

Private Enterprises and Innovative Interventions in Long-Term Care for Older People: Insights Into Residual Stereotypes of Greek Rural Areas

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Abstract: In many areas of rural Greece there exist remnants of traditional stereotypes that were socially constructed in closed societies where the institution of the patriarchal family previously reigned and are regenerated by the dominant culture. These stereotypes have shaped over time the perception that long-term care for older adults should be provided within the family structure and exclusively by family members. Notably, it was previously considered a disgrace in Greek rural society if children moved their parents to a residential or nursing home. Public or other care facilities for older people emerged just two decades ago, except a few led by the church. However, these attitudes have been softened in recent years. European and National funded programmes have shaped different notions towards long-term care in these areas. This was facilitated by the structural changes that occurred in the Greek countryside in combination with the existing low birth rate in these areas and the presence of concrete migratory flows. The present study explores the business environment that is being formed and its potential to unleash the productive forces that have pinned down the relevant residual stereotypes. It also examines the socio-economic impact of the above enterprises on rural areas. Qualitative interviews were conducted with eight entrepreneurs who have invested in rural long-term care settings for older persons and eight elected chairpersons of local councils. Our findings indicate that regardless of financial support towards private care entities for older people, in order for the services offered to take a more prominent social role, the development of local consensus and innovative interventions is required in tandem. If achieved, such care providers can contribute to the socio-economic development of rural areas. This study provides international literature with further evidence on the crucial role of such enterprises on supportiveness towards inhabitants' quality of life improvement while results can be useful for Greek and European decision-making centers as well as potential rural entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Long-term care, Older people, Rural areas, Stereotypes

1. Introduction

One of the most crucial issues globally at the moment from various point of views is the ageing of the population. It is also the main reason for the problematic demography of many developed societies (Rudnicka et al, 2020). European populations are ageing rapidly compared to other regions worldwide (Grundy et al, 2017), a situation most pronounced in Greece (Camarero et al, 2019). The percentage of the Greek population aged 65 or over is expected to increase during the next decades (Kollia et al, 2018). The result of this, in the context of rural depopulation leading to failures in the provision of certain services (Anastasiou et al, 2021). Considering that the biggest share of older adults is settled in countryside villages, most living alone (Kouvatsou et al, 2020), the need for care services is only going to increase (Jakovljevic et al, 2021). In this regard, the large percentage of population ageing in the non-metropolitan areas is related with significant social inequalities and exclusion, high number of single-person households and increasing health and care needs, with consequences for the rural residents' welfare and quality of life (Babatsikou et al, 2017). This situation exacerbates health inequalities between older residents of rural areas and their urban counterparts (Apostolopoulos et al, 2020). Meanwhile, changes in the average Greek family structure attributed to increasingly complex family attributes and new living standards (Anastasiou and Duquenne, 2020), are significantly increasing the demand for care services, more so than other EU countries (Jakovljevic et al, 2021; Karagiannaki, 2005). The major trends in the above context significantly impact the rural long-term care sector, largely due to the fact that most care providers for older people operate near to urban centres (Prouskas et al, 2021). Despite the existing challenges of rural environment, all demographic statistical rates reveal that long-term care facilities will inevitably need to be developed more in the future. Across Europe, long-term care services are mostly offered to older populations through a combination of public and private entities and certain non-profit organizations (European Commission, 2021). The major differences between Northern and Southern EU countries as far as formal and informal care for older persons in terms of family and friends catalytic role and its contribution to the coverage

of the needs for care related to older adults (Lyberaki and Tinios, 2018). Concurrently, rural regions of Greece are characterized by fewer entrepreneurial opportunities (Thomakis et al, 2022), inadequate healthcare access (Anastasiou, 2020), low quality of public healthcare provision (Apostolopoulos et al, 2022), limited access to high-skilled workforce (Vlachou et al, 2021), problematic rural economy (Papadopoulos et al, 2019) and barriers to many others dimensions of rural development. The latter are mostly related to the high level of sovereign debt, consequences of the financial crisis 2009 and austerity policies imposed by the government (Apostolopoulos et al, 2019). In this respect, healthcare and entrepreneurship have been found to enhance rural development (Khalid et al, 2021) and strengthening rural community resilience (Farmer and Kilpatrick, 2009). Finally, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, more challenges have emerged for Greek non-metropolitan areas in this crucial sector, with one of the lowest resident-to-bed ratios with regard to long-term care in the EU (European Commission 2021).

This study examines the extent to which the existing long-term healthcare provision in rural Greece are ready to meet the ever-increasing demand for care services towards older adults. In doing so, it will consider the role of stereotypes, the impact of European funds and the potential value of relevant private care providers in supporting rural socio-economic development. In addition to the above goals, it seeks to explore the innovative practices implemented by enterprises in this sector.

2. The Greek Rural Long-Term Care Field

In Greece, the demand for long-term care services for older people exceeds the supply (European Commission, 2018). The institutionalized system of long-term care for the older adults is fragmented and responsibilities are distributed among many institutions including the Ministry of Health, social welfare, insurance organizations and local self-administrative authorities. Most of the existing rural long-term healthcare facilities for older people are the result of European financial programs. Over previous decades there has been a transformation of rural Greece through modernizing the past reliance on agricultural economy (Kizos, 2018). However, they continue to be characterized by a small and ageing population due to youth outmigration to urban areas exacerbated by the low quality of living conditions in rural settlements (Kotsamanis, 1990). However, based on recent resettlement of economic migrants, the characteristics of Greek rural territories are changing, thus solving the problem of human resources faced by many established rural businesses (Anastasiou et al, 2021). These changes have created a new environment with business opportunities that are not only oriented to the primary or secondary sector but also to the tertiary sector (Lambrinidis, 2004). In addition, the above-mentioned process has been greatly helped by the transport networks, telecommunications and internet networks as well as by the digital transition systems that have expanded in rural areas and created business opportunities (Townsend et al, 2013). Certain greek rural health providers such as rehabilitation & recovery centers as well as medical diagnostic centers utilised the technological dynamics in the field towards open innovation practices (Apostolopoulos, Makris, and Stavroyiannis, 2023)

The case of older adults is indicative of the extended changes taking place in rural areas. Families in rural Greece retain patriarchal characteristics, including the obligation of children to take care of their older parents themselves, in their own homes. It was considered a disgrace in Greek rural society as well as in other societies of Southern Europe (Jakovljevic et al, 2021) if children removed their parents to a nursing home. Moreover, only the church provided such care in rural areas.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Methods and Materials

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted (Paunović et al, 2024) with eight business owners/COOs of relevant enterprises active in the field and eight elected chairpersons of local councils. Interview topic guides focused on their views and experiences as regards the current status of long-term care in rural Greece, its evolution in relation to the addressing of stereotypes, the respective impact of those enterprises in socio-economic development, and the influence of EU funding. The research team adopted a combination of convenience and purposive sampling in order to recruit relevant participants (Gregory and Austin, 2020). Respondents were based throughout Greece, with a focus on rural locations.

Table 1 : Description of the study sample

R	Status	Characteristics
R1	Entrepreneur	Private nursing home
R2	Entrepreneur	Private residential care home
R3	Entrepreneur	Care services for older persons
R4	Entrepreneur	Private nursing home
R5	Entrepreneur	Private residential care home
R6	Entrepreneur	Private residential care home
R7	Entrepreneur	Private nursing home
R8	Entrepreneur	Care services for older persons
R9	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Peloponnese Region
R10	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Western Greece
R11	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Epirus
R12	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Thessaly
R13	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Western Macedonia
R14	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Macedonia
R15	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Sterea Ellada
R16	Elected chairperson of local councils.	Mountain community of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thraki

3.2 Data Analysis

At first, the semi-structured interviews were analysed separately, followed by an inductive approach using a comparison strategy (Yin, 1994). Subsequently, emerging themes and sub-themes were identified, respectively (Gioia et al, 2013). The coding and category creation (Table 2) were captured in detail (Krippendorff, 2018). In order to facilitate comparisons between sections (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) there was a percentage weighting by the coding group of agreement or disagreement (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Table 2 : Emergent themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Highlights
Predominant rural perceptions of long-term care entrepreneurship	Residual stereotypes	Past stereotypes have been mitigated without being eliminated
	Migrant informal caregivers	Informal migrant caregivers of older people largely meet existing needs in rural areas
	Care for older people provided by church institutions	There exist several church-based care settings for older people
	Care for older people provided by public facilities	Public and municipal bodies provide care at home for older people
Private entrepreneurship in long-term care & rural civil society	Care for older people provided by private companies	Private rural care enterprises for older people have found a fertile ground for growth
	Information and communication channels	Lack of information
	Social consensus	Social consensus is crucial for the development of long-term care entrepreneurship
The impact of long-term care enterprises in rural areas	The role of local elected officials	The role of local elected chairpersons is vital.
	Socio-economic challenges	Socio-economic development
	Unleashing productive forces	Reducing the impact of stigma
	Quality of life of older adults	Improving older people's living conditions
		Participation of family members involved in eldercare within the operational process

Theme	Sub-theme	Highlights
Innovative interventions by long-term care providers	Innovative services in home care for older people	Serving the older adults Quality of life
	Innovative interventions in the facilities of long-term care enterprises	Improving user experiences

4. Findings

The findings were grouped on the four themes identified in Table 2: Predominant rural perceptions of long-term care entrepreneurship, Private entrepreneurship in long-term care and rural civil society, The impact of long-term care enterprises in rural areas and Innovative interventions by long-term care providers.

- Predominant rural perceptions of long-term care entrepreneurship

Respondents perceived that the stereotypes that the older adults should be cared for exclusively in the home by a family member have been significantly eroded. As a phenomenon it continues to exist to a limited extent.

"A lot have changed in the villages. The rationale logic that a family member, usually the woman, would devote part of her life to caring for older individuals in the family has to some extent been overcome. The search for alternatives is a real issue".R4

For some years, women migrants largely solved the problem of caring for older people in the countryside, for a fee, while also contributing to the mitigation of stereotypes. However, the number of migrant women caring for older persons was seen to be decreasing and as a result, searching for alternatives leads people to the private care providers.

"Migrant women have largely solved the problem of care for older adults. But in recent years the number of women migrants in villages has been decreasing and this is where the difficulties begin." R10

The church operates care facilities, but usually for poor people without family. Such facilities, however, cover a limited part of the overall needs.

"There are church facilities where older people without family usually go. Some of those structures however, require high fees for the hospitality." R15

Local government has developed specialized services to support older people in the countryside. However, they are rather limited and cannot address the whole problem.

"There are programs such as Care at Home which are important for older people and offer services free of charge. However, they cover limited needs and as a result, they do not solve the problem." R13

More and more care enterprises are operated in the countryside to meet existing needs. However, these are usually located close to urban centres.

"In recent years many such private facilities are being established in rural areas close to urban centers. Some the children of some older people from our village have taken their parents there." R9

- Private long-term care entrepreneurship and rural civil society

Local rural society lacks information about the services offered by long-term care enterprises.

"As local council chairs we do not have any information from long-term care businesses, nor do we know much about the services they offer." R16

Long-term care businesses for older people, do not have the appropriate channels of communication and information with local communities, creating barriers towards a wider social consensus.

"We don't interfere with families on how to care for their older adults. We only support the public facilities offered. I would not recommend that someone take their older person to a private long-term care facility because I know little about them." R12

Informing local communities through elected local councils present a major gap that long-term care businesses need to fill.

"The role of local chairs is crucial but to date we have not developed a channel of communication and information with them." R1

- The impact of long-term care businesses in rural areas

Long-term care businesses for older people were perceived to contribute to the socio-economic development of rural areas. They create jobs and income.

"Long-term care enterprises, apart from the better quality of life they provide to older people, they also contribute to the economic development of the region, adding value to the local community and creating jobs." R7

Their operation was perceived to alleviate the stereotype that care of the older persons should be carried out exclusively within the home by a family member and frees up family productive resources.

"More and more families are turning to us to meet their needs for the care of their older family members." R3

Long-term care businesses create quality of life for older rural residents.

"Older people need quality care services. We provide them with that, through our structures and the scientific support we provide." R1

- Innovative interventions by long-term care enterprises

For long-term care businesses to provide reliable services to older people either in their homes or in their own facilities, they have developed and provide specialized, innovative services.

"As we are talking about seniors that their families trust them to us, this requires innovative interventions in both quality service and communication. It certainly enhances user experiences" R5

The quality of life of older people by private long-term care organisations is reported to be achieved by the development of innovative services (based mostly on the establishment of cutting-edge technology)

"We established smart devices per room that help older adults towards managing lights, adjusting curtains etc." R6

"We have invested in innovation. Innovative services lead to a better quality of life for older people. People have demands. They don't easily compromise if we don't offer them innovative services. We have invested in modern equipment such as smart beds and ward layouts as well as in digital intercom systems and sophisticated means of transport." R8

5. Discussion

Our findings indicate that the stereotypes in rural areas of Greece, whereby the care of older people was supposed to be carried out exclusively by family members at home, have been significantly mitigated, but not eliminated. This is mainly due to the migration of young people from the countryside to urban centres, leaving the rural areas predominantly inhabited by older people. This evolution has led to care for older people being undertaken largely by migrant women for a fee. However, when there was a shortage of migrants, alternatives were sought, involving private care providers. On top of that, public facilities and church institutions in rural areas are very limited, while the latter often appeared to be a substitute for public sector services (Pöyhönen and Seppänen, 2016). Despite taking advantage of European resources, the long-term care services owned by local government, are unable to tackle the problem in its entirety. Searching for relevant findings in the international literature, the existence of stereotypes towards rural care of the older adults was identified in many other countries as well (Jakovljevic et al, 2021; Okoye and Obikeze, 2005). Stereotypes characterise the perceptions among specific social groups within different types of settlements (Frydrychová et al, 2017; Palacios et al, 2009). The inability of public organisations to cover the care of the rural older population is also observed in other countries (Knapik, 2020). Hence, the provision of rural care for older people by immigrants is not a Greek phenomenon (Zechner, 2008). What the present research has demonstrated as regards the distinguishing feature of greek rural long-term care (for older people) from other countries is the increasing tendency to create private care homes in rural areas, close to urban centres, when in many countries the deinstitutionalisation of care for older people is constantly being strengthened (Herron et al, 2021; Anttonen and Karsio, 2016).

Additionally, the present study indicates the increased need for long-term care of older people in the Greek countryside and the lack of information on the range of services offered by private care providers. This

information deficit creates an obstacle to the formation of a broader social consensus. Specifically, it was highlighted that the availability of private care establishments for the older adults in rural areas is not sufficient, and can be constrained by local culture. Similar findings in the international literature reveal that care providers for older people need to comprehend the various aspects of stereotypes (Nemmers, 2005). They also need to understand local contexts and address stereotypes of rurality through social consensus (Manthorpe et al, 2005).

Finally, the research indicates that private long-term care enterprises for older people in rural Greece contribute to the socio-economic development of areas, create jobs, reduce stereotypes and promote older people's quality of life. Similar findings were detected in the international literature. Research by Hjaltadóttir and Gústafsdóttir (2007) showed that older individuals who receive long-term care feel safe and experience quality in their lives and this crucial factor adds value to a threadbare world that retains its humanity. It is evident that private long term care enterprises create jobs (Torpey, 2011) and enhance socio-economic development (Brown Wilson, 2009). Subsequently, our study highlights that private rural long-term care providers for older people offer reliable and innovative services either at home or within care home services. The improved quality of life of older people is due to the innovative services delivered by private rural long-term care enterprises, and specifically their innovative living settings. They have also placed emphasis on improving their organisational environment by leveraging advanced technologies. We identified similar findings in the international literature. Research by André et al (2014) showed that improving the organizational environment creates quality characteristics in the field. Innovative interventions in improving the social context and providing human-centred care (Loria et al, 2024) for older adults play a significant role in quality of life (Fleming et al, 2014), with the same applying to innovative living arrangements (Adams et al, 2017). Lastly, it was observed that some care providers have developed collaborations with medical doctors in the field of home telehealth services (Frishammar et al, 2023).

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that the rural Greek culture of a family member caring for older people in the home has been mitigated, but not eliminated. The outmigration of young people from the Greek countryside, as well as the arrival of foreign migrants and funded programmes have supported the long-term care of older people. In parallel, it was revealed that the increased needs for long-term care of the older adults in rural Greece have created a trend towards the establishment of many relevant facilities offering care home services, while in many other countries the deinstitutionalization of this care is constantly being strengthened. This study also indicates that national or European financial support for private enterprises operating in the field is not sufficient, and further social consensus and innovative interventions are needed in order to be appreciated by local communities who seek to overcome the stereotypes in rural Greece.

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