

*An Innovative Response to a Financial Crisis:
Aiding Rural Village Farmers and Underprivileged Youth*

Introduction and Problem Statement

Greece has been in the throes of a major financial crisis since 2007. Since then, Greeks have suffered severe salary cuts and pensions have already been reduced 12 times since the start of the crisis. According to Eurostat, an EU statistics agency, 22.2% of Greece's population is "severely materially deprived", and, in one recent study, it was determined that 43% of pensioners receive less than approximately \$800 a month. Non-profits are also seeing their funding reduced.

Pensioners living in rural areas are feeling the brunt of the financial crisis and government austerity measure. Many of them survive on small, self-sustaining farms and are struggling to make ends meet. Less money naturally means less buying power, making store-bought items more expensive. Unfortunately, there is no positive change in sight for the Greek economy, and by extension, the condition of rural farmers.

Just as on mainland Greece, the Greek islands are feeling the negative effects of financial difficulties, and in many ways, it is exacerbated on some of them. Small village farmers, mainly older pensioners, are particularly hard hit. Upon visiting the Cycladic island of Syros, the results of the crisis became apparent to me. Government workers in the capital of the Cyclades, Ermoupoli, have been affected by the reduction in government employee salaries and pensions. Retirees have seen their livelihood compromised, particularly in the small farming villages. However, many small village farms naturally produce some annual foodstuffs that do not get picked due to lack of incentive, inability to do so, or not having had a need to do so in the past. Much of this food still remains unpicked, sometimes because of labor shortage, and therefore is wasted. If it is picked, it is to the amount that the individual owners or the families can. I see this unpicked produce as a resource that can benefit others.

Proposal, Implementation, and Outcomes

One reason that I am applying for a Projects for Peace award is to create "centers" that promote the exchange, trade, and donation of produce that would otherwise be wasted. I envision the results of my proposed project benefiting rural farmers as well as a non-profit that supports underprivileged youth on the island of Syros.

The first step in the project's implementation will be the creation of small centers that would allow farmers in the village of Finikas on the island of Syros a location to share produce that they have too much of for produce that they don't have, making for cost-neutral exchange. Not only will these centers prevent food from going to waste on village farms, but it will also begin to improve food diversity and increase sustainability on traditional Greek farms in a time when Greece and the Greek people are financially burdened.

I personally have spent much time in the village of Finikas. The village is full of small family farms that are clustered close together. These farms have fruit trees, vegetables, and small farm animals. I remember riding my bike past many of these farms and noting the wasted produce on the ground, often picking up a fresh fig or peach that had newly fallen. I began to wonder whether this fresh produce, that would normally be left to rot, could be of benefit to others in some way. After living on one of these farms, I became aware of a village community in need of a way to communicate, collaborate, reduce waste, and use the resources they have to their own and others' advantage.

Individual farms in Greece are not highly diverse in what they produce. Therefore, by encouraging more open lines of communication with each other, farmers can share food they produce in return for a diversity of produce with the centers allowing them to stretch their declining incomes further.

My contact in Finikas, Katarina Stefanou, has agreed to donate some of her land on the corner of a four-way intersection in the village that has over time served as a crossroad, and which will be the locale of the first center. I will, with the help of volunteers, build this initial center so people can exchange or swap goods. This center will be in a "high traffic" area of the village of Finikas, which also serves as a stop on the local public transportation system. The open-air structure that will be about the size of a large American-style farm stand will be built out of cinder blocks, a cheap, readily available building material on the island. The structure will have three full sides and a half side with an entrance with a roof made out of sturdy, breathable canvas or cloth that is locally made and allow

light to filter through. Shelves will be built in the structure off the ground to hold containers of produce that can be placed there to share by community members. The shelter will contain corkboards on which community members can communicate. With the intent of engaging the community, I plan to visit each farm in order to create a directory with contact information, and what they grow on their farm and want to swap, allowing for further communication and collaboration between people. For example, the center can be a place for village farmers to take their figs and swap them for tomatoes that they themselves might not grow. My contacts on the island have stated that there is already enthusiasm for my project that will address the issues of food needs and food waste on the island of Syros. My intention is that the first stand will be replicated in other areas of the island and later even farther afield than Syros.

Besides positively impacting the lives of many pensioners trying to sustain themselves on small farms, I want to extend the benefits of my project to a particular non-profit on the island that focuses on helping underprivileged youth. I have made contact with "Στεγη Ανηλικών Συρου" or "Shelter for Underage People on Syros", an organization that helps disadvantaged youth on the island in the summer months when school is out of session. One of the priorities of this non-profit is to feed young people who might otherwise go without a meal. Therefore, another aspect of my Project for Peace is to create learning materials for the organization that focuses on topics such as healthy food production and consumption. A component of this will be a collaboration between farm owners and youth to institute a "back to the farm day". This would involve farmers teaching youth how farming works through traditional farming practices. Also, farmers can donate their excess produce to the non-profit, which in turn can be used to teach young people how to prepare it. I will also create a program in which teenagers accessing the services of the non-profit can volunteer to pick unused produce that will eventually become healthy meals for them. This initiative will not only help fight hunger, but also reduce the loss of a needed commodity. Moreover, it provides a space for learning. In addition, the community trading centers can act as a place where farmers can leave food items for the non-profit, knowing that the donated items are going to feed youth in need.

Documenting the Initiative

I view my proposed Project for Peace as an innovative way to use products that would normally go to waste in such a way that many benefit. With financial crises, it is naturally the people who are less well-off, in this case Greek farm-owning pensioners and youth from underprivileged households, who feel the worst effects. In such times, unique responses are often required to address needs. As part of my project, I want to create a short documentary on how putting into place a simple system can have major positive outcomes. I want to show the impact small roadside centers can have on sharing in a rural farming village. It can also illustrate what happens when youth get involved in their community, capturing the intergenerational impact that coincides with teaching a curriculum on sustainable agriculture. My hope is that this documentary/short film will be screened at the end of the summer on the island of Syros, and also be put online for others to view. Ideally, my work can act as a conduit for others to think outside the box to solve problems in their own communities.

Sustainability

My project, in all its forms, is inherently sustainable. The cinderblock centers will be permanent structures available for continual communal use. The curriculum created for the non-profit will also be a lasting legacy of my project that can be easily added to and expanded. Lastly, the short documentary will be shared on the island and live on through social media and the internet.

Summary

My Project for Peace is multifaceted with far-reaching benefits for people trying to deal with a financial crisis that has had long-standing detrimental effects on the most vulnerable – pensioners and underprivileged youth. By introducing a physical space where community members can trade goods, address a noticeable problem of produce waste, and engage underprivileged youth will bring a financially-burdened community closer together. The significance of young people being introduced to a hands-on educational curriculum begins the process of understanding the value of locally grown produce and learning about traditional rural Greek farming culture. The collaborations I hope to foment through my Project for Peace will address the specific needs of a village like Finikas, and ideally the concept will spread throughout the island of Syros and beyond.