

## ATTEMPTING THE REGENERATION OF THE ISOLATED AND BORDERLINE SETTLEMENTS OF EPIRUS: THE CASE STUDY OF THE BROADER COMMUNITY OF POGONIANI (1129)

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**Abstract.** The fear of space confinement during Covid-19 pandemic, led many citizens to flee to rural areas, opening again the dialogue regarding rural development. Through the case study of a borderline rural community in Epirus (Greece), the possibility of reviving rural settlements that face severe problems of abandonment and isolation, is investigated. By evaluating the current national and international regulation on rural areas and a SWOT analysing the case study area, this research sets out to examine the character of a modern management of rural areas and contribute to the revival of these isolated communities. The subject of this paper is considered critical and needs immediate attention, as rural areas gather most of the planet's natural capital, which is currently being depleted and degraded.

**Keywords:** regeneration, decentralisation, desertification of rural areas, post-pandemic rural planning

### 1. Introduction

Right before the first lockdowns were implemented, the flight of citizens from cities to rural and coastal second homes, as Nick Gallent (2020) points out, became a defining image of the 2020 coronavirus crisis. The threat of self-isolation in dense city centres, drove many people in the countryside worldwide. Later, this phenomenon got named “urban exodus”.



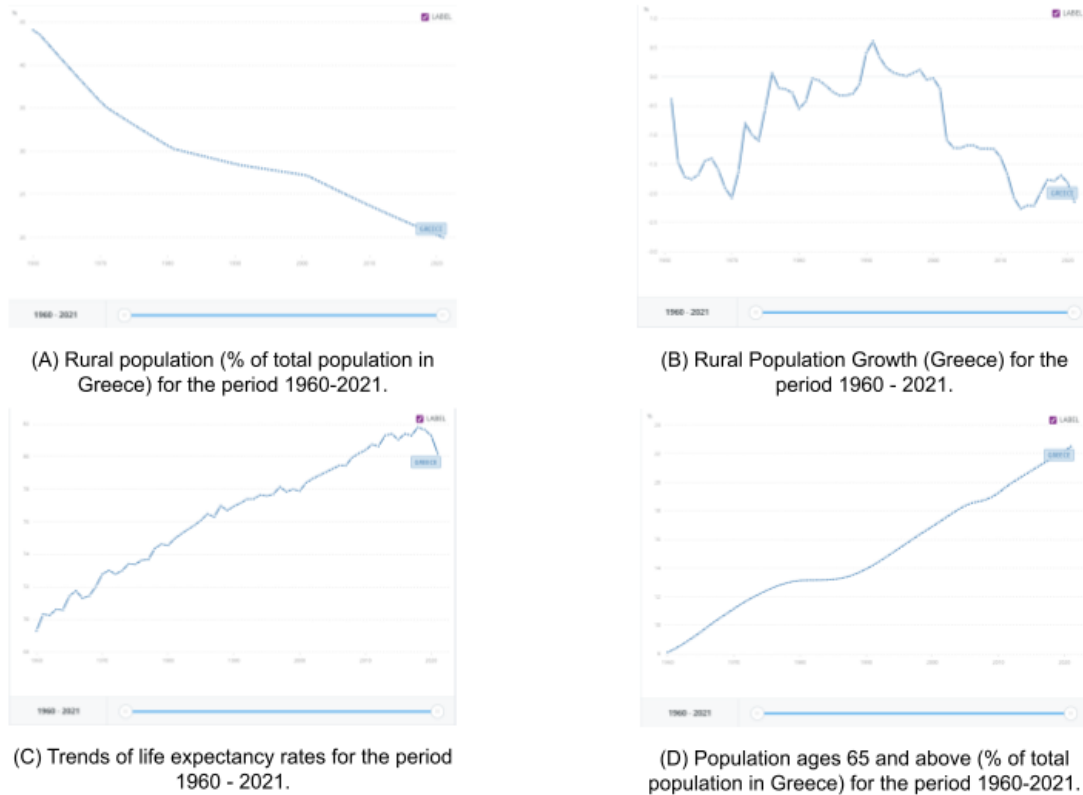
Figure 1. Escaping to rural areas  
Source: Drawing by Clifford Harper (2003).

Such a reaction brought back to light an interesting discussion on the consequences of urbanisation and the desertification of rural areas. As noted by Pikner *et al* (2023), rural areas, although they are presented as dependent on cities, are places directly associated with stability, old virtues and idyllic myths. The temporary exodus from cities to rural areas proved the need of people to connect with nature, but also the suffocating environment of urban centres, despite the fact that with the return to “normality” they returned back.

The pandemic crisis caused a significant impact on people's lives and brought up immediate changes regarding spaces of living, working, leisure and travelling. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic created a window of opportunity for regional authorities to create new and efficient strategies and policies regarding rural settlements by starting from new ideas of organising those areas for a better life quality.

Currently, the population percentage in Greek rural areas is 19.96% of the total country's population (Figure 2-A), demonstrating a -2.1% decline in population growth (Figure 2-B). One more critical obstacle they face is the constant population ageing. It is well known that the world demography is shifting to an era of population ageing, which is recognized by UNDP (2018) as an emerging social challenge that needs to be faced in order to achieve truly transformative, inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

These demographic changes are mainly caused by the decline in fertility rates, as well as the increase in life expectancy. Figure 2-C shows some clear evidence of this phenomenon in Greece, where the life expectancy rate has been increased to



approximately 82 years. By 2050, it is estimated that the elderly will be 40.8% of the population.

Figure 2. Population percentages in Greece regarding rural areas

Source: The World Bank.

In Greece rural settlements can be found in both mountain or plain areas, in the heartland or the islands of the country. However, mountainous areas, although they are famous for their natural, biological and cultural wealth, in their majority face numerous environmental and socioeconomic problems, such as abandonment and isolation (Michailidou and Rokos, 2011). Today in Greece, despite there being more than 2.000 villages, the complicated, multidimensional and interrelated problems of environment and development in mountainous areas, have not been confronted, but instead have gotten worse. An important number of Greek rural areas have been degraded, isolated and abandoned. Furthermore, they have not yet been the subject of specialised spatial planning and analysis, as priority is given mainly to urban centres. Apart from this, the

main directions for such a development focus on agriculture and tourism, depending solely on competitiveness, entrepreneurship, innovation and flexible forms of employment, as well as on segmental citizens' initiatives.

For this reason, this research sets out to investigate the character of a modern management of the rural areas and contribute to the revival of mountain isolated communities, following the values of urban and regional planning. At first an investigation regarding the term "greek settlement", as well as the evolution of the residential network in Greece, was conducted. Afterwards, the national and international approach on the protection and development of rural areas was examined. Through an *in situ* observation of the case study of the Municipal Unity of Pogoniani, a SWOT analysis was undergone in order to examine whether the pandemic has created a window of opportunity for regional authorities to compose new and efficient strategies and policies regarding rural settlements.

An important obstacle while conducting the specific research, was the lack of statistical information regarding the "Urban exodus" in Greece right before the national lockdown. Thus, it was difficult to highlight the intensity of the internal migration in rural areas. According to ELSTAT there is no clear image on how many people manage to escape to rural areas in order to avoid the severe restrictions that were enforced in the urban centres. Additionally, the same obstacle was also faced concerning the precise number of mountain settlements in Greece, as it would have been very helpful to have a database for future management.

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## **2. Background and Literature Review**

In Greece, among the compilation of rural areas, mountainous settlements account for 77.9% of the total country surface (NORDREGIO 2004, Michailidou & Rokos 2011). Up to date, these settlements are considered to be important natural, environmental and cultural residential centres, where traditional architecture, customs, professions and know-how have survived and been passed down to the new generations. Undoubtedly, they constitute "*great examples of successful coexistence between human beings and their environment, as mountainous people have managed to adapt, interrelate and interact with it in harmony and with respect*" (Michailidou & Rokos 2011, pp. 2).

Although rural areas are often associated with stillness and stability, they are in fact a complex network of needs and services (Pikner *et al*, 2023, p. 2), since they evolve over time and continuously transform based on the needs and desires of the societies that

reside in them. Greek mountainous settlements are divided into distinct categories based on their demographics, the geographic location, the topography and the local architecture, dating back from the Middle Ages up to the liberation from Turkish rule (Desyllas, N., 2007). Among them, a very distinctive category is that of the traditional settlements. As stated by the Council of State (2003) traditional settlements are defined as homogeneous residential complexes that have maintained their traditional architectural elements in their fabric.

Aiming for a better management of the residential network in Greece, two basic definitions of the concept “mountainous settlements/mountainous areas” have prevailed, separating settlements based on criteria other than architecture and cultural heritage. The residential network of Greece underwent various transformations in direct connection with the post-war efforts to transition to a new form of international economic and spatial organisation.

Based on the Greek National Statistical Service (1995), mountainous municipalities or mountainous municipal districts are defined as those that are located at an altitude of more than 800m or have an intensely sloped terrain, separated by ravines or mountains volumes with multiple soil folds with higher elevation differences from 400 metres. However, since the adoption of the Directive 75/268/EEC by the Greek Ministry of Agriculture, mountain areas are nowadays distinguished the following way (Michailidou, 2008):

- The Mountain Areas (Article 3, Par. 3) include Municipalities, Communities and Settlements following the conditions: (a) their real estate is located at an altitude of more than 800 metres, (b) their land area is between 600-800 metres and its slopes soil is at least 16%, and/or (c) their land area is at an altitude below 600 metres with slopes soil at least 20%. In case a Municipality, Community or Settlement has one of the above cases of at least 80% of land area or the sum of cases (a), (b), (c) is at least 80% of their total land area, then it is included in the mountainous areas category.
- The Less-favoured areas in danger of depopulation (Article 3, Par. 4) include many Municipalities, Communities or Settlements that are homogeneous zones and are characterised by low population density, barren land and low income. In particular: (a) the population density is up to 45 inhabitants per square kilometre; (b) the agricultural income is less than 80% of the national average, and/or (c) the yields of the main crops are up to 80% of its average country.
- Areas with Special Problems (Article 3, Par. 5) are included in zones, Municipalities and Communities of island and border areas, which have, due to their position, special problems, their agricultural income reaches up to 80% of it average of the country and the fertility of their soils is low (yields of main crops less than 80% of the national average).

Furthermore, an important factor that reinforced the disorganisation of the Greek province was the change from the Kapodistrias administrative system to "Kallikratis". This new system made Municipalities the main administrative instrument, making all central decisions. The problem is that many Municipalities include a large number of settlements such as the Municipality of Pogoni that rules more than 60. Additionally, although at first the Administrative "Kapodistria" system showed that mountainous - semi-mountainous municipalities made up 61.6% of the country, the "Kallikratis" decreased them to 9.5%. Therefore, one of the most important features of the country, its mountainous terrain, is being altered. Only 31, out of 325, Kallikratic Municipalities are mountainous, now occupying only 10.28% of its surface of the country. Consequently, nowadays Municipalities are invited to plan the development planning their territorial area through study, management and execution residential and urban development programs (article 94 par.7 of Law 3852/2010) and (Article 203 of Law 3463/2006) with a direct impact on social and economic life in them, in the quality of life of their inhabitants and in the possibility of its participation of Local Government and of the citizens in the issues that concern them and shape their future.

### **3. Policies**

#### **3.1. European policies and strategies**

In Europe mountainous regions and settlements vary, presenting different characteristics in terms of climate conditions, terrain morphology, economic organisation and population. As Michailidou & Rokos (2011) state, in 1975, the first mountain oriented "development" measure was announced by the European Community, introducing direct income support for farmers in mountainous areas (European Commission 2002). Following, in 1988 it was requested that mountainous areas are not to be treated solely as rural areas, but as separate spatial units that need different development policies (Michailidou & Rokkos, 2011). Since the 1990s, a substantial number of policies have been implemented trying to ensure a "sustainable development" of mountain areas. Important examples of European policies and strategies are the Cohesion Policy, the Integrated Mediterranean Programs (IMP) or the common agricultural policy (CAP), which provides programs such as the LEADER initiative.

All the above measures focus on ensuring a sustainable development, based on three values, the protection of the environment, the strengthening of economic competitiveness and the strengthening of social cohesion. So far, there is no specific single statutory framework that exclusively concerns these regions, except for the Alpine Convention (1995), which only concerns the Alpine countries. The policies and strategies that have been drawn up, concern mainly sectors, such as tourism, infrastructure and the environment, indirectly supporting the policies for mountainous areas. Nevertheless,

for the European Union, mountainous areas are considered to be important "local communities" due to their environmental, cultural, social and economic reserves. One cannot argue that for several years now efforts have been made, promoting good intervention practices, in order to face the continuous demographic change along with the loss of new residents, the need for better connected residential networks, as well as the tourism development based on the great environmental and naturalistic value.

### **3.2. Greek policies and strategies**

In Greece, the concept of "integrated development" began to be spread and understood with the introduction of the Integrated Mediterranean Programs (IMP) by the European Community during 1986-1993. From the end of the 90s, measures began to be taken that focused on the protection and development of the mountainous regions of our country.

To date, the policies of the Greek State focusing on the development of mountainous settlements are simply an interpretation and implementation of the relevant European policies, without any effort to adapt them to the country's needs and characteristics. We could argue that the only framework that can possibly set a direction for a future development of the mountainous areas, or generally rural areas, is the General Framework for Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development (GPHSAA), which recently became a National Spatial Strategy. Its main objectives concern the formulation of a spatial development model that seeks to strengthen the national social and economic cohesion, strengthen the country's role internationally, competitiveness, protection and highlighting the natural and cultural environment and addressing climate change.

Another step for the management of rural areas was the introduction of the Regional Spatial Frameworks (2018) that in fact substituted the Regional Framework for Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development. The new RSF provides direction of spatial development and organisation for every Greek region separately. For example, in this research the RSF of Epirus was investigated due to the geographical location of the case study area. Specifically, it aims to formulate an integrated strategic program of spatial policies for the Region, which will form the basic framework for spatial planning, urban planning, environmental and development options for the time horizon of its validity.

## **1. Analysis of Case Study Area**

### **3.3. The Municipality of Pogoni**

The Municipal Unity of Pogoniani is located in the northwestern greek-albanian borders of the Municipality of Pogoni in the regional unit of Ioannina, Epirus. First inhabitants in

the area of Pogoni are considered to be the Epirotian clans of the Molossians and the Chaonians, starting from the 5th century BC until the first Christian centuries (Fakatselis and Arbyros, 2006, pp. 41). Throughout history the area has met different invaders, such as the Venetians, Normans, Lombards and Serbs, but managed to save their culture, language and religion.

From 1449 AD and until 1913 AD the area was occupied by the Ottoman empire. During those times the inhabitants of Pogoni suffered many hardships, unbearable taxes, pressures of Islamization and robberies. For this reason, several residents were forced to emigrate to Romania, Istanbul, Russia, Egypt and later to America. Important examples of the Ottoman influence can be found in many cultural and architectural elements. Until 1913, the North-continental villages of Polytsani, Chlomo, Schoriades, Tsatista, Mavrogero, Seltsi and Sopiki, also belonged to Pogoni, but today are part of the Albanian territory.

In the most recent history, the area presented a dynamic resistance against the German occupation, with a number of burned down settlements. Later, many inhabitants of the region fled to the countries of the Soviet Union, while the intensifying economic crisis and the abandonment of the region by the central authority, led to new waves of migration abroad (Germany, Australia, America ) and to large urban centers (Athens, Ioannina).

#### **3.4. The Municipal Unit community of Pogoniani**

In recent years, especially in the end of the pandemic, Epirus has become an important destination of alternative tourism. However, a fairly significant percentage of its villages remain hidden, especially if they do not carry any special recognition. In this case also belongs the Municipal Unit of Pogoniani, a critical group of four mountain settlements in the homonymous Municipality of Pogoni of the Regional Unit of Ioannina. The area is located at the north-western end of the current Municipality bordering Albania and at a distance of 70-80 km from the city of Ioannina, on average.

Since 2010 (*Official Government Gazette of the Hellenic Republic*, B1292/11-08-2010) the community is consisted of four border mountain settlements of the area: Pogoniani, Stavroskiadi, Drimades and Dolo. The first three settlements are located in the northwestern borderline of the Municipality of Pogoni with Albania. The village of Dolo forms the border of its community with the broader community of Delvinaki. All four settlements are in the category of pre-existing settlements of 1923, demarcated with building conditions and restrictions (*Government Gazette* 1034/D/1987 & 216/AAP/2015). However, the only distinctive difference between them is the fact that Dolo has been characterised as a traditional settlement and a historical place, as issued



by O.G.G 594/D/1978 and O.G.G 352/B/1967. It is important to acknowledge that the community, as well as the whole Municipality of Pogoni, have been characterised as *less-favoured areas*, which is covered in “Council Directive (EU) 75/268/EEC”.

Geophysically the community is defined by the mountains, Makrykampos (Bozovo) (1,672m), Meropi (Nemertsika) (2,209m) and Koutsokrano at (1,208m). At the same time the Kouvaras gorge, located between the settlements of Pogoniani and Dolo, is another important local landmark. The homonymous stream of the gorge is an initial part of the Drinos river, which crosses the Greek-Albanian border in the direction of the plain of Deropolis. The main characteristic of the area is its pristine landscape, the mild climate and the variety of local flora and fauna. In the area there are rich forest complexes with a variety of species of centuries-old oaks.

In the past, these four villages of Pogoniani were important cultural and educational centres of the region. However, the increase of urbanisation, the economic crisis and the absence of initiatives for maintaining an active population in the area, led to the population's reduction, as well as the cultural degradation. Therefore, this work aims to highlight the importance of a thorough study of the course of the desertification and isolation of the Greek countryside. Today, the economy of the area is mainly based on livestock and agriculture. Additional occupations of the residents are beekeeping and the production of local traditional products.

Bearing in mind that spatial development constitutes a significantly complex process, as it demands a continuous dialectical relationship with social, economic, political, cultural factors, it is important to understand the current situation of the broader community of Pogoniani. Over time, most traditional village structures have changed and been abandoned, as new forms of life, needs and activities take shape. With the unification of the communities based on the "Kallicratis" program under the name "Municipal Unity of Pogoniani" and the integration into the Municipality of Pogoni, the community element that united the residents and created strong ties with the place has disappeared.

Today, the percentage of permanent residents in these four villages has been greatly reduced. In Drymades and Dolos the permanent residents number 4, in Stavroskiadi 5, while in Pogoniani there are around 80, including the students of the two social structures who live in the village. It is worth noting that the specific numbers of permanent residents refer to the winter months, as from March to October they return to the villages of NE. urban dwellers, but without the percentage of the population changing significantly. Many residents migrated to urban centres with increasing urbanisation. Main reasons for this change were economic factors (finding employment, higher salary), age (many young people who grew up in the village left in search of new prospects) as well as education. More specifically, several families chose to leave when their children reached elementary or high school in order to find another school for the

children.

Undoubtedly, this decline in its demographic sector and the change in the age range as well as the percentage of the population in these areas has significant consequences for society. The limitation of the number of gatherings of young people implies the reduction of educational benefits, the difficulty of adopting new work methods and the utilisation of technological advances and the modernization of local societies.

Year	Dolo	Drimades	Stavroskiadi	Pogoniani	M.U. Pogoniani
2001	62	139	93	478	772
2011	60	48	34	425	567
2021	-	-	-	-	629

Figure 3. Population census of Municipality Union of Pogoniani for the years 2001, 2011, 2021.

The majority of basic public and non-public services are concentrated in the capital of the Municipality of Pogoni, Kalpaki, which with the application of the Kallikratis Law acquired the position of "director" for the local residential network ". In addition, there is a lack of a specific strategic framework for the management of all 60 villages of the Municipality. Priority is given to the settlements that gather a large percentage of the population, with the result that no weight is given to the problems faced by the smaller settlements.

Therefore, on the one hand we see traditional settlements being developed for tourism (e.g. Zagorochoria), while on the other hand there are non-traditional settlements with rich cultural heritage that are in decline (e.g. Pogoni district). This has as result in several settlements (e.g. Zagori, Metsovo, Pelion) to increase salty the number of tourists and therefore the number of tourist of accommodation (small or large hotels, rooms for rent, etc.) and at finally, the natural characteristics of the settlement are lost and the purity is altered their original image, now creating a staged environment. Details of her daily life of the villagers of the past are now ways of attracting tourists to the areas.

## 2. SWOT Analysis

Through the use of the SWOT analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the broader community of Pogoniani were examined. The analysis was focused on all four settlements of the unity, Pogoniani, Stavroskiadi, Drymades and Dolo.



Figure 4. SWOT Analysis Table

As Figure 4. shows, among the main strengths of M.U. of Pogoniani is the special character of its natural environment and its geographical position. The M.U. manages to be both isolated and connected to important residential centres at the same time. The rich cultural heritage of its settlements, the pristine natural environment and the lack of tourist exploitation so far, are additional strong points of the area, as these can compose the character of their development and a notable difference from other areas of the Municipality. Simultaneously, the presence of social and cultural infrastructures, the well preserved natural environment, the richness of old trails to be explored, the social NGO structures that host young students, are more examples of the area's strengths.

In contrast to the above strong points, there are many unresolved weaknesses. The main problem is the continuous population shrinkage, especially the lack of younger people. This phenomenon is directly linked to the continuous ageing of the population in Greece, the lack of new businesses, absence of agricultural and livestock activity, as well as renewal of opinions and approaches to local socio-political developments. As noted in the SWOT table, in the four settlements there is also a great number of unexploited traditional buildings that are abandoned. Consequently, we are led to a gradual and continuous degradation of public space. At the same time, a low level of education of the local population is observed, which in turn results in the incomplete local political, economic and social organisation. The secondary and tertiary sectors are underdeveloped, as so far no weight has been given to these categories. Instead, for a period the Greek government took care to close down the country's main manufacturing schools, which largely saved important local arts. It is important to take into account also

that the promotion of less tedious work and the lifestyle shown on media platforms have reinforced the laziness of the local population. This has the result that there is no intense activity in the production of local products. Another weak point of the area is the seasonal habitation. Finally and equally important is also the non-exploitation of cultural and historical points of interest, as knowledge about the place is lost.

At the same time, significant pressures from the external environment of the settlement are identified, which in the analysis are recognized as threats. The main threat to the study area is the risk of foreign investors in the area, which can lead to the uncontrolled development of the place. In this case, the residents and the local government may lose their opportunity to shape the conditions for development, recovery and promotion of the area themselves. In addition, the uncontrolled tourist development of the area can bring about its possible "hotelization" and alteration of its character, if it is not done under the appropriate conditions. In addition, the situation is made more difficult due to the significant limitation of funding at the regional and municipal level, which combined with a laxity in the application of statutory rules for the protection of traditional settlements, can potentially lead to the alteration of the settlement and further degradation of public space. There is a lack of measures and initiatives regarding the resettlement and activation of young people in the province. A significant threat is also the lack of economic independence of the D.E., as was once the case with the "Kapodistrias" program. Finally, a low level of knowledge is observed in the Local Government, as a result of which the strategic movements for the recovery of the place are limited.

Main opportunity for D.E. Pogonianis from the external environment is the extension of the Ionian Road from Ioannina to Kakavia, which is expected to be auctioned in the near future. The development of such a road network will bring a greater wave of visitors to the area. In addition, opportunities for more exchanges with foreign countries will be given. The utilisation of state and European programs will be important tools for the Municipality regarding the implementation of specific projects or studies. Also, the traditions of the area that are directly intertwined with the public space, are potential elements that can work in a direction of upgrading and further appropriation of the public space.

### **3. Guidelines for reviving the broader community of Pogoniani**

Through the aforementioned SWOT analysis, we can conclude that the M.U. of Pogonianis can be revived, as all four settlements of the unit have rich cultural, historical and environmental wealth, which remains unexploited.

According to the *Regional Spatial Framework of Epirus*, the wider area of the Municipality of Pogoni belongs to the *Areas of Special Spatial Interventions* requiring

immediate action. Therefore, the same applies to the M.U. of Pogoniani, focusing on the utilisation of local agricultural-forestry products and of gentle agro-tourism development.

At the same time, the RSF of Epirus stresses as critical the utilisation and protection of natural and cultural wealth, which will enhance the visibility of this unique bordering mountainous area. Furthermore, the formation and promotion of networks is promoted, the nodes of which consist of distinct and interesting destinations. Undoubtedly, the Kouvaras gorge, the traditional stone bridges of the area and the preserved buildings are important examples of monuments and sites that synthesise the special character of the area, which has not yet emerged. However, to achieve something like this, it would be useful for the Municipality of Pogoni to first understand its strengths and weaknesses. So far, there has been no recording on the important characteristics of the area and no interest in attempting to promote them. The area lacks any specific vision for development and her revival. Consequently, some directions are suggested that could be followed by the Municipality of Pogoni for the recovery of the area and for protection of future geopolitical changes.

Initially, it is important to make an in-depth recording and evaluation of services, infrastructure and points of interest in the area. This way you will identify the main character of the Municipality and the settlements that make it up. In addition, a database about residents needs to be created for residents of the area. It is not known to date how many residents are engaged in the primary, secondary or tertiary sector in the wider area of the Municipality. Equally important, at least in the case of D.E. Pogonians, is the tradition of hosting minor children from social structures. While managing young students can be a challenge for the educational system, it can contribute to the development of small communities by their interaction and their inclusion in them. Contact with nature and the Greek highlands settlements can develop a strong link and desire establishment and future activity in the area. An equally important feature of the area is its isolation and virginity, as this can be her trademark in future. The natural environment, the mountainous landscape but the smooth slopes of the terrain could develop a form of alternative tourism, however for the older ages. THIS way a species could develop recovery tourism, disconnection from the city, which they could also take advantage of sports clubs. The existence of a wider network of paths which connects the villages to each other in an alternating mountain and plain landscape, makes the area accessible to everyone, which differentiates it from the rest Municipalities of the region.

Therefore, the cooperation of the Municipality of Pogoni with the Region or with university groups, in order to compile a scientifically thorough site development and management strategy. The external capabilities that will be given to the area with the extension of the Ionian Road up to Kakavia or even the possible integration of Albania

into the EU, further intensify the importance of one of such strategic spatial planning for the region.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The experience of the pandemic gave the opportunity for reflection regarding rural development, a fundamental factor in achieving the SDGs, as UN calls for a review of rural development aiming to end the gap between rural areas and urban centres, as well as better protecting the health of the planet. In this study, the development and regeneration of Greek mountainous settlements was examined based on the existing policies regarding. The research workflow and the analysis of the study area provided an all-encompassing view of the contemporary situation in Pogoni, future possibilities and obstacles that need to be faced.

Consequently, the presented guidelines can be applied on different scales, revitalising the local communities. It is important to realise that in order to preserve the cultural, environmental and human reserves while establishing favourable living conditions for the residents of the mountainous settlements, a balance should be ensured between the desired economic growth with sustainable heritage management. The mountainous settlements can be regenerated if we realise their potential and as long as a specific national strategy is introduced in order to ensure a common vision as a country.

As documented so far, to date, the policies of the Greek State focusing on the development of mountainous settlements are simply an interpretation and implementation of the relevant European policies, without any effort to adapt them to the country's needs and characteristics. Evidently, there is no specific strategy for the development of Greek mountainous areas but the policies implemented follow the general European model for rural and regional "sustainable" development. This study pinpoints that regional development should not be the same for every region following general directions and frameworks. The local administration units should collaborate with the citizens' initiatives, in order to participate actively in the design and implementation of local action plans, since they are the only ones who really know the actual potential, peculiarities, problems, limitations, priorities and expectations of their territory and its inhabitants.

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