

# The Role of Cooperative Enterprises in the Promotion of Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the Petrified Forest of Lesvos <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between SSE bodies, culture and sustainable development, studying the case of the Petrified Forest of Sigrí on the island of Lesvos and its interaction with the cooperative of the neighboring settlement of Eresos. Qualitative research was conducted by reviewing the relevant literature and implementing semi-structured interviews. A SWOT analysis was also conducted. The results showed that the Eresos Agricultural and Livestock Cooperative in Sigrí, in collaboration with other agencies, can contribute to the sustainability of the area. The cooperative lacks organized promotion, beyond that attempted by the Natural History Museum based in Sigrí.

**Keywords:** Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE); Agricultural Cooperative of Eresos; culture; social enterprises; communication



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## 1. Introduction

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is characterized by the ability to create possibilities for a sustainable and inclusive society by developing entities, based on the principles of solidarity, cooperation, equality and democracy [1]. The promotion of this policy framework arises through the application of new standards, economic and social, turning the economy towards innovation and sustainability. SSE is an activity between private investment and state mechanisms, as social needs cannot be met either by the private sector—it sets the goal of high profit—or by the state—due to a more general political phobia of possible fiscal shortening. Therefore, not being able to fully cover human needs, SSE comes to perform this task, constituting the so-called third sector—the public and the private are the other two sectors—as a pillar of the economy [2]. In the 21st century, economic crisis has forced Greek governments to turn to SSE. In particular, state welfare mechanisms, unable to cope with continuous needs and failing to find real solutions to emerging issues, promoted movements and initiatives towards the development of SSE [3], with part of the funds for it coming from the E.U.

Geoparks are characterized by UNESCO as wider areas that contain a significant number of geological elements, representative of the geological history of the area and of particular scientific value, rarity or aesthetic beauty, simultaneously including sites of ecological, historical or cultural interest (<https://www.unesco.org/en/igpp>, accessed on 10 March 2023) [4].

Culture refers to the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristic of a given society, of a group of societies, of a certain race, of a certain area or of a certain period of time [5]. Cultural monuments are a kind of territorial capital or development source which must be experienced and enjoyed not only by tourists but also by the residents of the area,

and their aesthetic value is as important as their historic narration [6]. This can generate positive economic developments, both for businesses and for local SSE operators, which is a strong incentive for protecting this dimension. Through this kind of protection and promotion, the bases and prospects for sustainability in the region are created. A three-way relationship emerges between cultural management, social enterprises and sustainable development, which contributes to the well-being of society as a whole.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the relationship between SSE bodies (especially agricultural cooperatives), culture and sustainable development, studying the case of the Petrified Forest of Sigri on the island of Lesbos and its interaction with the cooperative of the neighboring settlement of Eresos. The research questions that will be answered in this research are the following:

- What are the collaborations and interactions of the Eresos Agricultural and Livestock Cooperative, as an SSE body, with the university, museum, local government, cultural associations, civil society and other local cooperatives?
- What is the contribution of these cooperative relations to the sustainability of the region and the cooperative?
- Is there any possibility of networking these SSE bodies in order to promote their goals?

The Petrified Forest highlights the existence of a new type of tourism, so-called geotourism, which is a form of tourism based on the geological environment, focused on the geology and landscape of an area as a basis for promoting sustainable tourism development [7]. The Petrified Forest, like all geoparks worldwide, encourages active collaboration with academic institutions and corresponding communities through on-site scientific research, enriching scientific knowledge about the earth and its processes [8].

## 2. Methodology

This work was based on qualitative research that was carried out following two paths: those of the extensive literature review and the semi-structured interview. Through the literature review, an analysis of the examined topic is attempted regarding the above-mentioned research questions. In the research part, three semi-structured interviews were carried out with a member of the Eresos cooperative, a member of the Mesotopos cooperative and the Deputy Mayor of Tourism Development of the Municipality of Western Lesbos Island. Personal interviews gave additional arguments and fidelity to this work through the empirical knowledge of the inhabitants of the area regarding the promotion of the cooperative's products as well as the degree of cooperation between agencies, according to the quadruple helix model. Still, based on the interviews and the literature review, a SWOT analysis was conducted, which was used in order to list the strong and weak elements of the Petrified Forest and the wider area as well as the opportunities that can emerge and the threats it faces.

## 3. Results

The Eresos Agricultural and Livestock Cooperative collaborates with the Natural History Museum at the level of presentation of wetlands and in educational actions concerning the local community. In general, there is limited help provided to the head of the museum either from the state or from the local government in order to further promote the Petrified Forest and facilitate networking among the relevant organizations [9]. The cooperatives of Eresos collaborate with both the women's cooperatives of Mesotopos and Agras at the level of exchanging products and raw materials.

Help from the local authorities in the promotion of their products is limited related to participation in exhibitions and local celebrations, since there is a lack of organized advertising. The construction of infrastructure, such as that of Sigri-Kalloni road, is also important.

Regarding promotion, it seems that it is carried out by the municipality through their website, while the museum promotes initiatives by organizing events such as conferences that have attracted people in conjunction with the port that was built. There is a shop in the museum to better promote the cooperative's products. Unfortunately, there are road

construction problems, and accessing the area is not easy. The relationship between the local government and cooperatives remains mainly in the form of financial support. The local government is not seen as a supporter of these ventures, and problems have been observed in matters of decentralization. In conclusion, SSE and cultural/geological/natural heritage are guarantees of local sustainability, as long as there is a spirit of cooperation and openness to new ideas from all the actors that can cooperate.

The SWOT analysis (Table 1) reveals that strengths and opportunities prevail over weaknesses and threats.

**Table 1.** SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Recognized park by UNESCO	Reduced tourist interest
Geological heritage—huge cultural value	Difficult to access
Modern museum of natural history	Limited interest from local authorities and residents in the promotion of the forest and the island
Leader in research and implementation of educational activities, cooperation and networking with international organizations	
Opportunities	Threats
Potential for boosting interest in tourism due to road and port construction	Lack of cooperative spirit among institutions and residents
Increased interest for alternative tourism	Improper knowledge from residents and tourists about the great value of this museum

#### 4. Conclusions

The Eresos Agricultural and Livestock Cooperative in Sigri, in collaboration with other agencies, can contribute to the sustainability of the area. However, the cooperative lacks organized promotion, beyond that attempted by the Natural History Museum based in Sigri. SSE and local sustainable development are interrelated terms. In this regard, the existence of the Natural History Museum and the strong element of culture, which includes the Petrified Forest of Sigri, can act as guarantors of the stability of local sustainability. The Eresos Cooperative, as well as any newly established SSE project, must help more actively in order to give the impetus that is appropriate to the region and to this rare phenomenon of geomorphological texture. Through the interaction of culture and SSE, Sigri and Eresos can take advantage of the comparative advantages and lead the way to sustainable development.

The Petrified Forest in Sigri could play a significant role for the region as it is a well-known monument, and it attracts a lot of tourists from all over the world. It is a monument that in recent years, through the efforts made on the part of the museum, has become globally recognized.

The museum has taken serious initiatives in the direction of promotion, therefore also promoting products. Events and conferences have attracted people, in combination with the port that was built, and we hope that the road construction project mentioned above also breathes life into the area. The museum generally strives for local development through its actions, including collaborations with the University of the Aegean, organizing educational trips and attempts to develop a type of tourism, so-called “geotourism”, which from what we see now is becoming what we call “fashionable”. The shop inside the museum, where various foods produced by our cooperative are sold, also plays an important role in the promotion of products. Therefore, we can only see positivity from the actions of the museum and the contributions of the Petrified Forest as a cooperative. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the Petrified Forest, as a world monument, is not only important for the region locally but for the whole island as a touristic destination.

Cooperatives can arguably be most effective at the local level, where they stimulate local social cohesion through day-to-day interactions with members and non-members. In the same way, the Eresos Cooperative offers its members who are producers a series of possibilities that reduce the cost of production and ensure a satisfactory income for them. A cooperative can breathe life into an area through networking with others who have a similar background, such as those in Meteora and Dadia. However, the areas in question, with their special geological and natural topographies, and the SSE agencies based there have common goals.

The belief that geoparks (Petrified Forest, Meteora and Dadia Forest) alone are able to ensure economic viability and sustainability of the area is obviously a mistake. Networking among the relevant players in the area with common interests and goals could activate funds that will boost sustainability. Fine-tuned actions aimed at promoting alternative tourism should arouse the interest of a portion of people who prefer it and advertise it to other people with similar scientific interests or academic identities.

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