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## Editorial

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**Biographical notes:** Athanasios Ragkos is an Agricultural Economist, currently associate researcher at the Agricultural Economics Research Institute of the Greek Agricultural Organization 'DIMITRA'. He obtained his PhD Diploma in 2008 from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Since then, he has taught several courses in Greek universities and technological institutions. He has participated in more than 35 research projects (six of which as a Coordinator) and has published more than 85 papers in peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings. His research fields include the economics of agricultural and animal production, environmental economics, the multifunctional character of agriculture and extensive farming systems, project appraisal and sustainable rural development. He is experienced in designing interdisciplinary approaches regarding the above-mentioned research fields by maintaining close collaboration with scientists of relevant fields.

Stavriani Koutsou is a Professor at the International Hellenic University. She is an agricultural socio-economist specialising on human geography in rural areas. She is currently a Professor at the International Hellenic University, Thessaloniki Greece, in Department of Agriculture, Direction of Rural Economy and Entrepreneurship. She obtained her PhD Diploma in 1996 from the University of Nanterre (Paris X), Paris, France. Her scientific interests include collective actions in agriculture, transformations of rural societies, female entrepreneurship in rural areas, rural development and the evolution of rural societies. She has authored numerous papers in peer-reviewed journals and conferences and has coordinated research projects regarding social capital in Greece and collaboration in rural areas.

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Rural areas are actually in the crossroads, facing a wide variety of challenges that are shaping their present and future trajectories. Rural development policies favour a shift from primary sector to other income and employment generating activities, but still agriculture, livestock production and forestry constitute the main activities for rural population. According to the prevailing production patterns, ranging from conventional production and sustainable intensification to extensive and organic patterns, rural areas

and societies are looking for ways to ensure their viability and increase their resilience against unpredictable external conditions. Climate change, volatile food markets, changing consumption patterns and dietary preferences, competition in global value chains and the evolution of short ones are only a few of the challenges that determine the development pathways of rural areas.

In this framework, innovations, in all their forms, play perhaps the most important role in shaping sustainable futures. Farmers are in dire need of new business models, activities, technologies, methods and tools that pertain to their specific needs and are compatible to their beliefs, values and capabilities. While agricultural research and technology provide very important and promising outcomes, there are several factors that will decide whether these outcomes will be adopted by farmers and will contribute to ensure higher levels of sustainability.

The aim of the 'Research advancements towards sustainable rural areas' is to present state-of-the-art research regarding solutions and advancements towards higher levels of economic, social and environmental sustainability of the production of food and forest products. Particular focus is set on rural societies, traditional and climate-friendly practices as well as supply chain arrangements and governance issues for local resources. The special issue primarily targets researchers, academics and young scientists in a wide range of disciplines, from agricultural economics and agronomy to environmental studies, rural sociology and public/farm policy.

The special issue includes a selection of ten papers, eight of which were presented at the 9th International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies in Agriculture, Food & Environment, September 24–27, 2020, Thessaloniki, Greece. Authors provided new extended versions of the papers presented at the conference. In addition, two papers which were not presented at the conference were also accepted for publication.

The ten papers appearing in the special issue cover for a wide range of today's challenges in rural areas. Two papers (Solomou et al. and Georgoulis et al.) present research results linking environmental and physical parameters on traditional local production systems – one in valorising terraces and stone walls in mainland Greece and the other in a typical coastal area where fisheries and mussel production are key economic activities. Relevant to this, Koulelis et al. provide an overview of challenges and sustainable practices for resource management. The effects of adopting sustainable farming practices are examined by Ouiminga, while Spataru et al. analyse the development of peri-urban agriculture. Two papers focus on alternative tourism: Apostolidis evaluates the development of tourism in mountain areas of Greece, while Fytopoulou et al. focus on the emerging wine tourism sector by developing a typology and discussing complementary activities for rural population. In a similar context, Spilioti et al. examine possible ways to valorise local resources, by taking the example of the Greek PGI cheese 'Ladotyri Mitilinis'. Finally, two papers focus on consumer preferences for sustainable food consumption patterns (Kamenidou et al.) and livestock products from animals fed with locally produced feed (Kleisiari et al.).