

# **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-localities of Sparta and Tripoli 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 results (i.e. Spartathlon in Sparta) make a contribution to the discussion for social innovation, cohesion and sustainable economic recovery.

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

**JEL codes:** J24, P48, J64

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## **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.

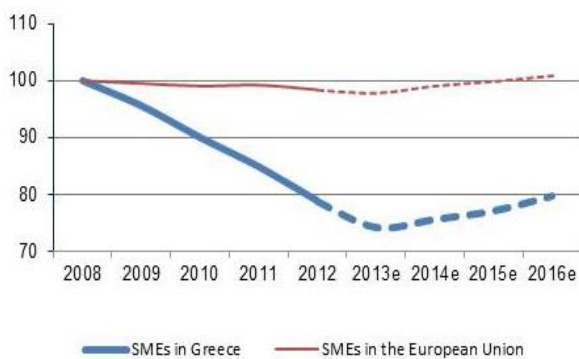
On the ground of our findings, the second research objective was to initiate innovative action *towards* sustainable socio-economic recovery and prosperity, through smart capitalisation of all available local resources. To this purpose, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted and applied in order 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.

In the case of SpARTathlo presented herein, the local actors group set the objectives and expected results of the action implemented and the researcher was invited by them to produce a detailed evaluation report, with the support of the project implementation team. We sought to empower the un/underemployed themselves and other interested social actors/ stakeholders in Sparta to transform and reconstruct views and practices they use in their effort to address the problem of underutilization and waste of human resources;

## 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 measurable 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)

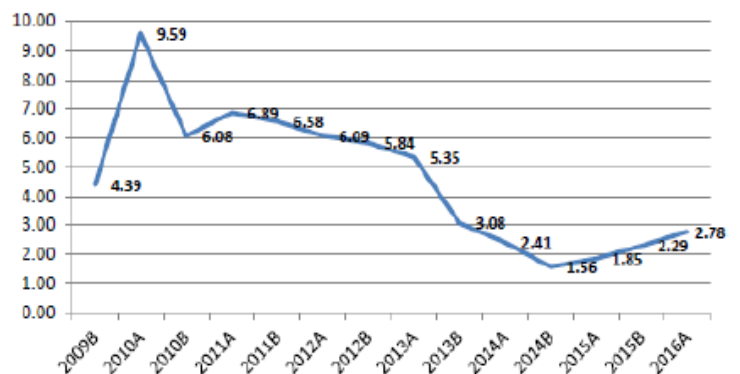
**Figure 1a. SMEs Employment change**



\*Index: 2008=100, estimates as from 2013 onwards

Source: 2015 SBA Fact Sheet: Greece, EC 2016

**Figure 1b. SMEs balance of hirings and layoffs**

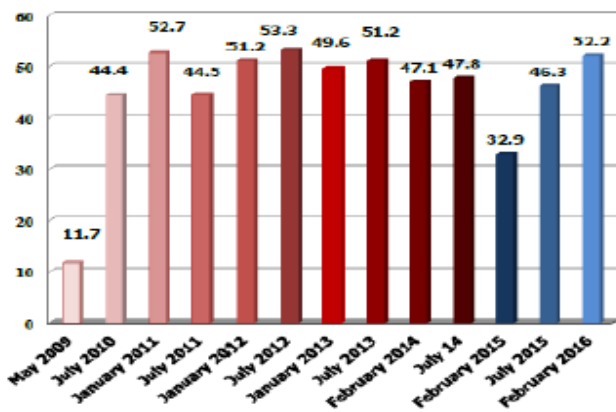


Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

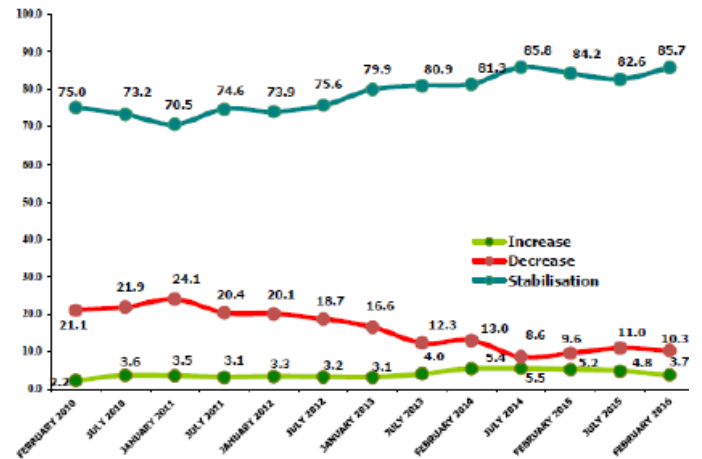
A most recent survey of the Institute of Small/Micro Enterprises (IME-GSEVEE 2016), biannually conducted on national scale, records the decline of Greek SMEs in terms of turnover, demand and orders. Just 1 in 5 enterprises showed profits in 2015, while nearly 4 in 10 showed losses. Consequently, the 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.

**Figure 2.** SMEs fear of closure, 2009-2016



**Figure 3.** SMEs employment, 2010-2016



Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016

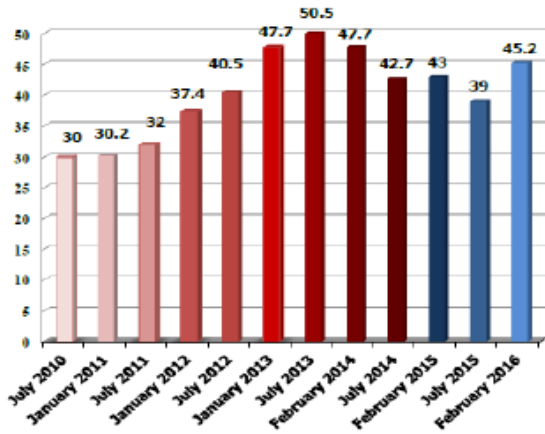
To this purpose, our research focused on the significant labour market shifts illustrated by current expanding employment patterns. Post-crisis data reveal the increasing turn of SMEs towards employment of high flexibility (IME-GSEVEE 2016, Figure 4). As established in previous research across Greece’s 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 4.**

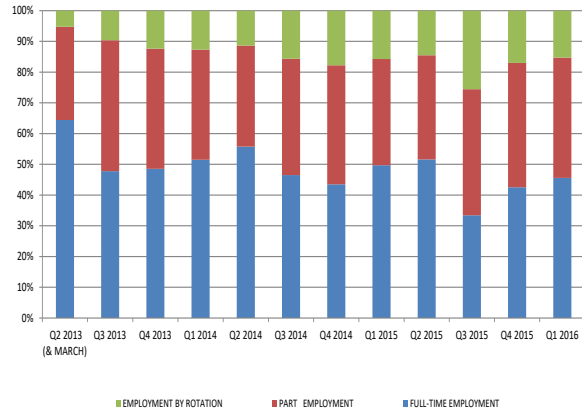
SMEs turn to flexible labour, 2010-2016

**Figure 5.**

Hiring by type of contract, 2013-2016



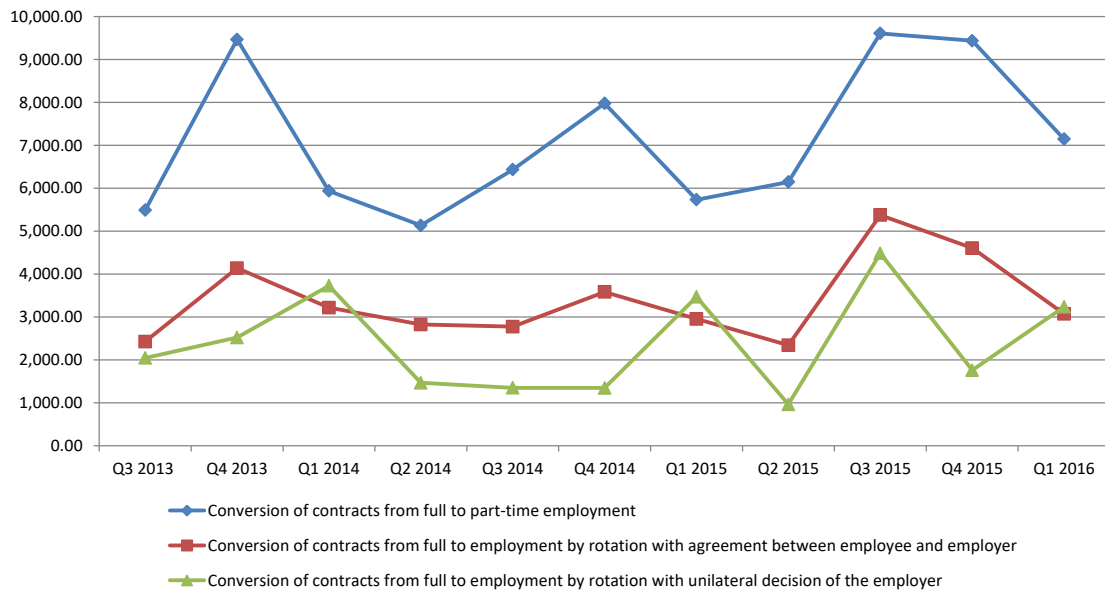
Source: IME-GSEVEE 2016



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

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). 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).

**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

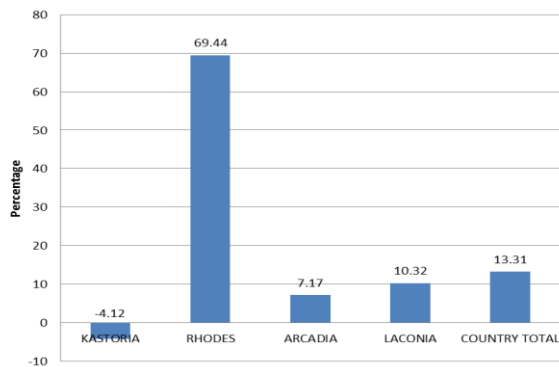
According to ERGANI data on working time show that, despite the predominance of full time employees ( $\leq 35$  hours per week), the number of employees working for just 2-4 hours per week increased by 54.5% from 2013 to 2015 (the highest by far increase, in a range of  $\leq 35$ , 35-20, 20-10, 10-4, 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.

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.

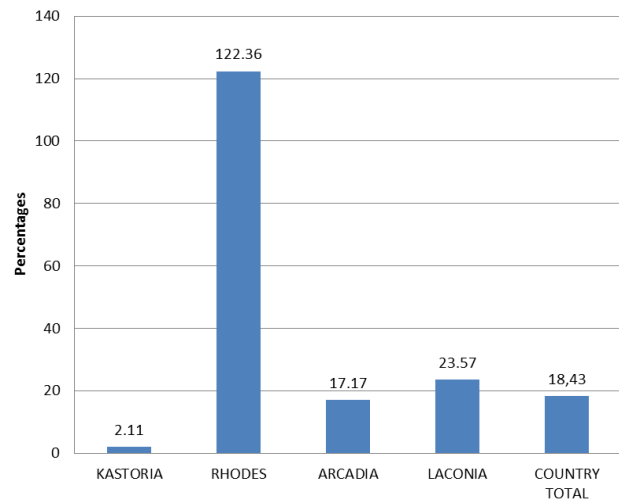
**Figure 7.**

Change (%) in entrepreneurship, 2013-2015



**Figure 8.**

Change (%) in salaried employment, 2013-2015



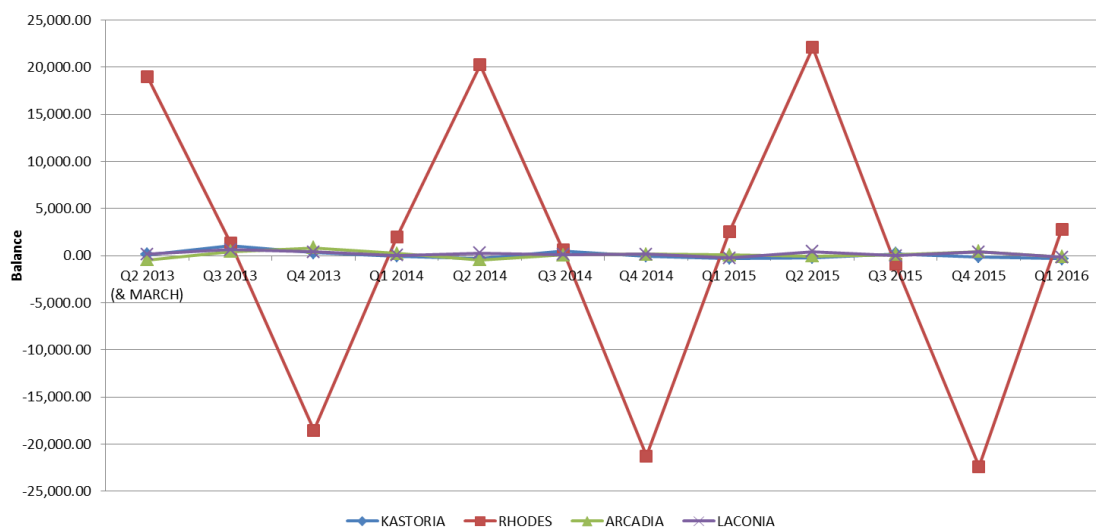
Source: ERGANI Information System; Authors' compilation of Annual data for 2013, 2014 and 2015

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.

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

Participatory Action Research 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 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 every day 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. More specifically, interview questions were distributed to participants prior to all interviews conducted at the identification stage. Then, participants were also given the interview transcripts to review and edit in order to ensure their own “voices” are documented and not misinterpreted. All sessions (semi-structured interviews and 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. Additionally, by recording proceedings the researcher was also able to concentrate on the group discussion more

effectively, listen to all members and “be present” rather than keeping notes. The researcher shared with the action group drafts of all written products of the research. All members of the action group were invited to clarify, elaborate on and critique those "interpretations".

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, transformed and restructured, through the critical reflective process of examining all the parameters of the investigated issue/problem. 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.

In the case of SpARTathlo, the group set the objectives and expected results of the action implemented and the researcher was invited by the group to produce a detailed evaluation report, with the support of the project implementation team. We sought to empower the un/underemployed themselves and other interested social actors/stakeholders in Sparta to transform and reconstruct views and practices they use in their effort to address the problem of underutilization and waste of human resources. In addition, it created the appropriate environment for the group to discuss and design collaborative local development actions which would address the problem of un/under/employment in a sustainable way. In what follows we provide some information regarding the synthesis of the PAR group in Sparta, the PAR process conducted, to focus on the action designed by the group, its objectives and expected results and its evaluation.

### ***Identification of participants in the Action Group***

The theory of PAR considers the identification of participants as the first and very critical step of the process as they become co-researchers, on an equal footing with researchers. 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.

Crucial in this identification process was the work the researcher had conducted in the past in the framework of another project which had allowed the establishment of a relationship of trust and cooperation with key institutions and people in the town. Thus, based on this trust relationship, key people in the municipality and NGOs were contacted and interviews were taken with potential participants. The first contacts provided information for other relevant institutions and specific individuals in the town so as to eventually lead to the establishment of the first group. The identification process involved an extensive dialogue between the researcher and the potential participants, in which the former explained what was the project about. Additionally, this dialogue included an extensive interview by the researcher in order to collect useful information for the design of the dialogue that was to be followed. At this stage there was a first exchange of information about the other members of the group so as to ensure there will be no unpleasant surprises which could threaten the work of the group.

During the first meeting of the PAR group, participants were invited to reflect on the synthesis of the group and discuss whether there are other important partners who should be invited to this dialogue. The suggestions made were taken into account by the researcher who undertook the task to contact them and invite them in the next meetings.

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.

Finally, 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 researcher 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.

### ***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. They discussed actions / interventions already undertaken by the different stakeholders in order to address the problem. Additionally, in the second meeting the participants were encouraged to present specific requests some of them they might had to the other members of the group about actions that could improve or enhance their own activities (e.g. the representative of OAED asked the representative of the local

directorate of antiquities and cultural heritage to collaborate so that OAED would include in its bi-annual apprenticeship program the profession of conservator of antiquities and the graduates would be able to do their practice at the local directorate). 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 together with all or specific members of the group and that could contribute to local development and thereby address the problem of unemployment.

### ***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" (from now on SpARTathlo). 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. It 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. This sports event was perceived by the PAR group as a territorial resource representing a competitive advantage for the town which has the potential to strengthen local economy and attract tourists.

Thus, SpARTathlo intervention was named after the Spartathlon race and it was an action containing urban social intervention elements in the town. More specifically, the action 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.

The intended objectives of this 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 advertise and promote the 56 members of the network, with an emphasis put on the most remote center shops and the less well known local products. 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*. *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. 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).

In order to better understand the decision of the PAR group to implement the specific action, we need additional background information about the Spartathlon race and its relationship to the town. Spartathlon is the historic race going from Athens to Sparta (246km) following the footsteps of the messenger Fidipides who went to Sparta to announce the victory of the Athenians against the Persians in the Marathon battle in 490 B.C. It is important to note here that 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. Additionally, 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.

The only activity in the town organised by the municipality, connected to this event is traditionally an evening with music and folk dances in the central square of the town when most of the athletes have ended the race. Thus, neither the market of the town nor the community are actively involved in it, let alone have the ownership of this special event taking place in their town. Thus, it becomes clear that there was no strategy developed by public authorities, which perceived that sport event as an opportunity for the promotion and branding of the town which could yield significant economic profit for its community.

### ***SpARTathlo evaluated***

In what follows we present the evaluation conducted after the end of the action vis-à-vis the intended results of the action.

**Result 1:** The first intended result of SpARTathlo intervention was the activation of the local community: the target group were local institutions and the local market and the reviving of their connection with the sports event of Spartathlon which involves a strong heritage dimension. 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. Also the aim was to create a pilot action, a "precedent" in the city, an "experience" which would form a basis of trust among the participants for other actions to be implemented in the foreseeable future. Additionally, participation in the action meant participation in the design and implementation of a local development endeavour. Another indicator of the activation is the number of members who created a new product or a new promotional action in the framework of SpARTathlo. A significant number, 23 of the 43 members of the network involved in the evaluation, claimed they created new products.

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 expected result was the successful advertisement and promotion of the 56 members of the network, with an emphasis put on the most remote center shops and their less well-known local products. The action achieved to a certain extent the result of the promotion and better advertisement of businesses / locations / craftsmen and local products. More specifically, to the relevant question 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.

**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.

The SpARTathlo action will ultimately be assessed by what will follow. It is important that such an investment (in time-expertise-money) will be a stepping stone for other actions organised in a professional and consistent manner and not a flash in the pan. When members of the network were asked whether the intervention should be repeated next year, 98% of network members replied "Yes" and 2% answered "yes, but not exactly", highlighting the need for an approach that takes also into account the particularities of certain areas (e.g. shops far from the town centre require a different approach which will address their needs). Moreover, 85% suggested that similar actions should be organised throughout the year and not only during Spartathlon. The above results underline the potential sustainability of SpARTathlo intervention and therefore can be considered determinants of its success.

**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 as well as those of the members of the NGO Activate Now.

Indeed, 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 organization Activate Now as well 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 SpARTathlo action provided an excellent opportunity for the emergence of productive partnerships between

the team of *Activate Now* and the PAR group as well as a group of (mostly) young (and mostly underemployed) professionals in the broader region (photographers, digital marketing expert, image consultant expert). The recognition of the organisation in the town grew and its record/CV 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. 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. 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. Participatory action research proved to be a productive methodology which bridges theory and practice and provides 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.

The SpARTathlo action that emerged through the collaborative work of the PAR group and was implemented through cooperation of the local institutions is evaluated as successful; it largely achieved the expected results and 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 sports touristic resort).

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