and increase the economic profit for the local shops - members of the network during the three days of Spartathlo, by attracting more customers from the approximately 2.500 athletes and their companions and the local community too. Fourthly, to draw upon existing dynamic skills and qualifications of human resources of the town, such as the members of the NGO Activate Now.

SpARTathlo evaluated

In what follows we present the evaluation conducted after the end of the action by a researcher with the support of the project implementation team, vis- à-vis the intended results of the action.

Result 1: The first intended result of SpARTathlo intervention was for the town to acquire ownership over and capitalize on an important territorial resource involving a strong heritage dimension: the sports event of Spartathlon race. The target group were more specifically the local institutions and the local market. The implementation team at the beginning set an indicator of 50 members-participants in the network and eventually managed to include 56 shops / craftsmen / artists. So, the initial goal set was fully achieved - the number 50 was considered to be manageable given the time frame and the available resources.

Another strong indicator of the activation of the network members is the number of those who created new products and/or new promotional actions: 23 of the 43 members of the network involved in the evaluation, claimed they created new products and 3 members created new promotional events.

Additionally, participation in the action meant participation in the design and implementation of a local development endeavour. Interestingly enough, when the members of the network asked during the evaluation conducted after the end of the intervention "did you feel that you participated in a collective action planning process for local development", 67.44% answered that they felt they were involved "very much," 11.62% stated "enough", 6.79% answered "moderate", 4.65% answered "a little" and 9.30% answered "no". Further investigation of these responses demonstrates that the question surprised many participants as they had not conceived this dimension of the action. But after explanations were provided they changed their initial reaction and answered "very much" and "enough".

Result 2: The second intended result of SpARTathlo intervention was to introduce innovation not only in terms of new products as we saw above but also in terms of new methods of marketing, successful advertisement and promotion of the 56 members of the network. SpARTathlo identified a new target group of customers and sought to innovate based on this.

This result was also achieved to a certain extent. It was the first time that a well-designed both online interactive and printed map of the town including its businesses was created. This was underlined by all 43 members of the network who participated in the evaluation. The online map received more than 16.000 hits during the three days of the event. Furthermore, although the majority of the members of the network already had a facebook page, the SpARTathlo promotional campaign through facebook and other social media was assessed by them as successful.

More specifically, when the members of the network were asked to evaluate whether the SpARTathlo intervention contributed to the advertisement of their business the majority (58.13%) answered "very much" and "sufficiently" and interviewed members of the network stated that the relevant benefits are to be found at different levels. Most of them said that there was a particular increase of mobility on their facebook pages some days before and during the days of SpARTathlo and they even received an increased number of "friend requests" with different than usual characteristics. A very satisfied member of the network, said he received "many likes and friend requests not only from regular citizens but also from colleagues and other professionals" and he was sure that "the action will yield more benefits in the near future." Other professionals reported that several clients and acquaintances met them and told them that they had seen the relevant posts advertisements and learned through them about the specific products created for the SpARTathlo network. They also expressed satisfaction and admiration for their inventiveness and creativity.

On the other hand, 16.27% of those who participated in the evaluation answered that they did not get any benefit in terms of promotion of their shop / work. Taking a closer look at their case, we see that they belong to different categories. Three members of the network are not familiar at all with social media and therefore did not attend this part of the work of SpARTathlo. Two members of the network were not happy about the photo shooting and the overall visibility activities and two members mentioned errors on the map concerning their presentation. Finally, six network members replied that they did not know if there was any promotion at all and how this was conducted.

Many professionals-members of the network stated that they were strengthened by the SpARTathlo action because they improved their marketing strategy. They understood the significance of catchy slogans and the power of photography and social media. Several members of the network indicated that the action mobilized and inspired them with new ideas not only for the three days of SpARTathlo, but for the future as well (e.g. for new products, better promotion, partnerships).

Result 3. The increase of the number of customers and sales of the members of the network during the 3 days of SpARTathlo as well as through the marketing activities implemented in the long run.

Regarding the increase of the customers base, the evaluation results indicate that the goal was not reached. It is a mere 15% which states that they observed a big/sufficient increase in the number of foreign customers in their shops and about 18% respond the same for local customers. A few members of the network said that several foreign customers appeared in their shops with the SpARTathlo maps in their hands. On the other hand, 75% of the professionals participating in the evaluation answered that there was no increase in foreign customers at all during the days of SpARTathlo and 50% say they have not benefited at all in terms of local customers. Regarding the increase of local customers, a small percentage (about 7%) replied "do not know" because, as they explained, there was definitely an increase, but many factors may have contributed to this, not only the SpARTathlo action.

Nevertheless, as it was explained above and discussed with the PAR group in the evaluation session, the evaluation of this specific aspect of the action should take into account that the increase in customers should also be considered a long-term goal that cannot be fully achieved through one action within 3 days. The data of the survey conducted demonstrate that SpARTathlo contributed significantly towards this direction and equally importantly, it highlighted the ways in which the long-term objective can be achieved. Additionally, the response of many network members made it clear that the promotion / advertising done through the activity will continue to produce results for them in the coming months, as it has certainly increased their visibility at the local market and beyond that.

This partial failure also reveals a weakness in the needs assessment and planning process of the intervention. The athletes are simply too tired to go around and visit the town and its market straight after an ultramarathon. Furthermore, the program of the athletes / accompanying persons is fixed and the free time spent in the town is limited. The attraction of the athletes and their companions as the main target group of the intervention could be modified. Perhaps instead the Spartathlon race could be exploited as an event that will attract other visitors. As the main target group set from the beginning was the athletes and their companions, it should be noted that the Spartathlon was not sufficiently advertised in Laconia, in the broader region (Messinia, Arkadia) or across the country, for that matter, so that the town of Sparta to capitalize on the event and attract more visitors from nearby regions and thereby generate the expected financial results for the shops / restaurants.

Result 4. The fourth intended result of the SpARTathlo action was the capitalization on existing dynamic skills and qualifications of human resources of the town.

The SpARTathlo action made possible the optimization of existing highly - qualified human resources, that is the team of Activate Now and its collaborators. Had the pioneering action not been implemented, this human potential would have remained untapped and this capital would be "wasted".

SpARTathlo empowered the young professionals of the organization Activate Now in many more ways. First, it was clearly at a higher scale than other actions the organization used to undertake so far, as it involved greater public exposure and risk taking. Despite the increased difficulty involved, the work conducted was professional and the overall outcome quite positive. It provided the young professionals of Activate Now the opportunity to demonstrate their capacities and acquire the self-confidence necessary to keep on working on similar local development projects. The recognition of the organisation in the town grew and its record was enhanced. After the implementation of the action, representatives of the municipality in the PAR group made several suggestions to the organization for future projects it could undertake.

Additionally, the SpARTathlo action provided an excellent opportunity for the mobilisation of the skills of another group of (mostly) young (and mostly underemployed) professionals in the broader region of Sparta: 4 photographers, 1 web designer, 1 digital marketing expert, 1 image consultant expert. All of them contributed to the action implementation using their expertise, getting recognition for their skills and expanding their professional networks.

To conclude, this collaborative action also addressed, in a sustainable manner, the problem of un/underemployment at least for the specific group of young professionals involved in the planning and implementation of the action and created new prospects for local economic development which would create new employment opportunities in the town.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP 2010), constant technological change induces a decrease of low-skilled jobs and a considerable growth in occupations requiring higher skills; employment opportunities for individuals with low education levels are expected to significantly decrease. However, the great crisis and recessionary shock have delayed or even reversed this trajectory, especially in the more vulnerable EU economies. Youth unemployment is soaring and its share of low-qualified people is high. Since the crisis outbreak, the Greek economy has showed significant hysteresis in industrial innovation and competitiveness, while at the same time its highly-skilled labour force is exported (brain-drain), with very low returns (Herrmann and Kritikos 2013, Labrianidis 2014).

As argued, the Greek business sector cannot provide employment opportunities that meet the qualifications and satisfy the career aspirations of the country's most valuable labour force. Instead, job offers - in all sectors and regions - undervalue skilled labour and professional expertise through the increasing flexibilisation of employment and its negative impact on job security and wages. Expanding atypical employment has led to acute compression of working time and costs; part-time and rotation work have risen at the expense of typical full-time work; full-time employment contracts are increasingly converted to casual work arrangements. But the deterioration of employment and work below a certain threshold will lead the Greece to a path of limited growth in sectors of low added value.

Our results indicate the need for an innovative approach towards inclusive and sustainable socio-economic recovery, through the smart capitalisation of available local resources - particularly, human capital.

The definition of innovation according to the revised Oslo Manual is "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations" (OECD, 2005). The above analysis demonstrated that SpARTathlo contributed to both product and marketing innovation of the SpARTathlo network members. More specifically, it contributed to product innovation with the introduction of significantly improved products and services concerning both their characteristics or intended uses (e.g. new restaurant and cafe menus addressing a different target group, i.e. the athletes and their companions as well as the visitors of the town during the three days of Spartathlon race). Additionally, it made a contribution regarding marketing innovation with the implementation of a new marketing method (e.g. with the use of social media and the development of an online interactive map) thereby introducing significant changes in product promotion.

It is argued that although the SpARTathlo intervention was designed for the three days of the Spartathlon race, it paved the way for a discussion on innovative strategies for both retail and services industries. The above analysis has demonstrated that service industries and retail shops can gain substantially if they open themselves to cooperation and information sharing. The network established was in fact an informal cluster which made possible the use of external knowledge. Highly skilled local human resources were successfully mobilised in order to make possible the implementation of the action, opening new directions for local development.

The SpARTathlo action that emerged through the collaborative work of the PAR group in Sparta and was implemented through cooperation of the local institutions not only largely achieved the expected results but also created an experience in the town that should be decoded and further capitalized in the direction of local economic and social development

(e.g. the town's resources in view of becoming a gastronomic destination and a sport's touristic resort).

A final conclusion that emerges through the above discussion is that Participatory Action Research can be a productive method for collaborative planning and implementation of local development projects bridging theory and practice. Participatory action research in Sparta provided the suitable environment for the appreciation of the local knowledge and the capacity of local human capital to generate solutions to social problems, such as un/underemployment.

Funding

The research is supported by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Through the EEA Grants and Norway Grants, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway contribute to reducing social and economic disparities and to strengthening bilateral relations with the beneficiary countries in Europe. The three countries cooperate closely with the EU through the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA). For the period 2009-14, the EEA Grants and Norway Grants amount to €1.79 billion. Norway contributes around 97% of the total funding. Grants are available for NGOs, research and academic institutions, and the public and private sectors in the 12 newest EU member states, Greece, Portugal and Spain. There is broad cooperation with donor state entities, and activities may be implemented until 2016. Key areas of support are environmental protection and climate change, research and scholarships, civil society, health and children, gender equality, justice and cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the EEA grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, that supported this research.

We are thankful to the Editor and anonymous referees for useful comments and critique.

EEA-GR07/3694: Supported by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway



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