

CULTURAL AND SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM AGRINIO, GREECE

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Koutsogiannou Sotiria

Graduate, Department of Economics and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University
koutsogiannouroula@yahoo.gr

Chalioris Konstantinos

PhD, Economist, Department of Economics and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University of Athens
konstantinoschalioris@gmail.com

Karametou Panagiota

PhD, Member of Special Teaching Staff (E.D.I.P.), Department of Economics and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University of Athens
karametou@hua.gr

Mitoula Roido

Professor, Department of Economics and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University of Athens
mitoula@hua.gr

Abstract

The present paper examines the contribution of cultural and sports associations of the Municipality of Agrinio, located in the Regional Unit of Aitoloakarnania, prefecture of Western Greece, to its Sustainable Development. The municipality, with a population of approximately 89,691 inhabitants, hosts a notable number of cultural and sports associations whose role in local development has not been systematically studied to date. The study pursues three interconnected objectives: to map the associations operating within the municipality and document their activities; to identify hospitality and dining businesses located in proximity to association premises and to analyze existing survey data on residents' cultural engagement and participation patterns. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining secondary analysis of survey data (Chalioris, 2023), spatial mapping techniques, and literature review.

The survey data reveals significant unmet demand for cultural participation: while residents express strong interest in theatre, nature hiking, and collective cultural activities of which actual participation rates remain low. A gender imbalance in respondents and a concentration of younger age groups is also noted. The findings further indicate that the economic potential of sports and cultural facilities remains largely unexploited, with the exception of the areas surrounding the Gymnastic Association of Agrinio and the G.F.S. Panetolikos, where business activity has visibly increased following recent municipal regeneration works. The paper concludes that, despite notable infrastructure deficits in both sports and cultural facilities, the foundations for sustainable cultural development are in place and could be significantly strengthened through targeted investment, improved programming, and closer collaboration between associations, local government, and the hospitality sector.

Keywords: *sustainable development, cultural associations, sports associations, Agrinio, local development, cultural participation*

1. Introduction and Research Context

The sustainable development of local communities has become one of the central challenges of contemporary governance, calling for approaches that go beyond purely economic metrics and integrate social, cultural, and environmental dimensions (UNESCO, 2022; UCLG, 2020).. (In this context, cultural and sports associations occupy a distinctive position: they function simultaneously as agents of social cohesion, custodians of cultural heritage, and catalysts for local economic activity, yet their contribution to sustainable development remains insufficiently documented at the municipal level in Greece (Thymi, 2026).

The Municipality of Agrinio, the principal urban center of the Regional Unit of Aitoloakarnania in Western Greece, offers a particularly instructive case study in this regard. With a population of approximately 89,691 inhabitants and a rich associational landscape that includes both longstanding civic organizations and more recently established clubs, Agrinio is far from being a typical over-touristic Greek municipality. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity: the municipality cannot rely on mass tourism as a development driver and must instead cultivate endogenous resources — among which its cultural and sports associations are arguably the most underexploited.

The research problem addressed by this paper is therefore twofold. Firstly, there is a descriptive gap: no systematic mapping of cultural and sports associations in Agrinio, together with an assessment of their economic footprint in terms of nearby business activity, has previously been undertaken. Secondly, there is an analytical gap: the relationship between residents' cultural participation patterns and the sustainable development trajectory of the municipality has not been examined. Without understanding both the supply side (what associations exist and where) and the demand side (how residents engage with cultural life), it is impossible to formulate evidence-based policies for sustainable local development.

Against this background, the present paper pursues three main objectives: (a) to describe the geographical, demographic, economic and cultural context of the Municipality of Agrinio; (b) to catalogue and spatially map its cultural and sports associations alongside the hospitality and dining businesses located in their vicinity; and (c) to analyze residents' cultural engagement through secondary analysis of survey data, drawing on the work of Chalioris (2023), in order to identify both existing strengths and structural gaps that bear on the municipality's sustainable development prospects.

The paper is structured as follows: Chapter 1 provides a description of the Municipality of Agrinio, covering its geographical location, demographic profile, and economic, social and cultural characteristics. Chapters 2 and 3 catalogue the cultural and sports associations of the municipality, respectively. Chapter 4 presents a spatial map of associations and nearby hospitality businesses. Chapter 5 examines the business ecosystem that has developed around the most prominent association premises. Finally, Chapter 6 analyses the survey data on residents' cultural participation. The paper closes with a conclusion section that synthesizes the main findings and identifies priorities for future action.

2. Study Area: The Municipality of Agrinio

The Region of Western Greece comprises three Regional Units: Achaea, Ilia and Aitoloakarnania. Within the Regional Unit of Aitoloakarnania, the Municipality of Agrinio holds a dominant position. It consists of the Municipal Units of Agrinio, Aggelokastro, Thestia, Arakynthos, Makrynia, Stratos, Neapolis, Paravola, Panaitoliko and Parakampylia. According to official data, it covers an area of 1,246.65 km² and has a population of 89,691 inhabitants, according to the 2021 census. The seat of the municipality is the city of Agrinio, which is the largest city in the Regional Unit of Aitoloakarnania, and its morphological

composition is predominantly flat with very little semi-mountainous terrain (Monioudi – Gavala, 2010).

Agrinio is located to the north-west of Lake Trichonida, with the Aetolian plain in front of it and Mount Panaitolikoat its background and it has been built at an altitude of approximately 90 meters.

The roots of the city of Agrinio can be traced back to antiquity, although not in the exact same location, bordering the Acheloos river, which has always been the natural boundary between Aetolia and Akarnania. It was at various times part of the Aetolian League and part of the Akarnanian League, until it was destroyed by Cassander in 314 BC. Archaeological excavations in the early 20th century uncovered remains of the ancient city outside modern Agrinio, as well as scattered antiquities within its built fabric (Papatrechas, 1991).

The historical reappearance of Agrinio came many centuries later, during the Ottoman period, under the name ‘Vrachori’. Its inhabitants were mainly Turks, and in the early 18th century it became the administrative center of a broader region called ‘Karleli’, which roughly corresponds to the present-day boundaries of Aitolokarnania. It was liberated on 11th June 1821 and was incorporated within the borders of the newly established Greek state in 1832 (Papatrechas, 1991). After liberation, the city was renamed Agrinio and began to develop rapidly, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through the cultivation and trade of tobacco. Powerful families (Papastratos, Papapetros, and Panagopoulou) developed tobacco cultivation and commerce. The traces of this development are still visible today through the vast warehouses and tobacco processing factories that survive and are now used as cultural or other public buildings (Monioudi – Gavala, 2010). The expansion of tobacco cultivation came primarily after the Asia Minor Catastrophe, when many refugees arrived in the city, settled in the area of Agios Constantinos and, with their knowledge and skills in such cultivation, contributed decisively to the growth of Agrinio and its establishment as a tobacco center. There was also an influx of population in Epirus and Evrytania (Monioudi – Gavala, 2010).

A defining element of sporting life in Agrinio is the local football Association Panetolikos, which was founded in 1926 as an educational organization and in subsequent years offered significant social benefits to the local community. The Panetolikos football team has become one of the most historic clubs in Greece and has maintained a steady presence in the top football league of Greek football in recent years.

Panetolikos also participates as a club in other popular sports such as volleyball, handball, basketball and Greco-Roman wrestling. Besides Panetolikos, other clubs have distinguished themselves in national championships, such as A.O. Agrinio, the Gymnastic Association of Agrinio (GEA) and PAS IonikosAgrinio.

Regarding sports facilities, a significant problem has been identified in the Agrinio area: there is a lack of substantial infrastructure capable of hosting the numerous clubs that exist (Mitsopoulou, 2016). Specifically, the available facilities include the ‘Michalis Kousis’ Municipal Athletic Centre, the Indoor Gymnasium in the main bridge area called ‘Aerogefyra’, the Panetolikos Stadium and the Emileon SportsCenter training facility (owned by the majority shareholder of Panetolikos and serving as the club’s training center), several neighborhood pitches for amateur clubs and the municipality, and a few private facilities. The shortage of indoor gymnasiums in the city is evident, but the main problem is that the existing sports facilities are outdated and in need of immediate modernization

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining secondary data analysis, spatial mapping, and literature review. The primary empirical basis of the research is the survey

conducted by Chalioris (2023), which examines residents’ cultural participation and perceptions. In addition, the study includes the mapping of cultural and sports associations within the Municipality of Agrinio, as well as the identification of nearby hospitality and dining businesses.

The methodological approach aims to capture both the supply side (associations and infrastructure) and the demand side (residents’ cultural engagement), allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of the contribution of these actors to sustainable local development. A limitation of the study concerns the composition of the survey sample, which presents a gender imbalance and a higher representation of younger age groups.

4. Mapping Cultural Associations in the Municipality of Agrinio

Association	Description
GYMNASTIC ASSOCIATION OF AGRINIO (GEA)	Historic association with multifaceted activities
ASSOCIATION OF ASIA MINOR REFUGEES	Association of refugees from Asia Minor, who constituted a significant part of the Agrinio society
CULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF AGIOS KONSTANTINOS	Same background as the above
PAN-EPIROTIC ASSOCIATION	Association of internal migrants originating from Epirus
TRADITIONAL ARTS WORKSHOP	Important center for cultural activities
G.F.S. PANETOLIKOS	The oldest and largest association in Agrinio
HISTORICAL – ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN GREECE	Organization with significant cultural activities
FRIENDS OF THE FOLKLORE MUSEUM	Small association supporting the Folklore Museum of Agrinio
FOLKLORE MUSEUM	Small museum housing significant preserved exhibits
TA MANOUSAKIS	Dance Association
CULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF DYO REMMATA	Association representing a local district of Agrinio
CULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF AHI VASILIOTIKON	Association representing a local district of Agrinio
CULTURAL – FOLKLORE CLUB OF AGRINIO “OI MERAKLIDHES”	Dance Association
CULTURAL ASSOCIATION – AHI GIANNIS RIGANA	Dance Association
PAN-SOUMELI SPIRITUAL CENTRE OF ROUMELION	Association of internal migrants from Central Greece (Roumeli)
PAN-CRETAN ASSOCIATION OF AITOLOACARNANIA	Dance Association

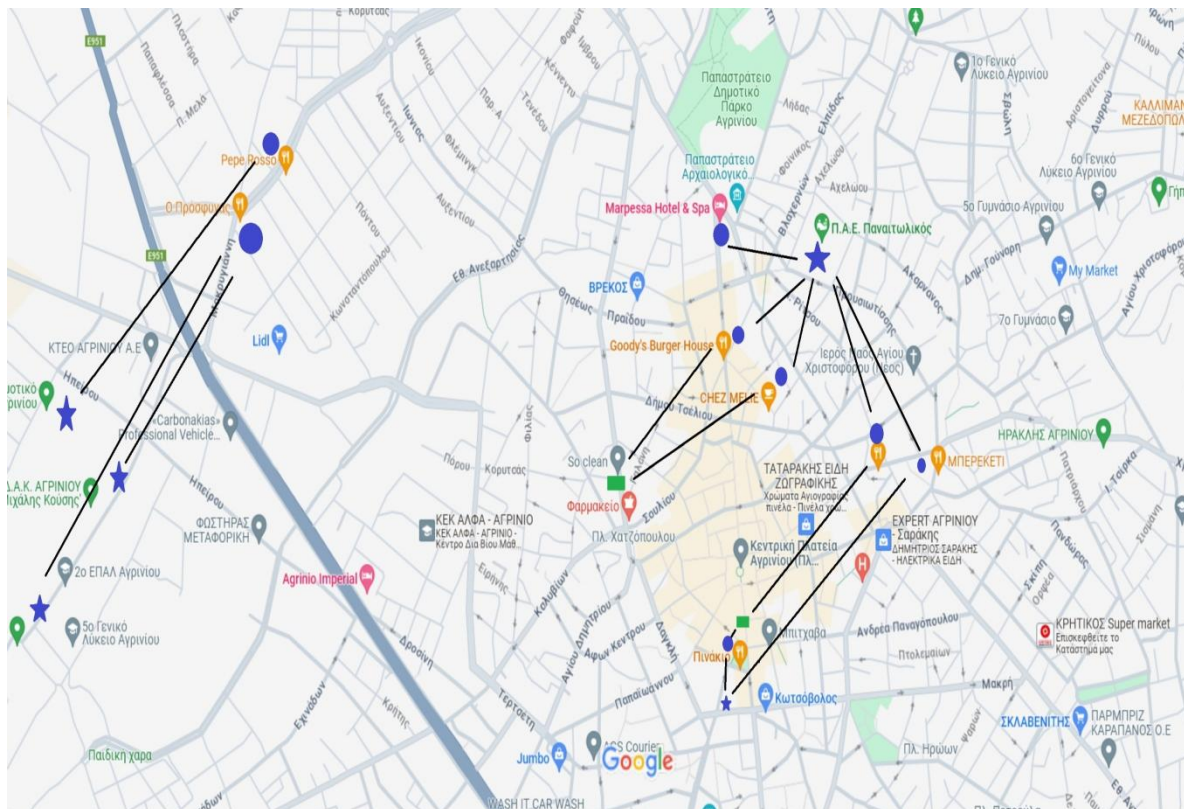
“COMPANY WITH TRADITION”	Danceassociation
PAN-EVRYTANIAN ASSOCIATION OF AITOLOACARNANIA	Association of internal migrants from Evrytania
ASSOCIATION OF PONTIANS OF AITOLOACARNANIA - “D. PSATHAS”	DanceAssociation
DANCE ASSOCIATION – “ZORBAS”	DanceAssociation
AETOLIAN ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIETY	Association focused on the protection of Lake Trichonida
ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS OF TRADITION “THE ROOTS”	DanceAssociation




5. Mapping Sports Associations in the Municipality of Agrinio

Association	Description
1. G.E. AGRINIO	Athletic club with a wide range of sports
2. PANETOLIKOS G.F.S.	Historic athletic club with a wide range of sports
3. A.O. AGRINIO	Athletic club with a football section
4. P.A.S. IONIKOS 80	Athletic club with a football section
5. FI.MBA. PEGASOS	Athletic club with a basketball section
6. A.L.F.A. 93’	Athletic club with a basketball section
7. A.S. ARGONAUTS	Athletic club with a swimming section
8. PROODEYTIKI AGRINIO	Athletic club with a basketball section
9. A.S. PHOIVOS	Athletic club with a swimming section
10. AKARNAN AGRINIO – BEACH VOLLEY	Athletic club with a beach volleyball section
11. EUZIN	Small SportsClub
12. FOOTBALL COACHES ASSOCIATION	Association of football coaches in the broader theAitoloakarnania region

6. Spatial Analysis of Associations and Local Economic Activity

The following map illustrates the spatial distribution of cultural associations, sports associations, and hospitality and accommodation businesses in the Municipality of Agrinio. The legend distinguishes among: (a) hospitality and dining establishments, (b) sports associations, and (c) cultural associations.



-  hospitality and dining establishments
-  sports associations
-  cultural associations

The dense urban layout of Agrinio did not allow for the creation of sports and athletic spaces within the metropolitan fabric; instead, it compelled the authorities to establish such centers on the periphery of the city, relatively remote and detached from its core (Mitsopoulou, 2016). As a result, these peripheral areas show virtually no signs of business activity or hospitality services, which means that the economic potential of these spaces has not been properly harnessed and that a broader economic and entrepreneurial flourishing has not been materialized (Zarentis, 2018). Exceptions to this pattern are the headquarters of the ‘Gymnastic Association of Agrinio and of the G.F.S. Panetolikos, both of which are located within the built fabric of the city and have in their own way shaped their surrounding areas, attracting diverse business activity from both the hospitality and retail sectors.

These areas have been regenerated by the Municipality of Agrinio in recent years, a development that has significantly boosted their commercial value and attracted new entrepreneurs. Around the premises of the ‘Gymnastic Association of Agrinio’ there are numerous restaurants and cafes, and its proximity to the central square of Agrinio, places it close to hotel units in the center and to shopping facilities.

The same applies to the area surrounding the G.F.S. “Panetolikos”000000, which also hosts the refurbished Panetolikos Stadium. This area also benefits from ample parking, as it is not located in the actual center of the city. Its proximity to the Agriniopark, which has recently undergone significant improvement, sets a different tone compared to the heavily ‘cemented’ remainder of the city (Zarentis, 2018). The difference compared to the central area of the ‘Gymnastic Association of Agrinio’ is that there are no retail shops around.

Representative examples of dining and accommodation establishments in these two areas include the Marpessa and Leto hotels, as well as the restaurants Pinakio, Il Mondo di Mare, Marpessa Roof Garden, Sergio, Pizza Roma, and others.

7. Survey Results: Cultural Participation Patterns in Municipality Agrinio

Analyzing the results of the survey (Chalioris, 2023) conducted by researcher K. Chalioris on the contribution of cultural associations and local organizations to the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of an area (see Appendix), we observe that the proportion of respondents residing in the Municipality of Agrinio amounts to 9% (Q.1). The vast majority of these have lived in the Municipality of Agrinio for more than 10 years (Q.2), indicating that we are speaking of permanent residents of the area. The gender ratio is approximately 75% women to 24% men (Q.3), while the age groups are distributed evenly, with the largest proportion belonging to the 16–24 age group (Q.4).

With regards to the employment status of the survey sample, we observe an almost equal distribution between public sector and private sector employees (Q.5), while in terms of educational level, university education dominates, with an additional increase in percentage attributable to postgraduate studies (Q.6).

Following the demographic questions, the questionnaire moves on to questions about cultural life in Agrinio. Specifically, respondents indicate that the three most important places for cultural life in a neighborhood are: a) an arts or music school, b) an exhibition space or museum, and c) a theatre or concert venue (Q.12). These answers are unsurprising, as these three venues – together with the cinema – have become established as the primary centers of cultural production in Greece. In the following question, we see that the most common cultural activity among respondents is going out to dining establishments, with participation in traditional or folk collective activities coming in a close second (Q.13). Notably, respondents indicated they would prefer to have more time for the latter, as well as for walks in nature, as shown in the answers to question 14 (Q.14).

In Questions 15–21, we see the respondents' answers about their cultural activities in the last six months. The responses show that a large percentage have watched films or attended concerts infrequently, while it is noteworthy that there is a marked absence of participation in theatrical performances or dance shows (Q.15–21). This can be explained by the timing of the survey, since in Agrinio such cultural activities typically take place at the end of spring or at the beginning of summer.

In questions 22–24, participants indicate that they would like to participate in more cultural activities, showing a preference in the arts, walks in nature, and collective cultural activities, while also expressing an awareness of their limited engagement with dance performances, photography activities, and so on (Q.22–24).

The most prominent cultural activities among respondents are music (listening, singing, playing instruments, etc.) and theatre, according to their responses in questions 25–32. These activities are available within the Municipality of Agrinio, as there are several music schools, most notably the Municipal Philharmonic of Agrinio, and the historic Municipal Regional Theatre (DIPETHEA) of Agrinio, which in recent years has managed to stage a number of interesting theatrical productions (Q.25–32).

Questions 33 and 34 reveal strong opposition among respondents to any downgrading of local cultural institutions (Q.33–34). There is a total rejection to the possibility of closing down a local library or a local cultural center.

In the section on the importance of education in culture (Q.35–41), survey participants express full agreement with statements such as 'The arts and culture are essential for society' and 'Visual arts, music and drama lessons are important for primary and secondary school

pupils', among others (Q.35–41). Following on from the above, question 42 asks about respondents' intention to actively participate in cultural groups and associations (Q.42). The responses reflect an intention to join an artistic or cultural association or group (51%) and an intention to join a sports club or hiking group (20%), as well as other activities with lower percentages.

Regarding the importance of the family in cultural life (Q.43–44), respondents indicate that it was primarily their mother who had handicraft skills, while their father was involved in music or writing (articles and prose). The importance of musical activities within the family context is also reflected in questions 46–48, wheremost respondents indicate that they have both attended such activities themselves and have encouraged their children to do the same (Q.43–48).

Finally, in the concluding questions 51–54 on the importance of culture in entrepreneurship and regional development, respondents express a positive view that social enterprises providing sports or cultural services and activities make a significant contribution to the economic development of an area and act as a multiplier of social cohesion and economic well-being (Q.51–54).

Question	Topic / Categories	Percentages / Data
DemographicData		
Q.1	Residents of the Municipality of Agrinio in total sample	9%Residents of Agrinio
Q.2	Years of residence in the municipality	81% More than 10 years 9% 4–9 years 6% 1–3 years 4% Less than 1 year
Q.3	Gender	75% Female 24% Male 1% Prefer not to say
Q.4	Agegroup	33% 16–24 years old 26% 35–44 years old 20% 25–34 years old 13% 45–54 years old 4% 55–64 years old 3% 65 and over 1%Noanswer
Q.5	Currentemployment status	36% Public sector employee 33% Private sector employee 15% Self-employed / Entrepreneur 6% Homemaker 5% Unemployed 3% No answer 2%Student
Q.6	Highest level of education completed	49% University degree (Bachelor's / Diploma) 25% Postgraduate studies (Master's) 23% Compulsory education (primary / secondary) 1% Doctoral degree 1% Did not complete compulsory education 1% No answer
Cultural Life&Activities (Q.12–14)		
Q.12	3 most important places for cultural life in a neighborhood (number of responses)	~28 Arts or music school ~25 Exhibition space or museum ~23 Theatre or concert venue ~20 Cinema

Question	Topic / Categories	Percentages / Data
Q.13	Cultural activities carried out in the last six months (number of responses)	~28 Going out to restaurants / bars ~25 Traditional or folk collective events ~22 Walks in nature ~18 Visits to exhibitions & markets
Q.14	Would like to spend more time on... (number of responses)	31 Walks in nature 25 Traditional / folk collective activities 24 Arts, crafts, traditional cooking etc. 19 Visits to exhibitions & markets 13 Team games / sports (non-professional) 8 Walks in the city 6 Going out to discos / clubs / dance halls 4 Going out to restaurants / bars 1 Visits to religious sites
Frequency of Participation in Cultural Activities in Last 6 Months (Q.15–21) — absolute values: 1=Never · 2=Sometimes · 3=Often/Very often		
Q.15	Concerts	37 Never 60 Sometimes 37 Often / Very often
Q.16	Watching a film (cinema)	32 Never 66 Sometimes 33 Often / Very often
Q.17	Danceperformances	68 Never 38 Sometimes 16 Often / Very often
Q.18	Films (streaming / TV)	20 Never 53 Sometimes 56 Often / Very often
Q.19	Theatricalperformances (as audience)	39 Never 64 Sometimes 23 Often / Very often
Q.20	Participation in theatricalproductions	92 Never 14 Sometimes 6 Often / Very often
Overall Assessment of Participation & Intention (Q.22–24)		
Q.22–24	Would you participate in more cultural activities?	114 Strongly agree 18 Do not know / No answer 1Stronglydisagree
Importance of Cultural Infrastructure (Q.33–34)		
Q.33	Would it bother you if the local library closed?	116 Very much (yes) 12 Do not know 6Notatall (no)
Q.34	Would it bother you if the local cultural centre closed?	117 Very much (yes) 11 Do not know 3Notatall (no)
Intention to Join an Association (Q.42)		
Q.42	Which type of group / association would you join?	51% Artistic or cultural association / group 20% Sports club or hiking group 13% Other groups for joint activities 12% Social association / NGO 4%Spiritualorreligiousassociation
Culture & Entrepreneurship / Regional Development (Q.51–54)		

Question	Topic / Categories	Percentages / Data
Q.51	Are you aware of social enterprises providing sports services in your area?	106 Yes 27 No 0 Do not know
Q.52	Do they contribute to the economic development of the area? (sports)	91 Yes 43 No 0 Do not know
Q.53	Are you aware of social enterprises providing cultural services in your area?	66 Yes 37 Do not know 17 No
Q.54	Do they contribute to the economic development of the area? (culture)	97 Yes 27 Do not know 7 No

Table 1. Survey Results — Municipality of Agrinio Source: Chalioris (2023). For Q.12–14 and Q.15–21, absolute values (number of responses) are provided, as exact percentages are not explicitly stated in the original presentation.

8. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Sustainable development of municipalities is a major issue in our time, and all stakeholders are seeking solutions that stand in contrast to the development pattern observed predominantly in island regions – development that does occur but is not sustainable, driven by overtourism and an exclusively economic orientation, resulting in the gradual degradation of both the place and its human dimension. The case of the Municipality of Agrinio is far from being characterized as over-touristic, which is not necessarily a disadvantage, as it opens wide the opportunities for its Sustainable Development. Despite significant shortcomings in both sports (pitches, teams, etc.) and cultural infrastructure (theatres, concert venues, etc.), the municipality nevertheless manages to sustain an undiminished sporting and cultural interest among its residents. The challenge is to link this sporting and cultural interest with hospitality businesses and broader economic activity so that appropriate revenues can be generated.

The survey conducted by K. Chalioris demonstrated the local community’s ‘thirst’ for cultural activities. The foundations exist; there are many associations engaged in cultural activities, whether of a traditional nature (e.g., dance associations such as ‘Ta Manousakia’ or the ‘Pan-Cretan Association of Aitoloakarnania’) or of a more contemporary nature (e.g., tango lessons offered by the ‘Traditional Arts Workshop’). What remains is for this foundation to be supported and expanded so that it can reach a wider audience.

According to the survey, there is a gap in engagement with theatre and nature hiking, but this can be addressed in the short term by the local community, with the support of the Municipality of Agrinio, since the necessary infrastructure is already in place – on the one hand, there is the DIPETHE (Municipal Regional Theatre) and other theatre groups, and on the other hand, there is a significant urban forest that can be used for hiking.

Strengthening synergies among cultural and sports associations, local authorities, and the private sector could play a pivotal role in unlocking the full potential of these actors for sustainable local development.

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