

The development of Greek mountainous traditional settlements

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Abstract: - According to Aristotle, the aim of the city is edifying. The city is worthy only when it provides each citizen with the opportunity to develop through its organisation and operation his mental powers and become virtuous.

The paper focuses on the evolution of mountainous traditional settlements in Greece and studies sustainable ways to overcome the neglect most of them are currently facing. It first takes into account the evolution of the institutional and jurisprudential framework in the field, which has permitted the rehabilitation of some of the aforementioned settlements for tourist use. Next, the paper refers to the possibility of developing agrotourism as a measure which could contribute to the preservation of local crafts and human memory through the revival of customs and traditional festivities. Finally, it concludes with the proposal of an institutional framework in the European level, which could promote and ensure the protection, development, sustainability and collaboration of mountainous traditional villages in the Mediterranean Member States of the European Union.

Key-Words: - mountainous traditional settlements, sustainable development, protected site, protection of the environment, cultural heritage.

1 Introduction

According to Aristotle, the aim of the city is edifying. The city is worthy only when it provides each citizen with the opportunity to develop through its organisation and operation his mental powers and become virtuous [1].

In contemporary Greek society intense urbanisation has led to the rapid sprawl of major metropolis. This tendency has caused serious environmental damage affecting both the various components of the city landscape – natural, built and cultural environment – and the physiognomy of settlements. Therefore, central and local governments have started implementing projects of sustainable development aiming at improving the quality of life in big cities and at revitalising the countryside. One of the main targets of the above projects consists in rehabilitating traditional settlements.

These settlements were created in Southeastern Europe around 1600 and prospered during the Greek Enlightenment (1770 – 1820). They were built without planning or building restrictions but with local materials adjusted to the landscape and human scale [2]. Mountainous traditional settlements are located in high altitude and often stand on a slope ensuring

natural fortification and safety. Their general boundaries are rather unclear, since there is an interaction between the built and natural environment. This relationship alters during the course of the year. In the summer months the verdure forces its way into the settlements on every side, while in winter the nakedness of the natural landscape assimilates the villages. Flat open spaces are a pole of community life with the main cobbled mule paths converging into the village square. In addition, a prominent role in the physiognomy of these settlements is played by public buildings such as churches, chapels, public water – sources and schools. This structure is strongly associated with the dwelling house, which constitutes the main unit of the built environment. The dwelling is composed of the main house, usually on two levels, ancillary buildings and the courtyard. The predominant material is stone, which is used in the construction of bearing walls, internal and external floors, roof – covering and various individual features of the buildings. Moreover, a significant role is played by wood, which is used in door and window frames, cornices, floors in the interior as well as in the construction of the roof [3]. Among the most typical examples could be mentioned the villages of Syrrako and Vitsa in Epirus, Makrynitsa and

Tsagarada on Mount Pelion and Dimitsana and Vathia in Peloponnesus.

In view of the declaration of a protected traditional settlement a series of criteria is taken into consideration, among which figure: **a.** the historic, aesthetic, architectural and cultural value of the settlement; **b.** the development potential and **c.** benefits rendering, e.g. national, cultural, social and economic ones [4].

2 The neglect of mountainous traditional settlements

Most of the mountainous traditional settlements in Greece were abandoned in the aftermath of the Second World War and of the civil war which succeeded it. By the end of the Second World War around 1.700 villages were totally burnt, while at least 700.000 – 750.000 people were forced to leave the mountainous settlements mainly in Central and Northern Greece due to the civil war [5]. The decay of rural areas and the concentration of productive activities in cities led to the collapse of the ekistic balance, to the rapid urban sprawl of major cities and to the degradation of the natural, built and cultural environment. Since the seventies Greek governments have undertaken special projects in order to protect and develop these villages, as they constitute a component of the national cultural heritage. However, the great majority of the settlements in context are still facing a problem of depopulation despite the restoration of shells. They are inhabited in the summer months, while in winter the few remaining residents are occupied with stockbreeding [6]. The situation differs only in settlements located in close proximity to ski centres or big cities.

3 The implementation of sustainable solutions

3.1 The institutional protection of mountainous traditional settlements

The General Building Regulation of 1955 first provided for the possibility of intervening in the surrounding area of a significant building or in historic or traditional complexes as well as in traditional settlements. In addition, their protection was guaranteed through the architectural shells control. Moreover, according to *the General Building Regulation of 1973*, settlements, parts of them or separate buildings could be declared scheduled by a special decree, prescribing specific

building restrictions. Furthermore, the same statute provided for the creation of Commissions for Architectural Control. However, the decisive step towards the protection of the cultural heritage was taken in the *Greek Constitution of 1975*, according to which the protection of the natural and cultural environment was recognised as a duty of the State, while monuments, traditional areas and elements were set under the protection of the State [7]. Under the aforementioned constitutional framework the Greek legislator has introduced a series of measures aiming at both the protection and the development of traditional settlements. Among these measures figure: **a.** the establishment of zones of special incentives and zones of special aid (*L. 1337/1983*); **b.** 421 settlements were declared traditional in 1978 enjoying statutory protection. Furthermore, the *General Building Regulation of 1985* defined even more the procedure leading to the declaration of a traditional settlement or a scheduled building; **c.** stricter conditions concerning the conservation of demolished scheduled buildings and **d.** widening of the protected object (*General Building Regulation of 2000*) [8].

3.2 The jurisprudential protection

The aforementioned recognition of the duty of the State to protect the environment has given the Council of State legal grounds for developing a framework of principles aiming: **a.** at the protection of the environment; **b.** at implementing sustainable measures taking into consideration the natural potential of the site and **c.** at allowing only measures promoting the quality of life [9]. This general jurisprudential framework also applies to protected mountainous traditional settlements.

Furthermore, Greek jurisprudence insists on guaranteeing the definition of the settlements boundaries, on prescribing land use and building restrictions and on preserving and showing off the traditional physiognomy of the settlements in question. Thus their delimitation lies within the regulative competence of the President of the Republic, while emphasis is put on protecting their shells and dwelling use.

3.3 Rehabilitation for tourist use

Tourist development of traditional settlements has been quite successful, for it implies the rehabilitation of the protected villages and the participation of local population. In national scale we should mention two successful interventions carried out by the Greek Tourist Organisation (EOT)

in the traditional mountainous settlements of Vathia and Makrinitza. Both interventions led to the partial rehabilitation of the settlements in context and to the transformation of important complexes in hotels. Besides, the above interventions have been awarded the Europa Nostra Prize [10].

Nowadays tourist development of mountainous traditional settlements is orientated towards the exploitation of the cultural and natural potential of each site through the development of agrotourism. The latter includes various activities, among which figure bread baking and traditional pastry-making, loom weaving, horse-back riding and a stroll in the forest. It also facilitates the production of traditional products, which would otherwise possibly vanish, such as fruit preserves and jams, embroidery, the cultivation of aromatic herbs and pasta. Finally, it contributes to the preservation of local crafts and human memory through the revival of customs and traditional festivities [11].

4 Conclusions

The protection and development of Greek mountainous traditional settlements should be conceived and planned in compliance with the opportunities and major targets of European environmental and regional policies [12]. The main aim should consist in the creation of a network of protected mountainous traditional settlements in the Mediterranean EU Member States, since there are strong similarities concerning the landscape, the fauna and flora, the architecture, the social and economic activities of the inhabitants as well as their main preoccupations. Therefore a central European institution should come into existence composed of representatives of central and local governments of each Member State of the network.

The institution in question should register the aforementioned villages and create a European record thereof. Moreover, the rights and duties of each Member State should be explicitly defined. Among the tasks of this institution should figure: **a.** the creation of vocational training and educational centres, which could organise and hold meetings and seminars on the sustainable development of these settlements. Summer schools for pupils and students could also be envisaged; **b.** the assistance of the network via Internet and new technology; **c.** the study and promotion of rehabilitation projects and **d.** ensuring financing by the European Structural and Cohesion Funds.

Thus exchanging knowledge and experience over the restoration techniques, sustainable materials,

agrotourism and cultural collaboration could be promoted taking into consideration the particular geographical, historic and cultural features of each site. Finally, closer ties would be forged among remote Mediterranean mountainous areas such as Sicily, the Pyrenees and the Greek regions of Epirus or Thrace.

The institutional proposal in context could contribute to the revival of the protected mountainous settlements in the Mediterranean EU Member States, and consequently have a direct impact on the protection of the European cultural heritage.

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