

HEALTHY FOOD FOR HEALTHY BUSINESS

With just under one in two people already working as self-employed in Greece¹, entrepreneurship policy has to be aimed at improving the quality of business start-ups . One of the ways for doing this is to encourage business creation in promising economic growth areas. The Cooperation Plus EQUAL partnership has tested an ambitious project involving a theme park in organic and traditional craft foods, which links one of the poorer suburbs of Athens to five outlying regions that supply many of the products. Unemployed local women have set up fifteen small firms in the theme park. Their success could provide a model for other parts of Greece.

The project developed by Cooperation Plus responds to several specific features of the Greek economy. Firstly women are clearly a priority target group. Unemployment rates among women are 50% higher than that of men and over one in three young women are unemployed².

Secondly, much of the unemployment is concentrated in the poorer suburbs and municipalities surrounding Athens (the metropolitan area of Athens contains over five million inhabitants - nearly half the Greek population). Recently, there have been considerable improvements in roads and infrastructure but the poorer areas still badly need economic initiatives that can help their citizens recover a sense of confidence in the future.

Finally, the outlying regions and rural areas of Greece still face many problems in creating businesses outside the expanding tourist sector. Around twenty percent of the labour force still work in agriculture and Greece has major strengths in high quality, traditional foods and important opportunities in organic food production.

EQUAL has brought together a series of key actors representing each of these issues. Three specialised training organisations dealt with needs of the unemployed women; 5 municipalities represented the needs of the poorer communities outside Athens as well as those in the outlying regions; while three prestigious academic and technical organisations concentrated on the organic food.

Nikos Krimnianiotis, coordinator and “father” of the Cooperation Plus EQUAL project says that *“we followed the example of an incubator for immigrants that we saw in Stockholm and adapted it to Greek culture... we wanted to show that it was possible to do more than just subsidising training and start-ups because in eight out of ten times these end in failure”*. The partnership between urban and rural regions set up by Cooperation Plus is exploring new ways to “promote a more entrepreneurial culture and create a supportive environment for SMEs” in a way that also clearly contributes ‘social and territorial cohesion’ and ‘inclusive labour markets.’³

¹ 42.3% of the Greek labour force was self employed in 2003. Employment in Europe. 2004. European Commission.

² 14.2% of women are unemployed compared to 9,3% of men. Unemployment rates among young women were 35.6% in 2003. In addition only 42% of women in Greece are employed compared to 54% in the EU 15. Source as above.

³ Micro economic guideline 10 of the EU's Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs specifically refers to the need to “promote a more entrepreneurial culture and create a supportive environment for SMEs”. Employment guidelines 10 and 18 refer to ‘social and territorial cohesion’ and ‘inclusive labour markets.’

A THEME PARK BY THE UNEMPLOYED

According to Evangelos Christofilakis the new mayor of Ano Liosia, *“not everyone supported the idea of the project in the past but now are wholeheartedly behind it...It creates a pool of entrepreneurs who themselves generate more employment...At the same time, the municipality becomes a centre for selling organic products which have many prospective clients ...This has a multiplier effect on unemployment which is very important.”*

When you visit the park it is easy to see why five mayors and the Efxini Poli (Hospitable City) Network of Municipalities have become partners to the project. The “Natura” food centre is itself set in the attractive courtyard of what used to be the stables of the King’s summer house. These



were specially redesigned to house fifteen enterprises selling different kinds of organic and traditional Greek products. On one side of the courtyard, there is a restaurant which offers a mouth-watering range of the best dishes from around the country. Next to it is the office for testing the official certification of the products on sale as well as the EQUAL headquarters and business advice centre.

Finally, on the other side of the courtyard there is a centre for children to play and carry out “environmentally friendly experiments” under the supervision of a trained member of staff. This space was originally designed as a crèche for both staff and visitors but there was less demand than expected. So it is being used to provide special classes and activities around

recycling and other environmental issues for local schools. Over seventy schools used the facilities between January and May of 2005 – far more than the organisers had expected. Based on initial reactions they calculate that they can more than triple the number of school visits from 2-3 per week to 2 per day.

One of the great attractions of the project is that it is located in a hundred hectare protected park with a series of lakes, canals and venues for holding events. The lakes are rich in birdlife and the World Wildlife Fund has an office in the park from which it organises many activities. This means that it is possible to follow a range of itineraries in the park: following through various natural cycles, seeing the possibilities of recycling different types of industrial products, shopping in the Natura Centre and ending with music and a delicious meal at the restaurant.

A new highway means that the theme park is no more than thirty minutes away from any of the four million people that live in the Attika basin. There is also a rail connection which links with the Athens metro. “Hundreds of thousands” of people are said to attend the events organised by Natura Centre and other tenants of the park. However, custom is heavily concentrated in the weekends and summer months.

NATURA’S WAY FROM UNEMPLOYMENT TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Cooperation Plus Partnership have built on the assets described above to create an entrepreneurial itinerary for fifteen unemployed women. These in turn provide a door to the Athenian market for organic food producers in 5 different regions of Greece.

The partnership started by advertising for candidates to follow its training and business advice with a view to setting up a shop in the Natura Centre. Despite the favourable conditions being offered, Nikos Krimnianiotis says that *“many people were interested but when we explained that*

they would have to take some risks many pulled back and we had to re-advertise. The candidates were all unemployed and from socially sensitive groups. We interviewed mainly to assess their drive to become an entrepreneur.” In the end, 20 potential entrepreneurs were chosen. All were women.

The twenty women were provided with a specially designed three months training course which not only covered general enterprise development but also specific training on the organic and traditional food sector. One third of the time was spent on-the-job training in a traditional or organic food shop in the Athens area so that they could obtain hand-on experience of the business, its suppliers and its market. They also took part in food fairs in Thessaloniki and Athens.

While the women were being trained the partnership used EQUAL funds to rehabilitate and equip the old stables to a common design. The resources they could dedicate to this were limited but nevertheless each shopping module in the centre was prepared to attractive and professional standards. They also designed the Natura Shop common logo.

During the course, the women prepared a business plan and decided on the focus of their different shops. These could either be geographical – selling the products of one of the five partner regions – or thematic – concentrating, for example, on wine, fruit and vegetables, cosmetics, toys or children clothes. In the end, 15 of the 20 women were chosen to run the shops in the centre. However, many either took on their fellow students or other people as partners as Nikos Krimniantotis says *“there are really 23 entrepreneurs altogether”*.

The fifteen women chosen were able to use the shop spaces and common facilities of the Natura Shop free of charge. However, they had to register as a self employed entrepreneur or company and be responsible for their income, profit or loss through the purchase and sale of their stock. Maria Grisina who now runs the organic vegetable shop describes her experience in the following terms: *“I learned so much that I did not know before - all about the environment and organic food – about how to deal with suppliers and how to sell to customers”*. Similarly, Sia Galanopoulou who manages the shop selling food from the Island of Chios comments that *“this has changed my way of life now I take more decisions but I also have more obligations and I cannot always predict what will happen”*.



The EQUAL partnership stood by the women to make the initial contacts and purchases with suppliers. It would have been very difficult for them to gain the trust of producers without the backing of a larger organisation. The five regional entrepreneurial support centres set up by the municipal partners in Crete, Chios, Imathia, Metsovo and Evia also helped to select the best products and producers, to develop contacts and organise the logistics.

Miltiadis Hatzigiannakis the mayor of Skyros, explained the importance of these regional support centres: *“During the summer, the population of our island multiplies by ten – but we have no way of reaching this market with our own products. There is a cooperative but it is not doing well. We have many excellent craft products – pottery, woodcarving, embroidery and a lot of potential for organic meat, cheese and olive oil - but the producers need organisation and direction. The regional support centre provides advice to entrepreneurs and we hope to set up our own organic food incubator. It will help build on what already exists”*.

RISKS AND POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TRANSFERRING THE NATURA SHOP MODEL

The Cooperation Plus partnership has not had an easy ride; if were not for the commitment and determination of its members, workers and the women entrepreneurs – they would not have got where they are. “*We believe in what we do*” is probably the phrase that visitors will hear, and experience, most when they visit the centre. It is clearly present in the quality and care taken in the product displays.

The location, as we have seen, has many advantages but it is an out-of-town site. This means that the custom is highly seasonal and concentrated in the summer and warm sunny weekends. The partnership is aware that it must draw in more customers by promoting the theme park, organising more events, and attracting other types of visitors. This is why they are planning to expand their highly successful work with schools.

However, while the organic food market is growing in Greece, it is also still relatively small. Even though they can have a magnet effect, it is not easy to sustain 15 similar enterprises in the same location. The companies have only been trading for one year which is too short to be able to judge the long term viability of a business. However, this is also the most dangerous time for any enterprise. The official external evaluation of EQUAL estimates that around half the enterprises will survive over three years under current circumstances. The women interviewed confirmed this picture.

These figures are around the average for start-ups and they might even be considered as reasonably good considering that the project is tackling a new sector, in a new area, in difficult times with inexperienced unemployed people. If a certain number of women decide to leave, the premises can be handed over to a new entrepreneurs so the project can survive. However, there is clearly a risk that the human cost of such decisions could jeopardise the entire initiative.

The partnership and the entrepreneurs are responding to this situation both by promoting the Natura shop more actively among different target publics and by reorganising the shops and their product lines. However, the project will probably need several more year’s public support based on a reevaluation of their marketing and commercial plans to be sure that they can be successful.

The possible benefits of supporting the implementation phase through to its logical conclusion are high because, in the words of Tina Orfanidou, the EQUAL evaluator, the project has considerable potential for horizontal transfer to other areas and sectors. For example, the partnership between municipalities in urban and predominantly rural regions covering both the supply and demand for certain products is extremely innovative. We have seen that both types of municipality are interested in testing variations of the Natura shop incubator model in their areas. Similarly, the model could fit with certain policies being developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Employment to promote the social economy.

CONTACT

List of National partners: [13 partners](#)

Transnational partners: TCA [1311 GENESIS](#) - Imprenditorialita` estrema per una vita indipendente (Italy), Gelijke kansen voor plattelandsvrouwen (Netherlands)

DP name: Cooperation Plus

DP ID: [GR-200883](#)

Contact: Nikolaos Krimnianiotis

Telephone: ++30 210 2482697-8 & 2486041-45

E-mail: genesis@mitnet.gr

Website: www.equal-genesis.gr/naturashop