

A Strategic Roadmap for the Revival of the Greek Handicraft Industry

[¹] Glykeria Karagouni, [²] Marios Trigkas, [³] Anna Zygoura, [⁴] Sofia Kessopoulou, [⁵] Petros Rodakinias, [⁶] Eleni Moschogianni

[¹] [²] [³] [⁴] [⁵] [⁶] University of Thessaly, Greece

Corresponding Author Email: [¹] karagg@uth.gr, [²] mtrigkas@uth.gr, [³] azygoura@uth.gr, [⁴] sokesso@uth.gr, [⁵] prodd@uth.gr, [⁶] moeleni@uth.gr

Abstract— *In recent years, and especially since the beginning of the new millennium, Greek handicrafts have experienced constant obsolescence, as Greek craftsmen are unable to maintain viable businesses. The paper reflects a part of an effort to build a concrete strategy for the revival and development of Greek Handicraft, under the auspices of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. It presents the strengths, weaknesses and major challenges that Greek craftsmen face and it ends with a delineation of a strategic roadmap to follow in terms of focusing the strategy towards three directions: business, people and catalysts.*

Keywords: *Challenges, Handicraft entrepreneurship, strategic roadmap, strengths and weaknesses.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Handicrafts are unique products made by artisans and local materials and they usually express the particular culture or nations, regions and communities. The handicraft industry constitutes a significant sector of cultural and economic value [1] but it also functions within volatile markets and dynamic entrepreneurial environments. It is therefore subject to fashion trends, consumer purchasing patterns, technology advances and economic conditions in markets [2]. Due to globalization and mass production, the future of handicraft is rather vulnerable with artisan producers facing increased competition all over the world, particularly from China and other Asian countries [3] which provide markets with substitute handicraft products.

The present paper is part of the work done within the Research Project entitled: "Model Strategy for The Reconstitution – Development and Redefinition of Greek Handicraft" (hereinafter referred to as the Research Project). The project is a contribution to the national effort for the revival, evolution and promotion of Greek Handicrafts, and specifically the sectors: weaving, woodwork and pottery, which is coordinated by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the co-competent Ministries, and is implemented in the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan Greece 2.0.

In particular, the program and its planned actions aim at the formulation of a concrete strategy for the creation of a sustainable model of development and business support of the Handicraft industry with a pilot application in weaving, woodworking and pottery, in the Regions of Western Macedonia, Thessaly, Epirus, Eastern Macedonia - Thrace, Crete, Peloponnese and North Aegean as well as the emergence of a new generation of craftsmen through vocational training and certification, business support and international networking.

The formulation and implementation of the new strategy supports the mission of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture regarding the preservation and promotion of the wealth of handicrafts in Greece, not only as an element of intangible cultural heritage, but as a dynamic sector that can be redefined with the help of entrepreneurship, networking and technology. The resurgence of the handicraft industry will be based on novel design with traditional roots and modern technologies, and suitable business models. The ultimate target is the achievement of substantial cultural and economic revitalization of local communities, creating new dynamic businesses that also entail jobs, making sustainable use of local resources and materials and boosting exports. The creative combination of culture and economy will turn the hitherto neglected craft sector to a key driver of economic growth, if it is effectively linked to the market and the fashion and design industry.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The handicraft industry is by nature a low technology one and it is extremely fragmented and predominantly labor intensive [4]. These characteristics are today the most important weaknesses although they used to be the major competitive advantages in the past: there is a shortage of interest in becoming an artisan, while productions methods are rather restrictive of producing large volumes or offering competitive prices [5].

However, nowadays, there is a revival of interest for the handicraft industry. There seems to be a come-back of the markets that seem to be tired of mass-produced goods, usually without an ID, as well as a focus of EU and national initiatives [6]. Consumers all over the world seem to become interested in short series, unique pieces, as well as in more sustainable manufacturing, and circular economy and handicraft industry represent these emerging trends. To these productive and economic factors, heritage is further added as

a core issue since many times, people come to realize its real and important presence. In this sense, and according to UNESCO besides the safeguard of traditional handicrafts, it is quite imperative to create conditions that will encourage new people to become artisans and to continue producing handicrafts of all kinds.

Thus, it appears that the handicraft sector, although extremely vulnerable is one of the promising sectors of the today's economy. The challenge is mainly on the shoulders of policy makers to identify the strategic directions and incentives in order to revive and empower this otherwise promising industry.

Handicraft in Greece is inextricably linked to its history and prehistory. Greece is known for the tradition of high added value crafts since pre-ancient times, as well as for the high impact of localization according to thrills, features and specifications of regions and areas. With its temperament, vitality and spirituality, Folk Art constitutes the long heritage of Greece. These timeless, impulse-generated artefacts have dominated Greek life for over 3,000 years, with craft art to be inherited from generation to generation.

Over time, its development, in the form of cottage industry and of a better organized craftsmanship, has been an important lever for supporting the Greek economy, rural and urban, at least until the middle of the 20th century. The various forms of handicraft activities have been for centuries an important part and continuation of Greece's cultural heritage (as they are related to popular culture as a living organism), but also a lever for the development of local economies. In recent years, and especially since the beginning of the new millennium, Greek handicrafts have experienced constant obsolescence, as Greek craftsmen are unable to maintain viable businesses. The abolition of the Hellenic Organization of Small and Medium Enterprises and Handicrafts (EOMMEX) in 2012 (article 17 of Law 4038/2012), despite the transfer of actions and responsibilities to the General Secretariat for Industry, created a significant gap. Since then, admittedly, those who are actually engaged in handicrafts have no support.

According to the secondary research conducted for this research project, during this decade there are no published studies on the course of handicraft in Greece in general. In fact, according to the only Study for the mapping of the sector of Handicrafts and Artistic Crafts by sector (end 2022), there are more than thirty sub-sectors that are still vivid in Greece. It appears that during the last decade there are several efforts to revive them with most of them in the form of national and EU programs to support training and new skills (e.g. digital and managerial ones), social forms of handicraft entrepreneurship or sector-based ones which aim at the revival of the weaker types like waivers or at highlighting heritage issues. During these last years, there has been an extremely large number of seminars for all types of artisans with an emphasis on weaving, pottery and woodwork. However, the majority of them aims at domestic use and

hobby. At the level of studies there are only two relevant departments, the Department of Forestry, Wood Sciences and Design of the University of Thessaly and the Department of Creative Design and Clothing of the International Hellenic University. It is quite evident that there is a lot of knowledge scattered and that the relevant initiatives are multiplying. However, these efforts, although worthwhile, are fragmented throughout Greece and most have a strong local character, while many adopt a one-dimensional orientation (e.g. only traditional form).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to reveal the challenges and suggest strategic directions for the revival of the Greek handicraft industry. For the purposes of the research, we started by collecting and elaborating secondary data and then a qualitative research was conducted. The project is subsidized by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture in an effort to develop the new and modern face of the Greek handicraft industry.

Within this direction and in order to uncover strengths, weakness and challenges of Greek artisans, we analyzed 210 cases in seven regions of Greece following the multiple exploratory case study model [7] with the individual artisan as the unit of analysis. Cases were collected from sectoral databases, while sectoral experts gave information about existing artisans in cases that the number of the businesses in formal databases was not sufficient (in the case of waivers). The interviews took place within 2023. The most representative handicraft sectors in Greece are woodcraft (the strongest one), pottery and weaving (most vulnerable nowadays). The goal was to acquire a sample of existing artisans, covering peripheral Greece, which would satisfy the following criteria:

- existing business (evidence of selling products)
- Handmade production bigger than 60% (according to UNESCO's (1997) definition: Direct contribution of the craftsman remains the most essential ingredient of the finished product), i.e. products should be made by manual labors, with the use of minimum machines.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Today, Greek craftsmanship is in a transitional phase. According to the findings, Greek craft business is under strong international pressure mainly due to massive imports from third parties and rapid changes of consumer preferences. Artisans of the periphery are rather neglected and highly and negatively impacted by the crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, while the closure of the Organisation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises and Handicraft S.A. (Eommex S.A.) in 2012 proved to be fatal for the decadence of the handicraft entrepreneurship in Greece.

However, nowadays, there seems to be an increasing interest in handicraft products both at European and world level. Both European Union directives and incentives and

Greek government's policies seem to favour the revival and flourishing of craftsmanship. Thus, Greece's rich but hitherto neglected artisanal tradition can become a core economic sector in Greece if given the proper attention and recognition. This means development from the creation of jobs through the development of integrated value chains, from the sustainable and ethical utilization of natural raw materials that currently remain unexploited, to exports, leading to substantial cultural and economic revitalization of local communities.

With the purpose to create a national strategy, the research purported to map the current situation and conditions of craftsmanship at the Greek periphery, i.e. out side the two main urban centers of Attica and Central Macedonia). The periphery faces much harder conditions and it is much more vulnerable than the main urban areas. On the other hand, localities and tradition is much stronger at peripheral level.

A. A general profile

Unfortunately, in recent years, crafts IN Greece seem to have been on the decline; businesses are abandoned, while young people seem not interested to follow such a career. However, Greek craftsmanship, although extremely scaled down during the last decade, still contributes in many ways to Greek economy. It is directly linked to domestic and international tourism, but it also covers domestic needs, supporting local economies and producers.

Nationwide, there are around 15,066 businesses, most of them registered as Sole proprietorship in the handicraft industry, employing 47,784 people with an annual turnover about € 2.8 billion. The Region of Attica gathers 46% of handicraft enterprises, 51% of the total turnover and the 51% of employees, followed by the Region Central Macedonia [6].

Findings confirm the high fragmentation of the Greek handicraft industry. Artisanal production activities come together in localization economies. Furthermore, being by nature and in its overwhelming majority a family matter, knowledge and know-how is mainly intergenerationally transferred. Due to the above, specific local know-how and skills have been created deep roots and local identities heavily influenced by local history, myths, traditions and identities. Although this is highly important in terms of culture, it seems to favor fragmentation even further.

Another major characteristic of the handicraft industry is the diversity of the sub-sectors in terms of maturity, dynamics and development. More specifically, among the three selected sectors for the qualitative research, woodcraft is the strongest one. It is highly organized, highly dynamic and extrovert. It is male dominated, with the mean age of artisans to be 41-50 years. Most of them have a second-degree education and they earn their living from their craft business having a good standard of life. Most of 90% of them develop synergies.

At the other end, there are the loom waivers. They are not organized at all and they are highly introvert. Most of the

artisans are women which function at a strictly local environment. Even in cases of selling abroad, this is mainly to Greek expatriates and it regards traditional costumes of their place. Most of them belong to heritage entrepreneurs. The mean age is over 60 and the education level is hardly second-degree. For the majority, the income is just complementary. With a few exceptional cases, they work strictly from mouth-to mouth. It is a highly vulnerable sector and it is threatened with extinction.

Pottery stands somewhere in the middle. It is well organized, quite dynamic and extrovert. Artisans are at equal percentages men and women, with a mean age of 45-55 years. Most of them have a second-degree education. They develop formal collaborations and participate in relevant trade shows and exhibitions. They can be grouped into four (4) wide categories of producers:

- of everyday objects with two (2) subcategories:
 - utilitarian, decorative – souvenir pottery aimed at tourists
 - pottery for sales at restaurants and tourist accommodation / hotels.
- of jars and plant pots.
- Using exclusively molds and avoiding the wheel
- Sculptors – artists of ceramic and pottery objects

But for the last category, they earn their living from their craft business having a good standard of life.

From the above, it is quite evident, that strategies proposed cannot be only horizontal. On the contrary, each sector needs to be treated separately and be accordingly supported. In addition, considering that Greece has been characterized by a great deal of geographic, social, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity, regional parameters should be also taken into consideration when forming a national strategy.

B. Strengths and Weaknesses

The analysis of the findings that emerged from the qualitative research as well as with discussions with experts in the field led to a core, horizontal strength and weaknesses (SW) analysis of Handicrafts in Greece, which is presented in this paper. However, it revealed two interesting aspects of the internal environment of the relevant industry:

- Each region has a quite different and unique picture due to the diversity mentioned above
- There are two perspectives of the strong and weak points, the one of the artisans themselves and the ones of the experts and the researchers, which do not always coincide.

In this paper, the presented strengths and weaknesses are the horizontal ones, i.e. at national level. Therefore, according the results of the qualitative study, major strengths at national level appear to be:

S1: Ecofriendly and unique products that seamlessly align with the global push for sustainability. In their majority, they incorporate locally sourced materials and their production has a low environmental impact and boast a longevity that

mass-produced items can't match.

S2: High added value

S3: The diversification and the potential of the relevant markets

S4: Artisans' passion and love for their craft

S5: Rich cultural heritage

S6: Large product variety due to the extremely diverse cultural environment

S7: Comparative advantages of individual sectors in quality, special characteristics, aesthetic techniques, etc.

S8: Low cost of investment required and consequently low barriers to the entry of new artisans

S9: Remarkable production of local / traditional products with spatial identity

S10: Remarkable tourist resources and tourist attractions

S11 Significant number of craft and commercial enterprises

S12: The diversity in materials derived from the Greek land

S13: The existence of many cultural heritage conservation bodies/events/organizations

S14: The significant capabilities for artistic creations of Professional craftsmen

S15: Flexibility in production

S16: The family nature of almost all businesses and the transfer of art knowledge from generation to generation

S17: The networking ability along value chains

S18: Remarkable learning and experience curves

S19: Design capabilities (especially in breathing new life into traditional craft).

On the other hand, the most significant weaknesses, according to the findings are the following:

W1: Lack of specific definition, codification and certification of handicraft products and professions in Greece

W2: Decline and ageing of the craft population with skills and techniques in several of the craft categories (e.g. loom weavers) and lack of interest among the younger generations

W3: Low educational attainment and lack of educational structures in some sub-sectors

W4: Small firm sizes (one-person or family businesses)

W5: Lack of skilled and qualified staff

W6: Minimal knowledge of entrepreneurship and marketing knowledge - Inadequate information on the current market trends

W7: Poor vocational training of human resources and low integration of innovation

W8: Easily replication of identical objects massively produced in Asian countries

W9: Lack of infrastructure and support structures for crafts

W10: Low competitiveness and extroversion: reluctance to open up to the outside

W11: Technology gaps: Lag in access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), lack of technological skills

W12: Limited promotion and branding of handicraft

products – lack of visibility

W13: Market liquidity problems

W14: Reluctance to develop partnerships and synergies

W15: Bureaucratic obstacles – lack of financial and organizational support from public bodies

W16: Extremely small national market

W17: Shortage of distribution channels

W18: Limited provision of local raw materials

W19: Long working hours required per product

W20: The heavy burden of contributions to the social security system: e.g. healthcare and pensions

W21: The family nature of almost all businesses and the transfer of art from generation to generation

W22: Lack of an organized institutional framework to stimulate crafts

W23: Lack of core links along the value chain (e.g. washing machines – carding mills – spinning mills – paint shops within the value chain of loom weaving)

W24: Lack of maintainers and spare parts

W25: Lack of knowledge on costing and pricing handicrafts

The findings confirm relevant literature; in most cases examined, it appears that craftsmen have lack of understanding about demand patterns, market dynamics, channels, price fluctuations or the importance of value added (e.g. [8], [9]).

C. Major Challenges

In today's fast-paced, tech-driven world, genuine artifacts, with a touch of traditions and history and in relation to human connection and the long-suffering environment can bring craftsmanship back to life. The SW analysis confirms the urgent need for the resurgence of Greek traditional crafts in the modern markets. While, strengths indicate the potential for development due to the quite deep-rooted background, there are fundamental challenges that must be addressed by policy makers and more specifically at governmental and business level. According to the findings, priority should be given to the following ones:

P1: Codification and authenticity certification of handicraft products, with the establishment of brand names and the promotion of local identities and geographical indications. Besides protection from non-authentic cheap replicas, studies show that buyers are willing to spend more when there is a certification of authenticity and high-quality [10].

P2: Encouragement of new generation to continue the tradition of the family business or be engaged in craftsmanship by a) form an educational background of the multidimensional handicraft entrepreneur and b) create a favorable entrepreneurial context (e.g. regarding taxes, contributions to the social security system, as well as subsidies, incentives etc) within new handicraft start-ups will be able to vision a prospering future. Brave measures should be taken to face bureaucracy as well as find innovative ways for public bodies to provide financial and organizational

support. EU programs and initiatives can support this effort, too.

P3: Extroversion: a) Development of a successful handicraft export industry, literally from scratch, i.e.: establish a favorable institutional export framework and conditions for start-uppers and low-income artisans, create and encourage networks and strategic alliances and foreign collaborations. B) empower the presence of Greek artisans in the tourism market by changing unfavorable laws (e.g. art potteries cannot be situated in touristic markets), while creating favorable conditions such as “artisan neighborhoods” within touristic markets, craft villages close to sightseeing and the quite globally famous Greek islands.

P4: Organized and subsidized promotion by the State and relevant Bodies in order to raise visibility at national and global level. This includes investment in branding and a strong marketing information system for international awareness (e.g. well-built sites, inclusion of the artisans’ narrative in diverse ways, participation in international fairs etc.).

P5: State and other Organizations’ and Bodies’ support for the development of new trends in Greece that will blend traditional methods of production with modern design and branding. Besides cultural heritage, modern, unique design and artisanal quality add high value to craft products.

P6: Management of the Technology gaps: easy access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), a focus on development of technological skills (vocational training is a proposal).

P7: In Greece there are many missing links along the value chains of craft production. Indicatively, regarding the value chain of loom weaving, there are no wool washing facilities and carding mills, while spinning mills and paint shops are rather scarce. In the same vein, in the pottery value chain, the last factory that produced clay powder shut down in 2012. However, all the above links exist and some of them are well equipped. It is only political positioning in order to bring them back to function. In parallel, several other links like maintainers and spare parts have to be revitalized. All the above should be placed under a wider umbrella of improving accessibility to main resources, such as raw materials, distribution channels, finance, technology, knowledge etc.

P8: Crafting Sustainability: in order to align with the values and principles of sustainable production, State has to secure sustainable values chains from locally sourced materials, to hand-made production, reduced environmental impact, and boast longevity of the artifacts. This must be somehow controlled, checked and certified. On the other hand, such certification is quite promising for consumers who seek ethical and sustainable choices.

P9: Tradition must meet Innovation: there is a certain resistance to change, not only by artisans themselves but also by experts of the field and other stakeholders. For example, there is an on-going dialogue about the role of industry 4.0. in handicraft. Is the use of 3d printing allowed or not? However,

craftmanship has deep roots in history and survived other industrial revolutions, too. It is quite imperative to blend the old with the new; and this is not only design. Artisans should embrace and develop modern techniques, use novel materials, and incorporate new tools and machinery, giving rise to fresh, captivating interpretations of age-old traditions.

P10: Digital opportunities: perhaps the most significant challenge of all. The digital age seems to be the core catalyst for the revival of traditional crafts. Platforms provide artisans with a global stage for promotion and can be cheap like social media or more advanced, like e-commerce websites. However, this is not easy for the usual craft business in Greece and policy measures including relevant training and subsidies should be considered.

P11: Dissemination of information: it appears to be a great problem among handicraft businesses. Eommex used to inform people not only through media but from door to door as well. This was a real convenience especially for artisans living in remote villages or island with a low level of education. However, today this does not exist anymore. Once again it appears that a formal Body for handicraft entrepreneurship is needed as well as training regarding the use of media for getting informed.

D. A Strategic Roadmap

It is quite evident that strong political will and impetus are needed to reconstitute the handicraft industry in Greece, and to turn it into a lever of progress and an important economic factor for development. Greek craft enterprises of all sectors have always been vulnerable to the ups and downs of the economy, especially in times of crisis. Today, most sub-sectors are threatened with extinction, while the numerous exceptional efforts focus mainly on saving and highlighting the cultural value of artifacts. On the contrary, there are few and fragmented efforts for strengthening the background of craft entrepreneurship.

Nowadays, the Greek government aims to reinforce the arts and crafts sector while preserving traditional handicraft products. Within this direction the following strategic vision has been prepared in line with the SWOT analysis and the contemporary global environment with its challenges: "The preservation and promotion of the wealth of handicrafts that Greece has, not as an heirloom but as a dynamic sector that can be reconstituted and substantially interconnected with the market and the fashion and design industry" Guided by the strategic vision the project aims at the broader policy of rebuilding handicraft at social, business and political level. In this line, the following three thematic areas were identified:

- Business
- People
- Acceleration catalysts

Two priorities were then set for each theme. Thus, the following six (6) priorities have emerged:

THEME: Business - priorities

- *The Promotion of handicrafts as a dynamic sector:*

- i. (Re)positioning and establishing handicrafts as an independent sector of the creative economy: The special position of handicrafts must be duly recognized in the Greek economy and distinguished, on the one hand, from design and applied arts and, on the other, from other specialized technological/technical professions.
- ii. Raise awareness of the value of handicraft knowledge and skills for global-European and local societies, cultures and economies among appropriate policy actors, civil society and industry.

• *The Strengthening of the handicraft enterprises:*

The encounter of the craftsman professional with the business models of the 21st century through

- i. The Identification of the factors that potentially promote and could form the basis for the development of forms of handicraft in the selected area,
- ii. The improvement of artisans' access to support services that facilitate the creation, expansion and scaling of businesses to higher levels of sustainability and innovation (in the broad sense) and
- iii. The mapping of the strategic options for the development of sustainable handicraft ecosystems in the areas under consideration, with proposals to create synergies with cultural and economic sectors.

THEME: People - priorities

• *The emergence of a new generation of craftsmen:*

The promotion of the contemporary profile of the craftsman by:

- i. Improving the profile of the craftsman in Greece and highlighting the role of the creative entrepreneur, establishing the 'artist craftsman' (House of Lords 1971) and the global entrepreneur
- ii. introducing the contemporary Greek society into the principles and values of handicrafts, with the ultimate goal of restoring its prestige

• *The Strengthening of the educational background:*

The creation of the multidimensional handicraft entrepreneur in the era of the 4th industrial revolution by:

- i. Mapping knowledge and skills gaps
- ii. A long-term strategy for Human Resource
- iii. Development and Craft Education
- iv. Encouraging links between non-formal education organizations, the formal education sector and appropriate craft sectors

THEME: Acceleration catalysts - priorities

• *Socio-political direction*

- i. Necessary conditions by the State to encourage synergies and exchanges between the handicrafts industry, the cultural sector and other sectors of the economy.
- ii. operating models of Handicraft Institutions for Greece based on best practices, in order to build a

strong economy and infrastructure for modern Handicrafts.

- iii. incentives to encourage business start-ups in the handicraft sector.

• *Technological direction*

- i. Charting the path towards Greek Handicraft 4.0: The initiation of the dialogue for a broad strategy for the transition of the handicraft sector to the 4th industrial revolution, with the harmonious integration of the required technologies (e.g. through specialized investment subsidies, through development programs of the State and the European Community) and the gradual training of craftsmen in these technologies
- ii. The creation of an open, unified Digital Library with designs and motifs of folk art (Design Banks), aiming at its further enrichment, after the completion of this project.

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