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## **Rural tourism and residents' well-being in Cyprus: towards a conceptualised framework of the appreciation of rural tourism for islands' sustainable development and competitiveness**

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**Abstract:** While Cyprus is a significant destination, it is mainly characterised by mass tourism, focusing on seascape and leaving rural areas undeveloped. This situation, creates challenges related to its sustainability, such as unequal development, impacts on residents' well-being, and decreased competitiveness. Employing a qualitative research approach, through interviews with fourteen policy makers, high-level administrators, and tourist officials, as well as document analysis, the study examines the role of Cyprus' rural tourism on its residents' well-being. Findings indicate that Cyprus' rural tourism takes the forms of agricultural, cultural and religious, nature-based, and event tourism. While rural tourism is recognised as a sustainable niche, challenges such as its fragmented nature, inappropriate management, lack of knowledge, and micro-interests, hinder its appreciation. The paper concludes with a framework suggesting three strategies that will lead to the islands' competitiveness and residents' well-being: Integrated Rural Tourism, valorisation of social entrepreneurship, and identification of rural destinations' capitals.

**Keywords:** rural tourism; Cyprus; integrated rural tourism; IRT; well-being; sustainable development; social entrepreneurship; islands.

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## **1 Introduction**

For many islands, tourism has been considered as one of the most important economic vehicles that can lead them towards growth and financial independency (Andriotis, 2002; Boukas and Ziakas, 2013; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012; Ioannides, 1992). It is a fact that many islands worldwide have capitalised on their tourism development in order to create a stable environment that provides foreign income and generates employment. Moreover, the multiplier effects of tourism for islands' affluence are even greater and traditionally have contributed positively to their overall prosperity. Undeniably therefore, tourism has many times been viewed by islands' policy as a panacea for their business growth and diversification of economy, where otherwise they would face the challenges of poor economic development-based mostly on the primary sector of the economy, vulnerability on global economic changes, small population growth and local residents' migration for finding jobs (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016; Niles and Baldacchino, 2011).

However, the overall value of tourism's economic benefits in combination with islands' idiomorphic physiognomies such as geographical isolation, small size, limited resources and dependence on foreign imports, has frequently led to their resources' exploitation and the emphasis on generating competitive advantages by focusing their developmental efforts on-mainly-mass tourism (Niles and Baldacchino, 2011; Boukas and Ziakas, 2013). While mass tourism can generate important income for the local economy, it is many times associated with a series of negative impacts for the host destination such as seasonality, primarily coastal development, excess of tourist flows in limited geographic areas, environmental problems and social concerns. The specific situation on an already sensitive island environment has many times led to islands' unsustainable development and inevitably has influenced the well-being of local residents. Indeed, many authors recognise that the monoculture of tourism only partially benefits locals and mostly in economic terms. Furthermore, in a continuously changing global capitalist system, decision making process regarding tourism projects often relies on the hands of 'outside' investors (Butler, 2008; Lewis-Cameron and Roberts, 2010), who many times neglect the prosperity of the local population. In this regard, locals' well-being in economic and socio-environmental terms is impacted and thus sustainable development of tourism in islands remains a difficult equation that requires contemporary solutions.

One of these solutions that could bring a harmony between the relationship of tourism development and residents' prosperity is the recognition of rural tourism. Rural tourism has been seen by several authors as one of the ways to generate income to rural areas, reinforce growth, create job positions in remoted places and eventually revitalise them (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004a, 2004b; Daspher, 2014; Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997). Emphasising rural areas during tourism planning can be a significant strategy. As Page and Getz (1997) argue, consuming rural areas for tourism purposes satisfies the needs for pursuing of a pastoral idyll, embracing the cultural signs of this rural idyll and seeking outdoor activities in these rural environments. Under this perspective and considering that islands are important rural environments, they can satisfy also diversified needs of tourists, not necessarily connected to mass tourism. As such, rural tourism could enhance islands' attractiveness, creating more tourist flows to the otherwise underdeveloped island spaces and contributing to a more sustainable tourism development (Sharpley, 2009). This in turn, would create in islands such as the Republic of Cyprus, a friendlier

environment for local residents to remain in their places and work in tourism, creating therefore, a better quality of life.

The Republic of Cyprus (Cyprus), as a small island state, exhibits all the above features that would demand a reorientation of the tourism policy towards rural tourism as a means for enhancing locals' well-being. Till today, Cyprus' rural tourism is considered a niche product that only supports in some areas the overall tourism development. Characteristically, 91,170 tourists arrived at the hill resorts of the island in 2017 (the most representative rural destination of the island) representing only the 3.17% of the total tourist arrivals (2,874,141) (CTO, 2018). According to CTO (2018), the majority of arrivals are met at the beach resorts of the island, representing mass tourism. Developing mass tourism for the last 50 years, the island currently faces several challenges such as decreased competitiveness, inadequate service provision in its tourism industries, development of solely coastal areas, migration of locals, dependence on foreign investments, seasonality, etc. (Archontides, 2007; Boukas and Ziakas, 2014). Moreover, the systematic exploitation of the island's resources for mass tourism has created an unsustainable setting in environmental, social and economic terms that has a direct impact on the residents' prosperity (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). As such, the turn towards more sustainable forms of tourism, such as rural tourism, that would bring into the centre of the attention local residents of the island is not just desirable, but crucial for the long-term feasibility of the place.

The paper explores the role of rural tourism in Cyprus for the well-being of its residents. Specifically, the paper studies the development of rural tourism in Cyprus, designates its main forms, examines how rural tourism contributes to the quality of life of local people and recognises the challenges and opportunities towards its long-term sustainable development. The paper concludes with a framework that focuses on local's well-being by concentrating on specific forms of rural tourism and suggests pertinent strategies towards the long-term sustainable development of island destinations that will make them competitive on the global markets on the one hand, as well as ideal spaces for islands residents' well-being.

## **2 Rural tourism: nature and significance**

Many scholars have been concerned defining rural tourism since different regions and destinations define 'rural' in different terms (Hall et al., 2016). Even though rural tourism, in a broader context, has to do with the countryside, its multifaceted nature lies on the fact that rural areas are also multi-layered, dynamic, influenced by globalisation and connected to urban patterns (Daspher, 2014; Lane, 1994). In this respect, rural tourism needs to be studied under the aspect of rurality and its features. Based on this argument, Lane (1994, p.14) argues that rural tourism should have the following characteristics:

- based on rural areas
- being functionally rural, in terms of small-scale, traditional entrepreneurial efforts that have a direct contact to the natural environment
- rural in scale – therefore, smaller in scale

- characterised by traditional elements and connected to local families in terms of control and operations
- of diverse forms, signifying the complexity of rurality in socioeconomic and cultural terms.

Based on these characteristics, rural tourism therefore, can include several types of tourism that occur in the 'rural' context, or else in the countryside, broadly classified into:

- a touring
- b water related activities
- c cultural activities
- d health related activities
- e aerial activities
- f sporting activities
- g business related activities
- h passive activities
- j hallmark events (Roberts and Hall, 2001).

As such, rural tourism is an amalgam of various forms of tourism in rural areas. For this reason, its contribution to the overall growth of rural spaces is unquestionable.

Moreover, rural tourism should not be seen only as an important tourism macro-segment but as a way to conserve and regenerate rural society and culture (Gao and Wu, 2017). In this respect, rural tourism development could be a dynamic element for the growth and prosperity of the peripheral regional economies that emphasises several and diverse tourism sub-products. This in turn, could lead to significant impacts on the rural and regional areas that rural tourism takes place on.

The importance of rural tourism development has been examined from various dimensions; economic, social and environmental (Egbali and Nosrat, 2011; Gao and Wu, 2017; Hernández et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). As Egbali and Nosrat (2011) argue, from an economic point of view, rural tourism contributes to the generation of new jobs, brings money to rural areas and enhances their economic activities preserving traditional industries, diversifies the local economy, promotes local production and generates multiplying benefits to other economic activities. In the same lines, Hernández et al. (2016) add that rural tourism helps to the elimination of seasonality and concentrates on destination with high environmental quality.

From a social point of view, Gao and Wu (2017) claim that rural tourism empowers local population and strengthens the locality of the area by employing rural inhabitants, and revitalises existing infrastructure and cultural heritage assets by transforming them into tourist attractions and resources. For this reason, the authors argue that rural tourism should be considered as an instrument for the conservation and renaissance of rural society and culture.

Finally, in environmental terms, rural tourism promotes tourist activity in attractions that generate lower pressure on the environment (in comparison to mass tourism) (Hernández et al., 2016). Moreover, by organising and revitalising the rural areas, rural

tourism contributes to the overall landscape improvement and the maintenance of rural regions (Egbali and Nosrat, 2011). As such, the significance of rural tourism for the growth of rural areas is notable; in fact, rural tourism under the appropriate management can lead to rural areas' sustainable development.

From the above argument, a remarkable concept regarding rural tourism is that of integrated rural tourism (IRT). Jenkins and Oliver (2001) define IRT as the tourism connected to the economic, sociocultural, natural and human resources of the local areas that it takes place. According to Cawley and Gillmor (2008), IRT places emphasis on the optimal utilisation of resources while at the same time protects them, leading this way to sustainability. Along the same lines, Saxena et al. (2007) add that IRT can have several benefits for the rural area such as:

- a Direct economic benefits through linkages between tourism and the local economies.
- b Experiential benefits through the formation of qualitative packages that would lead to a more complete local experience for the visitor.
- c Conservation benefits, through the improvement of the enticements for the maintenance and revival of resources and via the closer collaboration among different actors and further activities on the areas.
- d Developmental benefits, through the provision of new opportunities for the development of less privileged and under-developed regions.
- e Synergistic benefits, through the encouragement of partnerships among local actors in the community.

The above arguments suggest that IRT can be the means to sustainable development of rural areas. This is of extreme importance especially for islands since due to their unique characteristics face several obstacles in regards to their sustainable tourism development; this can also affect the well-being of their local residents.

### **3 Tourism development on islands: the role of niche tourism**

Islands are significant destinations since certain features of them, such as remoteness, idyllic landscape, morphology, as well as sociocultural fabric traditionally fascinated tourists (Boukas and Ziakas, 2013; Carlsen and Butler, 2011). Nonetheless, their unique features make them special cases of tourist development characterised frequently, by unsustainable manner (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). As Apostolopoulos and Gayle (2002) state, development on islands is complex since environmental sustainable growth opportunities are limited, provision of specific utilities is few and difficult to cultivate and resources are inadequate, while their small size limits their economic future. In this respect, Apostolopoulos and Gayle (2002, p.7) claim that: "the essential island development dilemma, then, is that aspiration renders self-sufficiency unacceptable, while attempts to gain or maximise wealth through economic specialisation tend to render society and the economy unstable." In this regard, even though islands have turned towards tourism development as a way for their economic growth, many times this development is far from sustainable.

In fact, in their effort to capitalise on tourism positive economic benefits as a means to their affluence, many islands have dedicated their tourist developmental goals on conventional activities (i.e., mass tourism) largely due to their rapid positive, short-term economic impacts. Additionally, despite the plethora of non-conventional (special interest) forms of tourism, still the dominant model of tourism development on islands at least in Southern destinations (e.g., Mediterranean Islands, Pacific Islands, etc.) is mass tourism, emphasising the exploitation of coastal destinations with 3Ss (sea, sun, sand) characteristics (Aretano et al., 2013; Bull, 1997).

For instance, tourism in Cyprus has rapidly grown, since its beginning (in 1960s), on the coast areas of the island leaving the interior areas unutilised. At the same time, the enormous hospitality industry generated on the coast has created an unbalanced scheme of rich places near the sea and poor places in mountainous and rural places (Archontides, 2007; Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). Today, more than three million tourists arrive at the island and the majority of them visit four coastal destination areas (Cyprus Statistical Service, 2016). The unbalanced development that mass tourism brings, creates a tourism reality associated with a questionable viable future for the entire islands' economy. In this regard, the entire tourism sector of many islands is associated to a series of problems such as seasonality, lack of competitiveness, increased prices to cover the increased costs of a seasonal business, resource deficiency and challenges of long-term sustainable viability (Graci, 2013; Ridderstaat et al., 2014). Furthermore, many residents need to migrate to the touristic zones in order to find jobs, leaving the periphery and regional areas literally empty. As such, the unsustainable development of tourism in these islands has a direct impact on the locals' life especially in places where tourism growth is limited.

The above situation has created many structural problems of over-dependencies on mass tourism on islands. This critical state necessitates for islands to receive a series of measures that somehow would diversify their tourism, focusing on niche tourism. As opposed to mass tourism, niche tourism concentrates on more sophisticated practices that differentiate tourist activities and tourism; thus, niche tourism can lead to diversification, greater potential, more sustainable and profitable development and more 'alive' experiences for the visitors (Mason, 2011; Robinson and Novelli, 2005). In this respect, niche tourism, such as rural tourism, can lead to the long-term viability of islands enhancing partnerships and cooperation among all stakeholders and considering the economic, environmental and sociocultural well-being of local residents.

#### **4 Residents' well-being and island tourism development**

Several studies have been conducted analysing tourism and residents' well-being. For instance, Ap (1992) examined the impacts of tourism on residents' well-being, incorporating social exchange theory. He argued that residents develop positive attitudes when exchange of resources (conveyed in terms of power) between them and tourism is high and balanced or high for the host actor in an unbalanced relation. On the other hand, when this exchange is low the impacts are seen as negative (in either the balanced or unbalanced exchange relation) [Ap, (1992), p.685]. Furthermore, Ap and Crompton (1993) studied the reactions of residents to tourism on a continuum that incorporates four strategies:

- a Embracement, where residents welcome tourists, they are frequently directly benefited by them and have built long-term relationships with them.
- b Tolerance, where residents show a degree of antithesis towards tourism recognising parts of it they like (for instance economic benefits) and others they do not – but tolerate.
- c Adjusted, where residents adjust to tourism, rescheduling activities to escape from tourist crowds.
- d Withdrawal, where tourists remove themselves temporarily from the community.

They authors conclude that during the time residents in a destination, may shift from one strategy to the other in either way of the continuum.

Therefore, residents' well-being of destinations is connected to the impacts of tourism on their lives (directly and indirectly) and the overall community. Nonetheless, well-being is a holistic and complicated concept. For example, Pratt et al. (2016) measuring the gross happiness index of two villages in Fiji (the one with evident tourism development and the other with little contact to tourism) found out that even though the tourism developed village was considered wealthier, the non-tourism villagers appeared to be happier throughout a number of life areas that are not so materialistic, such as kinship or traditions. This indicates that well-being in destinations does not necessarily have to do only with the money that tourism brings but includes also other dimensions that sometimes are complex to measure and valorise.

Nevertheless, tourism planning should move from the edges of planning practice to the centre, considering also the socioeconomic, political and cultural representation and equity [Harrill, (2004), p.263]. This is also applicable for islands. Many islands found on tourism their economic autonomy, growth and overall welfare; for this reason, they have embraced it (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016; Boukas et al., 2017). However, various islands' residents underline mostly tourism's positive impacts rather than negative ones (Ribeiro et al., 2013). For instance, Nawijn and Mitas (2012) studying resident attitudes to tourism and their effect on subjective well-being in the case of Palma de Mallorca, argue that tourism has a positive impact on residents' subjective well-being in regards to mostly economic benefits and in particular, to the domains of health, interpersonal relationships, friends and services and infrastructure. Similarly, Mehran et al. (2014) in their study for the locals' perceptions towards the impacts of tourism and the importance of local engagement for two islands in Malaysia, highlight the overall positive perception of locals for the economic, social and cultural implications of tourism, as well as an affirmative attitude towards the revenue from the tourist industry.

Yet, while tourism development has traditionally improved many people's lives in islands destinations, several dimensions of it, are also connected to negative aspects. It is a fact that, while the positive impacts of tourism for islands overshadow the negative ones, the last negatives still exist. Dimitriadis et al. (2013) examining the attitudes of residents towards tourism development for two Greek islands, claim that negative effects of tourism are relatively downgraded; they suggest that these effects such as cost of life, violence, impacts on the morals, social life, tradition and the environment are also evident.

Furthermore, when discussing about the positive or/and negative effects of tourism for islands' well-being, we need to comprehend the several aspects of the tourism

development to islands' residents. Ribeiro et al. (2013), regarding tourism in Cape Verde Islands, state that despite the overall enthusiasm for tourism, different segments of residents may have different attitudes towards tourism development and its impacts. The authors identified three segments with different perceptions regarding tourism's impacts:

- a The optimistic residents, that recognise the positive aspects of tourism more than the negative ones.
- b The rational residents, that are less expressive and more tight in regards to their enthusiasm about tourism even though also optimistic.
- c The indifferent residents that do not recognise any positive effects of tourism and argue that it has played a negative role on the environmental and social integrity of their place.

The above segmentation underlines that not all residents have a direct relationship to tourist development and this applies on the case of islands. As such, when it is about tourism development, we need to understand the level of involvement of residents to it as well as the level of impact of tourism to their overall life on the island.

Finally, another component related to the islands residents' well-being is to examine how tourism functions. For example, efficient (or inefficient) management of tourism plays an important role on the mitigation or not of the negative impacts of tourism as well as enhancement of the positive impacts, for islands' well-being. The unplanned tourist development and its inefficient management create several sociocultural and environmental costs to the host population (Mehran et al., 2014). As such, proper management by tourism policy paying attention not only to the economic dimension of tourism, but also to the sociocultural and environmental ones, is essential for the islands' long-term development. This means that many islands need to reorient their course regarding tourism towards more sustainable forms of development that would provide added value to local residents' well-being, such as rural tourism.

## **5 Methods**

The study continues from a previous, broader one that examined the overall tourist development of Cyprus and its connection to sustainability. The current study goes one-step further and emphasises a particular niche form of tourism, rural tourism and its contribution to residents' well-being. Given the objectives of the study, an appropriate methodological approach for generating such insight was qualitative in nature. In particular, an exploratory research was undertaken, in order to collect primary data through two main forms: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Exploratory research was used in order to generate insights, ideas and themes (Kent, 1999; Churchill, 1995) regarding (rural) tourism development on Cyprus and its impacts on residents' well-being. Firstly, a purposeful sampling involved 14 elite in-depth interviews conducted with key-stakeholders of Cyprus tourism development: policy makers, high-level administrators and tourist officials that have contributed to (rural) tourism development of Cyprus, and therefore have been the key-players in developing and managing tourism on the island (Table 1).

**Table 1** Interviewees' profile

	<i>Institutional domain</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Age (approx.)</i>
1	Tourism policy	Officer	35
2	Tourism policy	Officer	35
3	Tourism policy	Manager	40
4	Travel agent association	Manager	55
5	Travel agent association	Manager	45
6	Hotel association	Manager	55
7	Hotel association	Officer	50
8	Investment agency	Manager	55
9	Tourism businesses association	Manager	50
10	Environmental group	Manager	50
11	Rural development association	Manager	35
12	Tourism policy	Officer	35
13	Tourism policy	Officer	50
14	Rural tourism stakeholder	Manager	45

Elite interviews were utilised in order to gather the most accurate and highly credible responses (Goldstein, 2002) regarding tourism development on Cyprus. Moreover, the use of elite interviews gave the opportunity to collect objective data both from the policy makers and tourism professionals of the island, in regards to the development of tourism in Cyprus and its pertinent impacts in its economy, society and culture. The interviewees have a direct role to the formation of tourism in the whole island and realise in first hand its role to the overall well-being of the island's residents.

Data were collected from summer of 2013 until autumn of 2016. In this three years' period, the evolution of tourism in Cyprus has been notable, while several events such as the local economic crisis, the reorientation of the economy with emphasis on tourism by policy makers and the formation of the strategic plan of Cypriot tourism that prioritises sustainable development, have affected tourism on the island (Presidency – Unit of Administrative Reform, 2017). Moreover, this period provided the opportunity to understand holistically the impacts of tourism to the local life while follow-up interviews gave the opportunity to study the situation in a more spherical manner.

For the implementation of the interviews, an interview guide with a series of questions was utilised. The interview guide represented the main themes that the study tried to answer and helped to the direction of the interviews' flow. Some questions of the interview guide were adjusted to fit the audience addressed: policy makers and tourism stakeholders/representatives. The duration of each interview was approximately one to one and half hours. The interviews took place at the premises/offices of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded upon agreement with each interviewee. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the Greek language. Next, each interview was translated into English and analysed manually by the researcher. A cross-case content and narrative analysis was adopted to compare and validate the data from the policy makers and tourism stakeholders (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994), in order to determine inductively emerging themes and discern their relationships. Cross-case analysis is as a research method that facilitates the comparison of commonalities and

differences in the events, activities and processes that are the units of analyses (Khan and VanWynsberghe, 2008). In this case, it helped identifying common and different opinions among the interviewees. Narrative analysis was based on the views and personal experience of the respondents, regarding the – under research – points (Smith, 2000). Once theoretical saturation was reached, the author compared their interpretations and coding themes in order to agree on a coding scheme that best fits with and describes the emerging data.

Secondly, document analysis included official policy reports and documents related to tourism/rural tourism development on the island, for registering trends, forces and characteristics of rural tourism on Cyprus, as well as, for plotting the contribution of tourism to the overall well-being of residents. According to Bowen (2009), the combination of documentary evidence with data derived from interviews minimises bias and sets a more credible output. For this reason, it has been chosen as a supplementary method for this work.

## **6 Findings**

### *6.1 Tourism development in Cyprus*

An opening theme for the interviews was for the respondents to express their opinion about tourism development in Cyprus. All the respondents agreed that tourism has historically played an important role to the economic development and prosperity of the residents of the island. This is something verified also by the literature. For instance, Witt (1991, p.37) studying the benefits and costs of Cyprus' tourism, argued that the contribution of tourism on the island was noticeable especially in the following areas:

- 1 as a generator of foreign earnings, especially at the same time where other traditional generators of wealth such as mineral were declined
- 2 as a contributor to the national income
- 3 as a generator of employment
- 4 as a means for the regional development of the island.

The author concluded that since its beginning, tourism in Cyprus has helped the island to be transformed from an underdeveloped, agricultural oriented economy/society, to a modern European one.

Additionally, respondents mentioned that the contribution of tourism is not only economic in nature. As claimed:

“... the economic growth of Famagusta region through the contribution of tourism, also brought a series of other positive results such as improvement of the current infrastructure, more jobs in the hospitality sector, an overall wealthier society... there are for instance museums such as the museum of Thalassa in Ayia Napa, that operate mainly due to tourism and benefit the whole society...” (Respondent 4)

Indeed, tourism development in Cyprus has contributed to several aspects of the socioeconomic fabric. However, most of the tourism activity is related to mass tourism in the seaside (Respondent 2). Therefore, tourism in rural areas that are in low proximity to

the sea has been – in comparison to those within the island as well mountainous places – much more developed mainly in the form of mass tourism.

In this respect, the dominance of mass tourism as the prime tourism product of Cyprus has also created a series of negative consequences. Respondent 10 argues that tourism in Cyprus has been associated to a series of environmental and social problems (i.e., overconcentration of tourists in only some areas at particular times, stress on the environment and host community, uncontrolled development, seasonality, excess of carrying capacity, elimination of other traditional sectors of the economy such as agriculture and ultimately an unbalanced development).

Overall, in regards to tourism development of Cyprus, the interviewees concluded to two main results; certain areas of the island close to the seascape have been traditionally accepted the majority of the attention by the tourism policy. The increased development of tourism has injected the local economy and helped its total growth but created also problems of resources' over-exploitation and social/environmental concerns (i.e., crowdedness, diversification of economy, etc.). In contrast, other areas of the island such as interior or mountainous regions that do not neighbour to the sea, remain underdeveloped and thus, do not enjoy the benefits of tourism. Rural tourism, in these areas does have some traces, but since the attention of the policy makers mainly still concentrates on mass tourism, there are many more to be done.

## *6.2 The development of rural tourism in Cyprus: growth, forms and activity*

### *6.2.1 Growth of rural tourism in Cyprus*

According to the interviews, the significance of rural tourism for the overall tourism development of Cyprus has been recognised by the tourism policy. Characteristically, Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO) established in the mid-1990s the 'Cyprus Agrotourism Company', a body that deals exclusively with holidays in the countryside of the island (Respondent 11). As Respondent 11, the manager of the company argued:

“There was a need for the coordination of various small and medium enterprises in the tourism sector at rural areas. While we are named as Agrotourism Company, we deal with all aspects of rural tourism... It is notable that the company started with only seven members and today we number more than 84 members, 100 traditional houses and boutique hotels, in 60 villages around the island.”

The respondent also claimed that these numbers are going to increase in the future due to the interest of people to deal with rural tourist activities, as well as, the contribution of European Union in terms of funding. However, respondents representing the tourism policy suggested that despite rural tourism in Cyprus is evident, it is not yet in the desired level and more things need to be done (Respondent 1). This is something mentioned also by tourist professionals (i.e., Respondents 5, 6 and 9). While the tourism product in Cyprus is at the maturity stage, tourism in the rural areas of Cyprus is still growing.

Nevertheless, the level of development of rural tourism on Cyprus depends also on the centrality of the rural place. As Respondent 11 indicated:

“Not all rural areas have been developed equally... you can see that the villages of the mountainous areas of Larnaca [the areas close to the city of Larnaca, where the central airport is located, and in relatively close proximity to the

capital city Nicosia, and the second in size city, Limassol] have embraced rural tourism much more than the villages of Troodos Mountain, which are more distant.”

Nonetheless, the interviewees mentioned that in any case, due to the size of Cyprus, rural tourist activities are not so far away from the main tourist activity of the island and this is something that brings prospective to the overall rural tourism of the island. In regards to the types of rural tourist activities that the island has mainly focused, the interviewees agreed that the main rural tourist activities on the island could be categorised in four central forms

- a activities in an agricultural environment
- b cultural and religious tourism
- c nature-based tourism
- d event tourism.

### *6.2.2 Forms and activities of rural tourism in Cyprus*

Rural tourism activities in Cyprus are mostly associated with the traditional character of the Cyprus' rurality, in an agricultural environment. This is what the respondents mentioned as the 'authentic Cyprus' (Respondents 5, 7, 11 and 14). In this respect, rural tourism encompasses the accommodation of tourists in places with traditional environment. As mentioned by the Cyprus Agrotourism Company (Respondent 11), there are various types of accommodation in rural areas, such as: those that operate as small hotels and provide breakfast and other services to the tourists, those that are self-catering or bed and breakfast accommodations and those accommodations that combine the residence in traditional restored spaces that offer also modern amenities in the rural areas. The respondent mentioned that locals play an active role to rural tourist experience, from ambassadors of the local hospitality to the active providers of agricultural tourism experiences. Moreover, rural tourist activity emphasises in great detail the traditional character of the locality (Cyprus Agrotourism Company, 2018).

Another form that takes place in rural tourism areas according to the interviews is cultural and religious tourism. As mentioned by the respondents cultural, religious and historic traces are scattered all around the island and this is something of great significance since: "You can find culture in all over the island" (Respondent 8). Nonetheless, in regards to culture, some tourism professionals argued that it is not fully appreciated, in the degree that it can become an autonomous tourist activity. For instance, a respondent representing the travel agent association mentioned (Respondent 13):

“Let's start from our place... our history... I don't really see it. Yes, we do have archaeological places that are connected to our history but we don't have this element such as the Parthenon, or Colosseum that will attract tourists... we don't have the core element that will bring tourists.”

The above proposition is not embraced by the tourism policy that indicates that cultural elements of Cyprus are one of the most important activities for tourists (Respondents 2 and 12). As Respondent 4 indicates:

“Tourists can have the opportunity to visit in a short proximity [due to the limited space of the island] various different cultural characteristics of the Cypriot history; from relics of the classical Greek period till monasteries on the mountains and traditional bridges in villages.”

Nevertheless, both tourism policy and professionals agree that despite the evident elements of Cyprus’ culture there are no easily recognisable primary cultural tourism attractions on the island. According to McKercher and duCros (2002), primary cultural tourism attractions play a critical role in shaping a destination’s image and they are important attributes that influence visitation. They tend to attract people from longer distances that are willing to spend their limited resources in order to live unique experiences in them. As such, the interviewees argued that both quantity and quality of cultural heritage in Cyprus is undeniable; however, people visit cultural places in rural areas only as an adjunct to another rural activity rather than an autonomous travel trip. However, most of them claimed that cultural and religious tourism has a great potential for the long-term sustainable tourism development of rural areas.

The third rural tourism element is nature-based tourism. Almost all the interviewees mentioned the significance of the natural environment of the rural landscapes, especially those located in mountainous areas. According to the Troodos Development Company (2017), the mountain of Troodos [the largest mountain of the island] is popular for its thick forests and great mines. Nonetheless, as Respondents 14 and 11 mentioned, many areas of Troodos mountain are underdeveloped mostly due to the large distances from the urban centres of the island, not because of the actual distance, but mostly due to the natural landscape and the mountainous areas of Troodos. These elements challenge tourists to visit many areas of Troodos, despite their natural magnificence and wealth.

Finally, the last form of rural tourism mentioned by the interviewees is event tourism. According to the respondents, traditional events in rural places of Cyprus contribute directly to the many areas’ prosperity. These events are connected to backward linkages with traditional agricultural activities and practices (i.e., traditional culinary activities, local food and wine production and consumption, local produce, etc.). For instance, Respondent 2, representing the tourism policy mentioned:

“We have various types of events that embrace the rurality of the island such as the Rose festival, Zivania festival, Wine festival, and so on. Through these festivals that take place almost the whole year we are trying on the one hand to eliminate seasonality and on the other to boost traditional techniques of making things. This way, we are trying to bring tourists to the real character of the island’s rural places.”

Moreover, many hotels of the island even at the high touristic areas see in the events the originality and authenticity of the place they represent (Respondents 6 and 7). For this reason, hoteliers make agreements with local performers and present traditional folklore nights in their premises while others arrange tours that bring tourists to local distilleries, farms and companies that produce traditional products. As such, event tourism mainly expressed through the form of local festivals, is one of the rural tourist activities of the island that actively contributes to local residents’ well-being.

### *6.3 Rural tourism and residents’ well-being*

All respondents indicated that rural tourism plays a significant role to the well-being of local residents. As argued:

“The promotion of alternative forms of tourism such as rural tourism is an imperative strategy for the revitalisation of the rural areas in order to ensure a qualitative tourism product for the traveller and a good life for the resident there.” (Respondent 9)

Obviously, among the top impacts of rural tourism for residents' well-being, were the economic ones:

“The niche forms of tourism under the umbrella of rural tourism, on the one hand help to complement the activities of traditional tourism, and therefore improve our tourist product, and on the other hand, help local destinations to have tourism all over the year... through quality they lengthen the tourism season... hotels remain open during the winter, the restaurants are open, more cultural activities are present... more stakeholders, such as the agricultural sector, are benefited economically through this strategy.” (Respondent 2)

Indeed, according to the literature, aspects of rural tourism or tourism in regional areas can contribute positively to the local economy. For example, the tourist interest in local food and wine, not only is associated to the cultures and landscapes of the areas that produce them, but it also necessitates the direct expansion of backward economic linkages, recognising at the same time the social and environmental connections that may reassure the roles, responsibilities and potential for further expansion of the place (Hall and Mitchel, 2005). In other words, only for the culinary tourist activities in a region, several experts from the area are required to perform and deliver a holistic tourist experience. As such, the role of local employment, not only from the tourism sector but also from other industries is vital for rural tourism.

Along the same lines, Respondent 14 argued that rural tourism helps local communities to sustain their local workforce (and their families) since the latter do not need to immigrate to sea resort destinations, for finding jobs in tourism. As argued:

“... rural tourism activities help the decentralisation of the tourist zones and thus the maintenance or even increase of population in the rural areas. There are many people that do not want to leave their villages but they need to do so because they cannot find any jobs... or others that want to go to regional places but cannot find an economic activity there... rural tourism, helps them deal with their traditional economic activities or even with tourism itself.”

In economic terms, traditional activities are strengthened, because of tourism demand for them (i.e., agricultural tourism, wine tourism, etc.), and hence offer new (or further) income to local residents who do not necessarily work directly in the tourism sector. As Respondent 11 stated:

“In the wine villages of Cyprus, you can see an interest by tourists on the ways of making wine in the traditional way. Those travellers that love wine appreciate the whole production process. For them is a unique experience... Of course, in order for this experience to be delivered we need the active contribution of locals in the industry; from the cultivation of the grape till the distillery and sale of the wine.”

Additionally, the small-scale character of rural tourism supports local investments. As Respondent 11 claimed:

“There are many investors that have houses on regional areas and decide to return to their villages and deal with tourism... in contrast to touristic places where much of the investments are of foreign interests, rural tourism's infrastructure and activities are mainly owned and performed by local people.”

Therefore, more local investments create fewer dependencies on foreign investors and capital.

In a sociocultural aspect, employees in rural tourism also have the chance to increase their knowledge and thus expertise and competences, through numerous training products, provided by several public and private developmental companies and the tourism policy. According to Respondent 11, one of the main activities of Cyprus Agrotourism Company is the training and education of those entrepreneurs dealing with rural tourism activities on subjects regarding hospitality, service-quality and tourism management. Additionally, as the respondent complemented, this measure is going to increase since more emphasis is given by the tourism policy, on the projection of niche tourism, such as rural tourism, advancing qualitative tourism services. Tourism policy makers agreed with the above argument and added that one of their main activities as an organisation is to support the local authorities and population, as far as tourism activities are concerned, such as training and consultancy in several matters (Respondents 12 and 13). The cooperation of the public and private sector towards the support of local population, can make agricultural tourism and in expansion rural tourism, a leading sector of regional development (Marques, 2006), protecting and reinforcing the local economy and employment.

Furthermore, Respondent 1 underlined the existence of short escapes where domestic visitors and tourists can travel around rural Cyprus and learn about its natural/cultural heritage. As the respondent commented, this is very important not only for the economy of the local places, but also because through these activities, travellers (domestic and international tourists) have the opportunity to meet the 'real Cyprus' and its people. In this regard, these areas promote their cultural identity, creating stronger images and recognition to local and foreign markets. This has also a socio-political significance for the rural destination, as it endorses and strengthens local entrepreneurship and distinctiveness and supports the political autonomy of destinations, making them responsible for their own fate in the local matters (Boukas and Chourides, 2016; Boukas and Ziakas, 2016; Tetzschner and Herlau, 2003).

Additionally, elements of the rural environment such as local goods (i.e., agricultural products, food), may be among the most significant determinants that can express the locality of the place and promote the overall authenticity of the destination (Povey, 2001). Indeed, the local produce of rural areas comprises one of the most significant attractions for rural tourism. According to respondents, tourists seek authenticity through the consumption of local ingredients; they believe that through this way, they come closer to the local environment of the destination they visit (Respondent 2).

According to the findings, rural tourism can deal also effectively with seasonality. Seasonality is one point mentioned in the interviews as a chronic problem of the conventional Cyprus' tourist activity. The respondents stated that rural tourism can tackle efficiently this problem. The fact that rural tourism on the island is characterised by more moderate levels of seasonality – especially in comparison to mass tourism – was stated as one of the most anticipated positive impacts for the well-being of local residents (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 11, 12 and 14). As Respondent 11 claimed:

“In contrast to tourism on the coast where the majority of tourists travel during the summer period, these activities [rural tourism] bring people during the whole year. There are villages on Troodos for example that have a significant capacity and business during the winter months.”

Indeed, seasonality is an important problem that islands such as Cyprus, face. Due to the seasonality, many industries have limited or inexistent operation during the winter months. During these months, people remain without a basic professional activity and thus income; on the other hand, during the peak period both parents in the household work for long hours; in both cases, this has a serious impact in the structure of family (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016) and eventually the quality of life in tourist zones.

According to respondents, even though there is still a seasonal character overall, rural tourist destinations tend to deal with it in a better degree. Moreover, because rural tourism is of smaller scale many tourist companies tend to be family oriented local entrepreneurships. For them, the character of tourism is more personal and therefore there is a tighter relationship in the family structure. As mentioned in the interviews: “the tourist activity in the rural areas is more relaxed... therefore, people working in the sector are happier, in my opinion since they work in a less stressful environment” (Respondent 2).

Lastly, respondents indicated that probably the most important aspect of rural tourism for residents' well-being is that all its forms happen to the natural environment and give the opportunity to local residents enjoy a more healthy way of living among nature, while at the same time highlight regions' natural and cultural heritage. As stated: “... look at around you, this natural environment is the ideal for someone to work in. Rural tourism offers the opportunity to locals to escape from the cities and crowded places and return back to their natural environment...” (Respondent 14).

Another aspect mentioned is the fact that rural tourist activities utilise existing resources such as old buildings renovated to accommodate the niche tourists' preferences and demands or natural heritage elements, such as water deposits, forests and paths. As Respondent 14 mentions:

“Old buildings in villages that for years remained abandoned have been transformed into accommodation units such as boutique hotels, offering the traditional appeal of the island. These buildings without rural tourism would be most probably collapsed. In fact, there are developmental schemes by the government that support the renovation of these properties in order to protect their local character. This is something of extreme importance for the island since you can see places that used to be empty and through [rural] tourism become alive again.”

The support of tourism policy towards the rejuvenation of local areas by maintaining traditional villages is one of the pivotal axes of rural tourism development in Cyprus. As Respondent 11 suggests:

“There are conditions that need to be met in order to guarantee the long-term viability of the project. For instance, in order to be financed to renovate your old property, let's say a house you inherited, you need to live permanently at the rural destination. This way you can manage your tourist property fully, you can directly involve to tourism hospitality, you can bring people to work there, and eventually you generate wealth to the local community supporting also other industries.”

In this regard, rural tourism has contributed positively to the life of rural areas.

In conclusion, according to the interviews, locals not only directly contribute to the rural tourist experience but they are also benefited in many ways: economically since they earn extra income from the support of the increased demand for the local produce, socially because local produce signifies the society of the place, culturally since

traditional ways of production and consumption are rejuvenated and environmentally since in the majority of the case these traditional techniques are of small-scale and respect the local fabric (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016; Boukas and Chourides, 2016; Ziakas and Boukas, 2015; Sharples, 2008). Therefore, rural tourist experiences with the direct involvement of local people can create a more sustainable environment for people to live in. This ultimately, leads to a better way of living.

#### *6.4 Challenges and opportunities of rural tourism in Cyprus and the role of local residents*

To a large degree interviewees argued that for an island like Cyprus, rural tourism is beneficial for the well-being of locals in environmental, social, economic and political aspect. Respondents have connected rural tourism and its benefits to the sustainable tourism development of the island, the product diversification, the elimination of seasonality and the respect of the local community. Nonetheless, as argued, there are several challenges that rural tourism faces. One of the main obstacles is related to the local authorities and how they view tourism. As mentioned by a policy maker representative (Respondent 4):

“Local authorities are responsible because the most of them do not deal in the degree they should, with local culture and museums... The local policy that cares about the good of the community could inform local residents of villages that they should have collaborations with each other... there is this thing in the villages, that they have rivalries... they are small societies with micro-interests.”

As the respondent explained, despite any benefits of rural tourism on residents' well-being, there are problems in its application on many rural areas because of lack of collaboration among community stakeholders, local government and public. As such, the benefits of rural tourism are lost together with the opportunities of further tourism development.

Moreover, according to Respondent 11, the above situation is one of the reasons that make tourism planning on the island to ‘come from above’, meaning the national tourism policy. In order for rural tourism to be applied successfully, more freedom needs to be given on the local communities' leaders and communities. Planning at the local level, as explained, can become more successful since locals know their resources and could find more ways regarding how to deal with them. However, the respondent explained that this is something difficult to be done due to the great number of areas and the need for a coordinated rural tourism programme with emphasis on sustainable development that everyone should follow.

In the same line, due to the fact that rural tourism is a fragmented product that occurs in several areas, it creates contradictions based on micro-interests. As claimed (Respondent 14):

“It was very difficult to put everyone under the same umbrella. It was very difficult to coordinate all those villages... there is locality... It is difficult to communicate... we have managed to convince them that our role is to promote the entire area, but still we don't talk the same language...”

While niche forms of rural tourism are not enough to generate vast tourism flows on a specific regional area when applied individually, a combination of niche rural tourism

forms, in a cooperative manner of several villages together, can build a strong rural tourism identity. The respondent admits that there is still future towards a more efficient formulation of rural tourism strategy.

Moreover, other interviewees mentioned about the unplanned development on rural tourism on regional areas. For example (Respondent 5):

“There is a village in Limassol that they have built through European Union funding, a very nice museum around wine... much money have been invested on this museum... today it remains closed and it is a pity that it is closed... they should ask themselves if a project like this is viable in the long-term... management is always the problem.”

For the respondent, one of the main challenges of rural tourism is to find out the appropriate people to deal with it. As suggested, only when there are those that they want seriously to deal with rural tourism projects, this form of tourism can be appreciated in its full. Lack of professionalism on rural tourism planning and implementation on Cyprus, therefore is existing. As Respondent 9 mentions: “There are many people that only because they have a house in the village, they think that they can work in tourism... you need to have certain expertise in order to deal with tourism and hospitality.” Indeed, the small-scale character of rural tourism allows many small and medium entrepreneurs to deal with it. Even if, simply put, this is not negative, many of these local entrepreneurs fail due to the lack of know-how. This eventually makes them disappointed with the sector overall. As argued (Respondent 2):

“Because some entrepreneurs do not have any knowledge to deal with the various types of tourism met on the rural areas, they fail... of course, this discourages locals to further deal with tourism... we need to deal with education when it is to apply these types of tourism... you can see tourist businesses that remain closed and affect also the visitation to the places, and the overall wealth there.”

Finally, another problem mentioned as an obstacle for rural tourism development especially on several regional areas, is the one of transportation. Respondents indicated that several places, especially those at the mountains, are more difficult to be visited despite their significant features. For their residents, dealing with tourism is much more difficult due to the accessibility problems (Respondents 4, 5 and 7).

The above characteristics summarise the character of rural tourism on Cyprus; while both government and private sector appreciate its character and contribution, they argue that there are more things to be done and still there are enough opportunities to capitalise. In fact, while rural tourism is known on Cypriot life, still residents have the belief that more opportunities exist on tourism developed on coastal areas, rather than rural ones. This happens even because of the lack of knowledge or because of the belief that mass tourism generates more money than rural tourism itself. As Respondent 3 explained, people in Cyprus still consider that because of the character of mass tourism, the majority of money go to these areas and neglect the fact that rural tourism as a more qualitative option could provide more, in numbers and diversity, benefits to them in rural areas. For this respondent, many opportunities have been lost because the majority of concentration still goes to the resort areas.

In line with the above argument, the role of the tourism policy to direct stakeholders in rural tourism is unquestionable. For instance, according to Respondent 4:

“The Cyprus Tourism Organisation does not have a managerial role... but it can help. For instance there were some mistakes in Paths of Nature Project... we realised that there were some misleading signs that could confuse the tourists... they [local authorities] said that they do not have the money... we asked them how much they costed and we supported them financially... we have a good relationship with them... but the decision making is not ours... we can discuss the problem but they [the local authorities] implement the project.”

The consultative character of tourism policy is imperative on the provision of knowledge regarding opportunities in rural tourism. This does not only encompass the provision of training to those interested in rural tourism development (Respondent 11) but also includes the communication of the benefits of rural tourism to the sustainable development of the islands' periphery. In an environment where competition demands new and alternative products in order to differentiate, rural tourism offers the opportunity to do it in a successful and sustainable manner. Moreover, sustainability is much more appreciated today than the past, therefore based on the respondents' views, emphasis on rural tourism will be increased in the future: “Our product is good but old, we need to enrich it... rural tourism can do that” (Respondent 12). As Respondent 9 suggests: “We have so many different types of tourism... most of them are based on quality. We can use our rich culture, sport activities, rich cuisine and deal with the forces of the environment such as the economic crisis.”

Therefore, respondents find on the diversity and character of rural tourism a stronger sustainable competitive advantage. This in turn can benefit holistically the well-being of islands' local residents (Ziakas and Boukas, 2015). Indeed, as Kim (2016) claims in regards to culinary tourism as an expression of cultural heritage tourism, while much emphasis in tourism literature has been given upon the sociocultural aspects of food, through the exploration and knowledge of food production and consumption practices, there is lack of information regarding how food heritage can contribute to the overall regional rejuvenation and (re)development through food tourism. The need towards understanding the strategies whereas culinary tourism, can boost entrepreneurship and hence promote locality, is imperative since several sociocultural, economic, technological and political global forces, affect directly and indirectly the overall tourism sector and its pertinent industries (Boukas and Ziakas, 2013). In this respect, in a continuously turbulent global environment, rural tourism activities may be among the few tourism elements that can actively represent a destination's locality, promote its identity, enhance the place's authenticity maintaining and reinforcing traditional practices and ultimately support in a holistic economic, sociocultural and environmental level the overall sustainable development of regions.

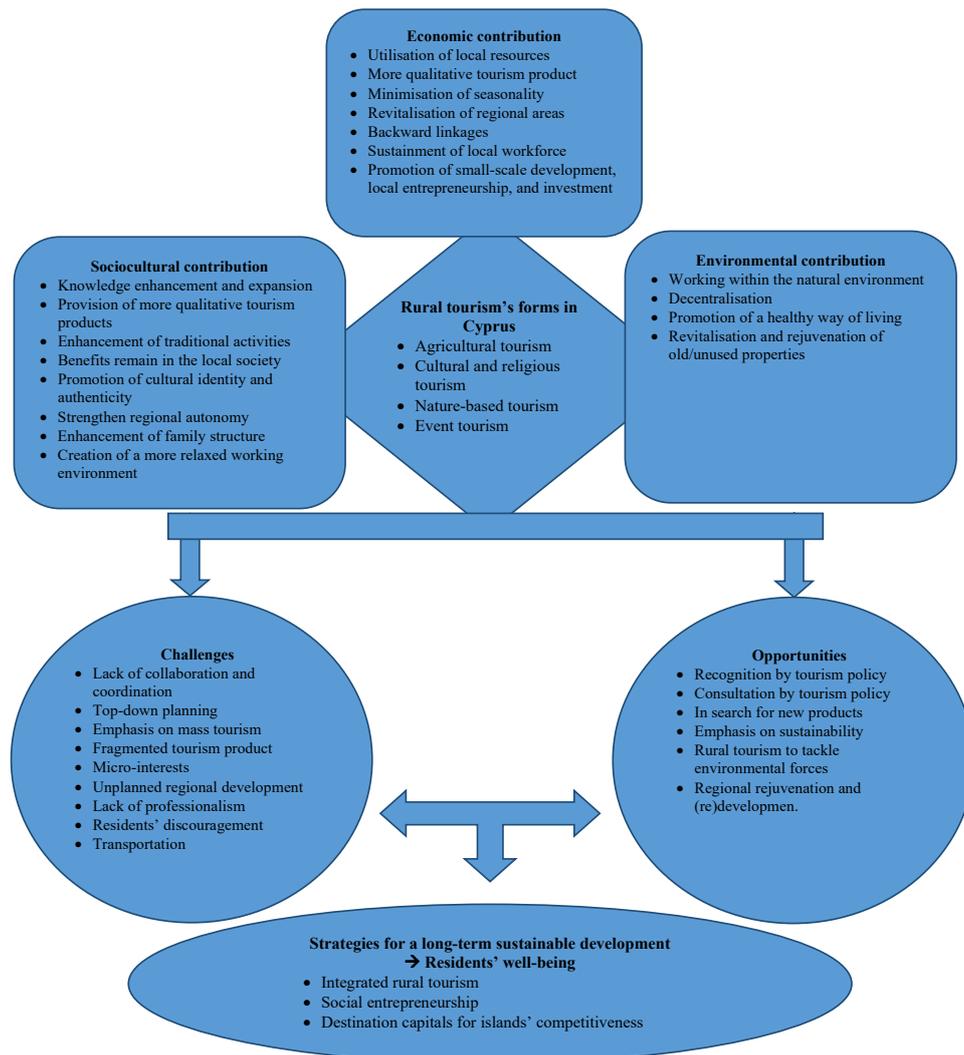
## **7 Discussions and conclusions**

The paper tried to shed light on the role of rural tourism for the well-being on islands' residents by examining the case of Cyprus. According to the study's findings while tourism has been seen as an important sector for the economy's growth and consequently the overall quality of life of locals, the concentration both by tourism policy as well as local stakeholders has been focused on the conventional model of mass tourism. Despite, the obvious recognition of rural tourism, as macro-niche that encompasses several micro-niches (Robinson and Novelli, 2005), on residents' well-being, it has not received

the attention that it deserves and thus, many opportunities for its development are being lost.

Based on the findings of the study, the paper concludes with a framework that summarises the main outcomes of the study and suggests a series of strategies for the long-term competitive sustainable development of island destinations, such as Cyprus and their connection to their residents' well-being (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Strategies for a long-term sustainable island tourism development and residents' well-being (see online version for colours)



According to Figure 1, rural tourism in Cyprus mainly takes four forms: agricultural tourism, cultural and religious tourism, nature-based tourism and event tourism. All those activities are met and developed on various geographical spaces on the island due to the dispersed resources that rural areas offer, while some areas due to several conditions

(e.g., proximity, accessibility, etc.) are more privileged than others. Moreover, rural tourism contributes to the overall well-being of residents. This contribution can be classified into three interrelated pillars: economic contribution, sociocultural contribution and environmental contribution. These interrelated pillars make rural tourism an ideal form of tourism development for islands, that can tackle efficiently the problems of seasonality and can rejuvenate areas and resources that till today remain unutilised. However, despite the positive impact that rural tourism has on the islands residents' well-being, it is not fully appreciated by tourism policy. Several obstacles make the application of rural tourism problematic. The majority of these challenges are mainly man-made and can be dealt with, through proper managerial interventions and better communication among local governments, communities and tourism professionals. On the other hand, rural tourism development is also associated, with several opportunities. The most characteristic one is that it represents a large macro-niche that deals mainly with many micro-niches that are related to sustainable tourism development. The fact that for many island destinations, sustainability has been considered, more that something desired, a necessity is encouraging for rural tourism development. Moreover, several policies today are related to the turn towards sustainable development. As such, rural tourism satisfies the main conditions of sustainability; it is environmental acceptable, socially and cultural oriented and supports the local economy, benefiting this way locals' well-being.

In order, however to deal with the environmental forces and apply successfully rural tourism on island settings, we need to incorporate a series of strategies that will make islands sustainably competitive, affecting hence, their residents' welfare. The first strategy suggested is the incorporation of IRT. As mentioned earlier in the literature, IRT emphasises the optimal utilisation of resources while at the same time protects them, leading this way to sustainability (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008). Cawley and Gillmor (2008, p.319) argue that for the integration of rural tourism, seven features need to be considered:

- a ethical concerns for the promotion of multidimensional sustainability
- b the empowerment of local people
- c local ownership and resource use
- d tourism as a complement to other economic activities in the local landscape
- e networking among local stakeholders
- f incorporation on local systems
- g an appropriate scale of development.

According to the authors, having in mind sustainability, rural destinations (producers, host communities and support agencies) can seek their competitive advantages on the elements that the rural environment offers. In order however, this to be implemented successfully, there is a need for 'endogeneity' through the incorporation of local resources and ownership, 'complementarity' through the cooperation of tourism and other activities (the backward linkages as mentioned in the findings) and finally 'appropriateness of scale'. The authors conclude that the above strategies will be effective, through the suitable 'networking' and local integration or 'embeddedness', in order to project local and extra-local cooperation and bring tourism close to other sectors.

Based on the above proposition, one of the main tools to enhance residents' well-being is their incorporation on several aspects of tourism management, from the formulation, till the implementation and evaluation stages. As such, locals' contribution becomes an integral part of rural tourism development and changes their current role; from a peripheral element of tourism planning dictated from a distant policy maker, to protagonists that provide resources, expertise and overall insight regarding the planning, development and management of their regional areas and the pertinent tourism produce. As mentioned in the findings, better communication among local stakeholders and the tourism policy is needed to deal with possible micro-interests and internal rivalries. In order for this to be achieved, both parties need to understand the contribution of rural tourism. In this respect, a communication scheme initiated by tourism policy that would stress the collaboration among stakeholders and its derived benefits regarding rural tourism would be appropriate. According to Jamal and Getz (1995), collaboration as a dynamic process-oriented strategy, may be appropriate for managing contradictory domains in local tourism planning and the coordination of local resources. The authors argue that collaboration can add the foundations for the community involvement in regional planning, by selecting key stakeholders and promoting the various public interests. As such, tourism policy through its communication plan should incorporate more actively the local element of the rural tourist areas.

In line with the above argument, a second strategy proposed in developing rural tourism, is the adaptation of social entrepreneurship while dealing to rural tourism products. According to Boukas and Chourides (2016), social entrepreneurship differs to the individual entrepreneurship, because it incorporates innovative thinking and creative understanding in order to channel improvements in a social rather than an individual context. According to Dees (1998), social entrepreneurship adopts a mission to create and sustain social value, recognises and seeks for new opportunities to serve this mission, creates a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning, acts confidently considering the existing resources and exhibits increased liability to the community it serves and outcomes it produces. In this regard, social entrepreneurship is based on the cooperation of many individuals, supports social innovations creating favourable opportunities and acts as a catalyst for tackling risks and uncertainties (Tetzschner and Harlau, 2003). Rural tourism products can become the innovative tools for supporting social entrepreneurship. The utilisation of local resources, under the model of social entrepreneurship, can spread the benefits of tourism towards local communities, leading this way to their welfare and consequently to their sustainable development.

A final strategy suggested towards a long-term sustainable development and residents' well-being is the identification of rural destinations capitals and their efficient utilisation. According to Sharpley (2009), the productive assets of any destination are based upon destination capitals: sociocultural, human, environmental, financial, political and technological. The most significant task for the destination – in this case the island rural destination – is the identification of its capitals' nature and their interconnectedness in order to generate benefits to both tourists and destinations communities. Based on the local community/destination needs, destination capitals can be used in order to deal with external forces and recognise developmental opportunities. Rural destinations of islands can offer these destination capitals where under the appropriate management can enhance their overall competitiveness, dealing with the challenges and capitalising on current opportunities. As such, the recognition and management of these capitals may

enhance local residents' well-being, in the long-term, creating sustainably competitive experiences.

The above recommendations could also be parallelised with community-based tourism (CBT) as a rural development strategy. As Tolkach and King (2015) suggest, a CBT enterprises' network can help the development of tourism in rural areas and deal with challenges such as limited knowledge, funding and marketing issues, enhancing this way the rural livelihoods. The authors argue that the success of this network should be based on the authoritative funding body and the communication between managers and stakeholders that sustain a balance of power. Adopting this suggestion, tourism policy of islands should actively support rural tourism development by maintaining, enhancing and coordinating local stakeholder relationships within the rural tourism environment.

The specific framework is vigorous and progressive and is based on a macro-niche, rural tourism. A limitation of this study is that it views island residents' well-being through the glance of policy makers and stakeholders of tourism on Cyprus. Interviewing also local residents in different areas of the island would provide a more holistic image regarding the under study matter. In this regard, future research should also study the views of individual locals or local communities' stakeholders, regarding rural tourism development and their well-being. Furthermore, future research needs to concentrate on specific micro-niches of rural tourism and their contribution to the overall residents' well-being of islands. According to the findings, rural tourism could be an ideal form of niche tourism that can confront successfully the problems of seasonality, unbalanced development and regional disparity. Nonetheless, by its own, rural tourism is not the solution. In order, for the sustainable development of islands to be achieved and thus residents' well-being to be guaranteed in the long-term, attention needs to be paid to the ways and strategies that rural tourism is applied. IRT, social entrepreneurship and investment on the destination capitals are just some indicative strategies for the effective management of rural tourism. Future research needs to highlight also other strategies towards a more holistic application of rural tourism activities. Nonetheless, the specific paper underlined the crucial role of rural tourism to the overall sustainable development of island destinations and signified the importance of rural tourism products for islands residents' well-being. By investing on rural tourism on islands several benefits can be achieved: more unique and differentiated experiences for the tourists can be created and therefore more attractive tourist products can be marketed; a more harmonic utilisation of resources can be achieved guarantying therefore, their long-term viability and a better environment for locals to live in, work and grow is assured.

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