

EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN GREECE: A NEW THINKING IN CRISIS TIME?

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Abstract

Over the past few years, the tourist industry has come to be recognised as a way of providing strategic support for sustainable local business development. The contribution of Greek tourism in the country's economy has been highlighted several times over the years especially during these turbulent economic times. In these hard economic times, two terms have surfaced that could create added value and promote local business development in Greece, although quite familiar in western countries for several years. Experiential tourism on one hand, is an outgrowth of a global movement toward experiential learning, whereby people create meaning through direct experience. On the other hand, social entrepreneurship is the field in which entrepreneurs tailor their activities to be directly tied with the ultimate goal of creating social value. Therefore the question to be answered is that of socially capitalising on local tourism development could become a guide for sustainable development that could combat the impacts of the economic crisis?

Keywords: *Experiential Tourism, Social Entrepreneurship, Strategic Management, Tourism Economics, Social Inclusion*

JEL Classification: *E26, L31, L83*

Introductory thoughts

In today's global, informational economy of rapid change and crisis, opportunities and threats arise equally for tourism organisations as well as tourism destinations. Unexploited emerging consumer markets (ECM's) on the one hand, and fragmented, dominated markets

in the western world on the other call for a more than ever need for competent and effective management and strategy.

‘As tourism destinations become more substitutable due to increasing competition in global tourism markets, destination personality is seen as a viable metaphor for building destination brands and crafting a unique identity for tourism places’ [1; 2; 3; 4 adapted from 5].

The Middle - East problem, the Syria issue and the North Africa conflicts diverted a great flow of tourists towards the Mediterranean area but it seems that Greece has seen a fall in demand, according to tourism specialists. If some reasons could be mentioned for this latter, first of all would be bad press, economic problems and generally turbulent environment, strikes and street clashes that have occurred in Greece over the past year stand only as a few of the reasons that have contributed to its fall in popularity unfortunately at a time when many people were booking their summer holidays. But is this the reality or there is a hidden history behind each destination? Is this now the perfect opportunity for Greece in order to capitalise its tourism product to invest in different and diverse techniques in the fond of economic crisis and the increasing neighbor competition while providing original experiences to potential visitors?

The concept of ‘social entrepreneurship’ has been rapidly emerging in the private, public and non-profit sectors over the last few years, and interest in social entrepreneurship continues to grow. Currently, the non-profit sector is facing intensifying demands for improved effectiveness and sustainability in light of diminishing funding from traditional sources and increased competition for these scarce resources. At the same time, the increasing concentration of wealth in the private sector is promoting calls for increased corporate social responsibility and more proactive responses to complex social problems, while governments at all levels are grappling with multiple demands on public funds.

In light of this, social entrepreneurship is emerging as an innovative approach for dealing with complex social needs. With its emphasis on problem-solving and social innovation, socially entrepreneurial activities blur the traditional boundaries between the public, private and non-profit sector, and emphasize hybrid models of for-profit and non-profit activities. Promoting collaboration between sectors is implicit within social entrepreneurship, as is developing radical new approaches to solving old problems. Social entrepreneurship has a strong intuitive appeal, and several recently documented examples highlight its potential in a variety of contexts. However, this is still a very new area, and research on social entrepreneurship lags far behind the practice. Political decision-makers consider entrepreneurship in tourism to be a means of local business development on the fringes, for instance in the European Union (6; 7; 8).

An insight into social entrepreneurship

Key books and articles on entrepreneurship often begin by establishing that there is no common general and universally accepted definition of the concept of entrepreneurship [9; 10; 11; 12; 13]. 'To define' means 'to limit' and 'to narrow down'.

Defining what social entrepreneurship is, and what its conceptual boundaries are, is not an easy task. This is in part because the concept is inherently complex, and in part because the literature in the area is so new that little consensus has emerged on the topic. While the ideas fuelling social entrepreneurship are not new (Victorian private hospitals and the hospice movement are both cited as examples of social entrepreneurship [14] the term as it is used in the academic and popular literature currently encompasses a rather broad range of activities and initiatives.

Peter Drucker argues that social entrepreneurs "...change the performance capacity of society" [17] while [18] speak of 'civic entrepreneurs' as "...a new generation of leaders who forge new, powerfully productive linkages at the intersection of business, government, education and community" [18, p.1]. [19] describes social entrepreneurs as "...individuals who have a vision for social change and who have the financial resources to support their ideas....who exhibit all the skills of successful business people as well as a powerful desire for social change" [19, p. 1]. [20] presents social entrepreneurs as "...non-profit executives who pay increased attention to market forces without losing sight of their underlying mission" [20, p. 1]. [14] describe "...people who realize where there is an opportunity to satisfy some unmet need that the state welfare system will not or cannot meet, and who gather together the necessary resources (generally people, often volunteers, money and premises) and use these to 'make a difference'" [14, p. 328].

To add to the confusion of these somewhat differing descriptions of social entrepreneurs, several other terms are currently also used to describe similar activities and initiatives, including, but not limited to: social purpose venture; community wealth venture; non-profit enterprise [21]; venture philanthropy; caring capitalism; social enterprise [15; 16]; and civic entrepreneurship [18].

An insight into experiential tourism

In the age of postmodernity, the experiences of consumers play an increasingly important role in economic and social life. It is claimed that we are witnessing the emergence of the experience economy [22]. Tourism is surely one of the pioneer examples of the experience economy. From the 1970s onwards the tourist experience has become one of the most popular academic topics, reflected in the constant growth of the social science literature on

the tourist experience during the last three decades [23]. With the changing compositions of tourists, the contents of tourism experiences change. [24] indicate that experiences are subjective and personalized processes, and are related to social cultures and varied systems. Therefore, studies of tourist experiences should be based on flexible and diverse multi-discipline perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, or marketing, and could even be interdisciplinary [25].

Therefore and analysing the above mentioned, the concrete approaches to the tourist experience vary. Firstly, the tourist experience is studied from a phenomenological approach, which focuses on the subjective experience from the common-sense standpoint of the tourists [26]. Secondly, the tourist experience is treated from a Durkeimian approach and is equated to a quasi-religious, pilgrimage- like and sacred journey [27] which offers opportunities of escape from daily drudgery, constraints, anomies, and profane responsibilities [28] and of experiencing freedom [29], authenticity [30], novelty and change [31], the exotic [32], playful childishness [28], “flow” [33], meanings [31], identity [34] and myth-making [35], and so on. Thirdly, the tourist experience, as a subjective psychological process, is treated as the object that can be studied in positivist methods, as exemplified in scientific experiments and other quantitative methods [36]. Fourthly, there is a critical approach that regards the tourist experience as an institutional pleasure-seeking activity, which unconsciously contributes to the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, just like religion is regarded by Marx as the opiate of the masses, the tourist experience is similarly treated as the opiate of modern tourists [37]. Fifthly, the tourist experience is essentially treated as a particular type of gaze which incorporates the powers of institutions of tourism industry and mass media and which is trained and shaped by cultures, values and dominant discourses such as romanticism [38].

Discussion

In spite of the varying definitions of social entrepreneurship, one commonality emerges in almost every description: the ‘problem-solving nature’ of social entrepreneurship is prominent, and the corresponding emphasis on developing and implementing initiatives that produce measurable results in the form of changed social outcomes and/or impacts. For example, [39] quotes one social entrepreneur who criticized his own organization’s earlier ineffective approach, noting they originally asked “...’how many people walked in the door’ rather than ‘how many people are better off for having walked in the door?’” [39, p. 103].

[40] has produced the most complex social entrepreneurship typology to date, highlighting three broad categories of socially entrepreneurial activities. One of these is, ‘integrated social entrepreneurship,’ refers to situations in which economic activities are expressly designed to generate positive social outcomes, and where surplus generating activities

simultaneously create social benefits, and ideally create horizontal, vertical, forward or backward economic linkages. Fowler identifies the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh as an example of integrated social entrepreneurship [40, p. 645].

The contribution of Greek tourism in the country's economy has been highlighted several times over the years. However, not all the regions contribute equally. More specific, coastal areas and islands that represent the core Greek tourist product, sea and sun, are the most popular ones whereas the rest of the Greek territory remains 'unexploited' in tourism terms.

Greece is one of the most popular destinations in the Mediterranean, while tourism is considered in general a major financial activity. According to the Greek Tourism Confederation [41], Greek Tourism contributed in 2012 to the country's GPA about 16,4%. Its contribution to employment was accounted for 18,3%. More specific, the International Tourism Receipts, the same year, reached 10 billion Euros.

Due to the socioeconomic and political crisis Greece has undergone since 2009, Greek tourism was characterized by a general contraction in terms of both arrivals and receipts. However, corresponding data from the last two years show a clear tendency for the numbers to be restored [42]. Based on that fact, it is believed that tourism might be the driving force behind the country's economic recovery [43].

Acknowledging though the great effect a successful regional policy might have in boosting local tourism, regions' and prefectures' authorities do try to form specialized policies for the corresponding areas they serve. It is attempted for these policies to be custom-made and as a result, to rely on the specific and unique characteristics of the region.

Among Greece's competitive advantages are its rich cultural legacy, natural beauty and geographic diversity [44]. However, what need to be considered are the not so favorable aspects of Greek tourism. The geography of Greek tourism is one of those. It refers to the dissimilar distribution of tourists' visits. In particular, tourists prefer to visit coastal areas and islands. The fact of their concentration in such geographic regions can be explained through the establishment of Greece over the years as a destination, where visitors can enjoy sun and sea. Narrowing the selling proposition of the country in that diptych is actually the reason why tourism appears to have intense seasonality. The tourism product selected to be the flagship of Greek tourism can be offered only during the summer. Obviously, that fact generates a series of issues along with little exploitation of the already existing infrastructure and increased cost of use [45].

Greece based its tourism development—mainly on mass-market models and included the popular sun-sea-sand destinations view. However, this model is rather outdated and changes are needed. Hence, Greece started to evaluate its current tourism model, tourist activities and the need of alternative forms of tourism. Out of this evaluation, the following

several weaknesses emerged (ELKE: The Hellenic Center for Investment): i) High seasonality and high density in peak seasons, ii) Dominance of mass tourism, iii) Lack of thematic and alternative forms of tourism, iv) Unhealthy public infrastructure. On the contrary, the following strengths existed within the Greek tourism (ELKE: The Hellenic Center for Investment): i) The increase in the number of tourist arrivals; ii) Diverse natural beauty; iii) Cultural and historical heritage; and iv) Vibrant folklore and Greek way of life. But what can be done in order to eliminate seasonality, promote and present a quality product but as well combat the effects of economic crisis and maintain social cohesion?

Internationally, there have been efforts trying to establish experiential tourism and social entrepreneurship collaboration which could create tourism development, offer quality tourism product, offer an add-on experience to the visitor, combat unemployment, increase self-awareness, broaden people's horizons and produce positive psychological effects as well as promote social cohesion and a sustainable living. These efforts communicate the sentiment of 'I can do this' and 'there is an alternative future' and these efforts became a good practice to follow.

Firstly, Fifteen – founded by English celebrity chef Jamie Oliver in 2002, *Fifteen* started out as an ambitious effort to offer disadvantaged youths (aged 18-24) a means of creating better futures for themselves through the art of good food. The restaurant initiative was named for the 15 young people who originally entered apprenticeships under this program. Since the first establishment opened, *Fifteen* has:

- Delivered delicious Italian food to patrons and opened two other restaurants in Amsterdam and Cornwall
- Trained 220 young locals in the art of cooking and hospitality and inspired many of its graduates to pursue successful careers in the restaurant business
- Reinforced the value of local produce and cooking techniques

Secondly, Ladakhi Women's Travel Company – named for Ladakh, one of the most beautiful and fascinating places in northern India, the *Ladakhi Women's Travel Company* is a travel agency made up of female trekkers and travel guides. It was founded by accomplished Ladakhi trekking guide Thinlas Chorol in 2009, defying trekking industry conventions that heavily favor Ladakhi males. Over the last few years, the *Ladakhi Women's Travel Company* has:

- Organized educational and ecologically friendly tours, treks and homestays for travelers and tourists
- Inspired Ladakhi women to prove that they are equally talented in serving as tour guides in their hometown
- Encouraged local economic growth by allowing women to find work within Ladakh

Moving along, could Greece capitalise these examples in regions to establish experiential tourism and social entrepreneurship collaboration which could create tourism development, offer quality tourism product, offer an add-on experience to the visitor, combat unemployment, increase self-awareness, broaden people's horizons and produce positive psychological effects as well as promote social cohesion and a sustainable living as mentioned before?

There are always questions of why to start social enterprises and especially in tourism sector. Of course there is no longer the sole idea for entrepreneurs to be only making profits, getting bigger market shares, freedom and power anymore. This new innovation perspective is to create new kind of benefits to local community and environment and possibly create development boost in the region.

- A local community as well as a region needs always be easily met with the own community/region solution in resolving it. This kind of community/regional issues are simply related with incompetence in creating more business opportunities, job creation, transportation etc. If a social enterprise is built focusing on these needs, it will surely generate the possibilities of success and tackle down all negative effects.
- Social enterprises are the resources that become available for the needs of the local community/region and community/region will see these as an opportunity for the locals to get access in a wider range of services and possibilities.
- The community addresses local problems and wants to regenerate it and so a development trust is formed and using that social enterprise can be developed in taking on issues that should be resolved through this community consultation.

Ending the discussion it should be mentioned that, the development of social economy schemes into tourism sector provides some strong advantages such as the closeness to its clients and customers. Clients and customers nowadays want the idea of consuming the products and services with a purpose and a benefit. With this they feel connected to social enterprises more as they are willing to pay more in order for the benefit of the social issues implemented in the company itself. Towards this latter, Greek tourism policy-makers and Greek tourism entrepreneurs should focus and develop their strategy in order to tackle down seasonality but also maintain social cohesion, increase profitability and combat the effects of economic crisis.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of this study, 'as tourism destinations become more substitutable due to increasing competition in global tourism markets, destination personality is seen as a viable metaphor for building destination brands and crafting a unique identity for tourism places' (1; 2; 3; 4 adapted from 5).

Tourists' experiences can be divided into active and passive experiences based on tourists' degree of involvement. [46] suggested that both experiences are possible. Active experiences include educational or escapist experiences, as people actively participate and are involved in traveling situations, and can even create various experiences in the process. Passive experiences include esthetic and entertainment experiences. In the Greek case, a question that has to be answered is 'what type and kind of tourism Greece needs?'. The answer to that is a tourism product that could offer experiences to be passed on with word of mouth, through social media even through policy changing that could influence positively the tourists perception over Greece as a destination that offers add-on experiences.

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