

September 2022 | Policy Brief 2

Synergies. The key to Cycladic cultural tourism stewardship and development

*Author: University of the Aegean*

*Introduction*

**The Cyclades** are among the most world-renowned and highly-competitive global-tourism destinations in Greece (e.g. Mykonos and Santorini), with significant implications for their economic survival and development. Indicatively, international tourist air arrivals in the Cycladic islands in 2019 reached 994,000, while the trend for 2022 arrivals is even higher. **Cultural tourism** differs from island to island, and it does not represent a conscious tourism motive for most Cyclades visitors. However, broadly defined, culture remains the main factor underlying tourists’ decision to visit these islands, as it constitutes the Cyclades’ distinctive tourism-attraction profile and competitive edge, e.g. striking natural/ environmental assets, great landscape diversity, and rich cultural traditions and heritage.

*The* ***case study of the******Cyclades*** *was the subject of in-depth research conducted under the EU funded SPOT cultural tourism project, with specific focus on the islands of Andros, Santorini and Syros. In order to understand and assess the state, challenges and prospects of cultural tourism in the Cyclades, an extensive questionnaire survey with tourists, local residents and business representatives, a roundtable discussion, a symposium, and a series of intensive interviews with culture and (cultural) tourism stakeholders took place, during the tourist seasons of 2020, 2021 and 2022. The coincidence of these activities with the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant governmental measures proved to be both positive and negative.*

Generally speaking, the Cycladic islands feature **small- and medium-scale tourism**, since they are not as heavily reliant on mass/ package visitor inflows, a trend also reflected in the locally supplied types of accommodation. The latter include family operations, to a very high degree, some of which may also not be formal/ institutionalized. Nonetheless, when destinations, such as Santorini, gain **more international popularity and tourism investment**, they tend to attract more privately-owned businesses or become part of international hotel chains. The growth and development of all other sectors of the local/ regional economy in the Cyclades (e.g., primary-sector activities, services, culture, and gastronomy) tend to follow those of tourism, which constitutes the main source of income for the whole region.

This policy brief focuses on the **significance and exigency of synergies and partnerships** in all the aforementioned sectors and practices in the Cyclades, as a necessary and pressing priority for cultural tourism stewardship and development, and, through the latter, future local/ regional development and growth. Due to the high degree of interconnection and interdependence between the sectors of tourism, culture, society, local resources, sustainability, development, governance etc., such synergies are complex and interweaving.



# Evidence and Analysis

There is broad acknowledgment of the significant role of culture in local tourism development, as well as that of the implications/repercussions of tourism for local culture. There is also agreement that cultural tourism is the most obvious and promising means to upgrade the Cycladic tourism product, promote the island destination, boost local/ regional economies and raise the cultural standards of their islands—in short, enhance destination (cultural) sustainability. However, there is much room for improvement, based on the unfulfilled potential for cultural tourism growth and on the potential benefit for tourism, culture, and the economy more generally—partnerships/ synergies are considered key to this prospect.

**Synergies and partnerships within (cultural) tourism** were reportedly very low, and mainly in organizing joint activities. Such cooperation among various tourism and other relevant businesses is not particularly favored, except for servicing individual business goals. The emerging picture seems to be that of competition rather than cooperation.

**Synergies and partnerships between the sectors of culture and tourism** were also reportedly very low, although there seems to be general agreement that much potential lies in such cooperation.

**Synergies and partnerships between the State and local/ regional entrepreneurship** reveal an even worse picture, especially expressed from the business side. There is an absence of the State in culture and tourism planning/ development/ regulation/ legislation/ management (including cultural tourism). The State’s misguided actions in combatting the pandemic (mainly through incidental financial assistance) and their repercussions are reportedly leading to an even more pronounced and grave loss of cultural traditions/ heritage, jobs and opportunities for further overall--as well as specifically cultural--development. This shortcoming is especially felt, by all involved sides, in the sector of basic infrastructure provision (e.g. improvements to the road network, public transport provision), information provision to tourists (including destination publicity and marketing) and several other provisions relating to tourism promotion and attraction (i.e. organization of events/ attractions and monitoring of prices), as well as tourism education, support of visual and performing arts, establishment of more family-oriented events and financial incentives for all of the above. As regards the transport sector, there are inadequacies and inefficiencies in inter- and intra-island connections, while during off-peak season both locals and tourists have a very limited set of choices and rely mostly on public trasport. The amelioration of the transport sector will result in the development not only of alternative and more locality-friendly forms of tourism, but also develop clientelle that relies less on organized and package modes of travel.

**Other synergies are also required** from all involved sides. Bottom-up initiatives in culture and in tourism are of utmost significance in cooperative, participatory planning, management and implementation of actions/ goals/ visions, with the patronage and support of the authorities (at all levels), including funding and infrastructure provision. Visions for the future of culture and cultural tourism exist, but there is the risk that culture is becoming a tourism product; moreover, the pandemic has altered local priorities, shifting them towards more realistic goals of survival.

In light of the heightened awareness of **sustainable development and economic self-sufficiency**, the value and significance of protecting the physical environment, local character, architecture and cultural heritage of the islands is highly advocated, through imposing more restrictions on hotel constructions and other tourism infrastructure, as well as on mass/ package tourism. In this regard, the importance of further advertising and communicating the natural and cultural beauties of the Cyclades has been raised, in conjunction also with the urgency of regulating tourism flows (‘overtourism’ in Santorini) in the islands. Further, ‘greener’, sustainable and ‘alternative’ (special interest/ purpose) tourism development, supported by emerging ICTs, seems to be highly favored.

All of these **problems and shortcomings in the area** require concerted and collaborative action. Municipalities have tended to play a very significant mediational role between entrepreneurship and society at large, on the one hand, and the State, on the other, with regard to cultural tourism development and relevant issues, as well as with improved cleanliness, accessibility, parking and public area Wifi provision.

# Policy Implications and Recommendations

* **The establishment and development of synergies and partnerships in all sectors of economy and society** are deemed essential for any sustainable future growth and development of (cultural) tourism, towards local/ regional (tourism) development and societal well-being. These need to be initiated both from the **top-down and from bottom-up**, but the role of the State is crucial and key to all such development.
* **Governmental support**, funding and regulation of cultural activities, heritage and infrastructure are deemed essential in **local/ regional cultural tourism development**. In this regard, the following actions are needed: more (varied) historical and archaeological courses/ seminars, workshops and events; destination information and advertising up to the standard of the high level of cultural richness and heritage of the islands; improved visual and performing arts spaces/centers/galleries; and development of new cultural attractions/ sites/ events. Sustainable cultural management needs to be placed at the center of responsible cultural tourism planning and management, through cooperation for heritage conservation among all relevant stakeholders, without compromising the islands’ cultural integrity, economic independence and socio-economic standard of living.
* **State planning/ implementation/ management of new and existing infrastructures of all types, including transportation/ accessibility networks**. The development and/ or improvement of transport-related infrastructure, including public transport facilities, services and amenities, is imperative for the Cyclades, e.g., accessibility routes/ road construction and maintenance. Inter- and intra-island connections need to be improved and expanded, especially during the off-peak tourism season, new road connections/ improvements made, and ferry-boat and other sea connections established with the mainland, beyond those with the Athens ports of Piraeus and Rafina.
* **Further and more comprehensive governmental assistance to local/ regional enterprises,** in order to offset the impact of the pandemic and other crises.There is an overwhelming need and appeal for governmental tourism-related support, funding and regulation of tourism cultural activities, heritage preservation and promotion and investment in infrastructure, but especially for financial assistance for the local/ regional businesses, e.g. through reduced taxes, loans for investment, etc.
* **Better local-/ regional- and national-level tourism promotion of the Cyclades** and/ or further development of their cultural activities and attractions are necessary towards their economic wellbeing, and thus their cultural and overall local sustainability. Tourist information ought to be available on the public and local internet websites, as cultural events and festivals have tended to be promoted only by private initiatives/ advertisements and not publicly via i.e. The Greek Board of Tourism. Communication of information and advertising/ promotion need to be further digitalized and broadly accessible, not just through conventional means (brochures, tourist information centers and fairs, etc.), but also through new and updated search engines, etc.
* **The Greek State needs to instigate and monitor legislature as well as measures to facilitate the transition towards further sustainability in tourism and overall development in the Cyclades** as (cultural) tourism destinations, encompassing economic self-sufficiency, protection of the physical environment, local character, architecture, landscape, and cultural heritage of the islands, i.e. by imposing more restrictions on hotel construction and other tourism infrastructure, as well as on mass/ package tourism, in conjunction with regulation of tourism flows in the islands. ‘Greener’, sustainable and ‘alternative’ (special interest/ purpose), innovative/ creative and technologically-upgraded forms of (cultural) tourism development, supported by emerging ICTs, ought to be thus established and promoted.
* **General collaboration among all relevant parties (tourism-related businesses, the authorities and the cultural sector) is needed between top-down and bottom-up initiatives and monitoring,** in order for all above measures to take hold and operate. More specifically: Some measures need to be instigated from the top-down and require bottom-up collaboration, e.g. in local/ regional price regulation; in tourist flow controls and curbing the numbers of incoming tourists; in controlling tourism impacts on local culture, nature, landscape and the physical environment. Other measures need to be instigated from the bottom up, but cannot be carried out without the patronage and support of the authorities (at all levels), including funding and infrastructure provision, i.e. business operation/ growth; further development of cultural activities, arts venues, festivals and other attractions. Finally, some measures and initiatives need to be instigated, organized and implemented in tandem by both/ all sides involved, e.g. tourism vocational training for staff; information provision to tourists (including ICTs, social media and national campaigns); the digitalization of the tourism sector; and the embracing and establishment of Cyclades’ culture as its local everyday practice and reality, safeguarded against becoming a tourism product.
* **Municipalities need to be more assertive and supportive** as regards the significant mediational role they are called to play between entrepreneurship and society at large, on the one hand, and the State, on the other, with regard to cultural tourism development and all relevant issues. Besides improved cleanliness, accessibility, parking and public area Wifi provision, municipalities need to exert more effort in supporting the organization of cultural events and activities, by providing infrastructure, staff and/or funding to artists or cultural organizations and by organizing and establishing more children- and family-oriented venues and types of activities.

Project Identity

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| **Project name** | Social and innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation (SPOT) |
| **Coordinator** | Prof. Milada Šťastná, Ph.D.  Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic  [milada.stastna@mendelu.cz](mailto:milada.stastna@mendelu.cz) |
| **Consortium** | Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic  Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel  Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania  Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development, Dresden, Germany  CERS Institute for Regional Studies, Győr, Hungary  Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, Netherlands  Tallinn University, Estonia  Karl Franzens University of Graz, Austria  University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom  University of the Aegean, Mitiline, Greece  University of Barcelona, Spain  University of Verona, Italy  University of Wrocław, Poland  Univerzity of Ljubljana, Slovenia  Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia |
| **Duration** | 36 months |
| **Funding Scheme** | H2020-SC6-TRANSFORMATIONS-2019 |
| **Budget** | 3 000 000 EUR |
| **Website and social networks** | [www.SPOTprojectH2020.eu](http://www.SPOTprojectH2020.eu)  fb: @SPOTprojectH2020  twitter: @H2020Spo |
| **For more information** | Contact – Dissemination team: spotprojecth2020@gmail.com |

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