A condensed profile of Greek Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives

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Abstract

The present study attempts to examine the activities and the role of the Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives (UAC), an institution that for years has represented the financial interests of a significant portion of producers in Greece. Apart from setting out certain basic financial dimensions, elements regarding human resources, facilities, products, activities and their public policy are also presented. A discussion follows regarding the weaknesses of the cooperatives in Greece and the environment of the agribusiness sector worldwide, which could contribute to their rebirth from the current unfavorable situation.

Résumé

Cette étude essaie d'examiner les activités et le rôle des Unions des Coopératives Agricoles, une institution qui, depuis des années, représente les intérêts économiques d'une partie considérable de producteurs en Grèce. Au delà de la présentation de certains agrégats de base, des éléments concernant les effectifs, les installations, les activités et leur politique publique sont également signalés. La discussion se penche sur les faiblesses des coopératives en Grèce et sur le secteur agricole (agribusiness) dans le monde entier, ce qui pourrait contribuer à leur renaissance dans ce contexte défavorable.

1. Introduction

Cooperatives have always been an important institution for the distribution of agricultural products in Greece. They emerged from the economic and power disparities between small, fragmented and poorly market-informed farmers and their bigger, concentrated and market-informed trading partners. In the recent years they have mainly made technical and organizational steps in the country that contributed to the improvement of performances, quantity, quality and agricultural income. We mention the creation of improved or model oil factories, wine factories, cheese dairies, ginning houses and other facilities and machines (harvesting, threshing machines, etc.). Moreover, storage facilities and selection-conservation centers were created, through which the first and sometimes very remarkable attempts were made for the joint distribution of agricultural products or even for the facilitation of the necessary state product concentrations (wheat and so on). With the support of the previously mentioned activities, cooperatives attempt to operate in the free market.

Unfortunately, however, most cooperatives are faced with severe financial problems that make their survival in the market difficult. Agribusiness as a whole is undergoing structural change in terms of internationalization, network relationships and concentration. The economic, social and legal environment of cooperatives is changing, requiring adaptive measures. Some of these new measures are: international trade liberalization and expansion, new technological developments, withdrawal of government from the market, changing consumer demands, concentration and integration processes in other segments of the product and marketing chain. In addition, the food-manufacturing sector has been influenced by mergers and acquisitions in pursuit of efficient use of fixed resources, utilisation of plant capacity and access to world markets. All these factors have a major impact on the development of agricultural cooperatives, placing them under great pressure to adapt themselves to new realities. In order to get grips with how this adaptation process is evolving, the need is felt to state facts and to carry out a preliminary analysis.

The following section presents the agribusiness environment, the area where the UACs are activated. A condensed presentation of cooperatives follows with reference to their activities and structure; finally a discussion with some concluding remarks.

2. The environment of the agribusiness sector

The agribusiness sector is undergoing major changes. New challenges, which continue to shape the sector, force enterprises to rethink their organizational structures, their strategy, and their position in the market. Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives as well as agri-food Investor-Oriented Firms (IOFs) are obliged to be adapted to this new environment. Some of the most striking developments and issues are evaluated below.

2.1. Public policy

A series of deep changes at political level demonstrates the changing historical perspective of agriculture: the reform of CAP, coupled with the GATT agreement and future negotiations, non- tariff barriers, the expansion of international trade, facilitate competition and downsize farmers' support. What underlies this development is the changing

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political economy, which pervades not only agriculture but every sector of economic activities: shifts of interests from producer to consumer and taxpayer, from protection to competition and from public to individual.

In Europe, the continuous enlargement of the EU has set up a new competitive environment for the European Agribusiness. However, commodity trade is only one aspect of globalization: input markets, R&D, distribution and other value activities of a company are subject to global competition as well. Customers, competitors, suppliers, cultures, technological developments and regulatory framework have to be analyzed on a global market. Even for those firms that focus on a single geographic region, it is imperative to position themselves as world class manufacturers because competition is global in nature (Bekkum and Dijk, 1997).

2.2. Technology

Technology and innovation increasingly shape the market structure, the context of competition and the performance of the business through "creative destruction" (Schumpeter, 1989). Innovation outdates businesses as new advanced methods or products are introduced to exploit new opportunities. The role of biotechnology in reshaping the agro-industrial complex is very crucial. Seeds and agro-chemicals, primary agriculture and food processing are more likely to be co-ordinated to achieve food with functional requirements matching industrial and consumer preferences for health, convenience, low cost, reliable quality. At the same time information technology shapes the structure of agri-food sector, facilitating the development of chain relationships in order to achieve co-ordination in logistics and the marketing mix (Kyriakopoulos, 2000).

2.3. The entrepreneurial environment

As a result of this ever-changing environment, cooperatives need to continuously improve their ability to become acquainted with new developments, to adapt, to introduce far-reaching innovations, and to re-engineer their organisational structures. With the increased role that knowledge and information play in the market position and financial success of firms, large investments need to be made in the so-called soft assets, such as innovative activity, total quality, human resources and flexible structures. In this respect the traditional definition of a firm is rapidly changing. Instead of being a collection of permanent human, financial and physical resources with specific business focus, the firm becomes simple, moving rapidly into and out of market niches. Entrepreneurs instigate economic change and development by introducing new products, new production methods, new markets or organisational innovations.

Agricultural cooperatives need to strengthen their competitive power in response to IOFs in the rapidly changing market. Increased competitive ability is of utmost importance for the agricultural cooperatives all over the European Community. The following section gives a condensed profile of Greek UACs with their structure and activities.

3. The UACs Profile in Greece

With the assistance of data collected through personal interviews with UACs chief executives and a PASEGES study (2000) regarding the UACs profile in Greece, the following may be outlined:

3.1. Human resources

The rate of employees who have a university or technological institute education from the total of those permanently employed by UACs ranges from 13.7% in the Aegean islands to 31.8% in the Peloponnese. This rate is low and mainly concerns the administrative staff of each cooperative and a small portion of permanent employees. Many factors contributed to this small rate of scientists in the manpower of cooperatives. Their relatively low salaries can be included among them (Kamenidis, 1998). Furthermore, it should also be taken into account that most UACs haven't hired staff members for several years - except for a few cases of specialized jobs- and thus the majority of employees is old in age and appointed at times when the educational level wasn't so high as it is today. Undoubtedly, their typical qualification is inadequate and far from the principles dominant in private companies.

Tab. 1. *The personnel of UACs in Greece*

Geographical division	Employment	Number of permanent workers	Number of graduates	Personnel of high education (%)
Sterea Hellada & Evia	938	571	140	24,5
Peloponnese	1242	521	166	31,8
Ionian Sea Islands/ Hepirus	662	445	91	20,4
Thessalia	1186	667	198	29,7
Macedonia	3365	1058	329	31,0
Thrace	597	417	78	18,7
Aegean Sea Islands	622	502	69	13,7
Crete	1170	824	199	24,1
Total	***9.782***	***5.005***	***1.270***	

Source: Papageorgiou, 2004, "Viable Co-operative Economy", p. 424

3.2. Facilities

Cooperative organizations have manufacturing and supporting facilities for the production of goods to serve their members. We present the facilities of the major cooperatives according to data of a previous research (Papageorgiou and Kaldis, 1999). As it seems, the Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives have the necessary facilities for the concentration and distribution of their members' products in a standardized form (Table 1).

Tab. 2. *Cooperatives' Facilities*

Type of Facilities	Number
Oil factories	598
Simple cheese dairies	220
Vegetables sorting and packing factory	155
Wine factories	65
Cotton ginning houses	25
Edible olives tinning factories	23
Tomato paste and vegetables tinning factories	15
Factories for milk pasteurization and cheesemaking	13
Slaughterhouses	11
Roller mills	10
Refineries	10
Pomade oil factory	7
Raisin factories	7
Seedoil factories	5
Citrus juice factories	2
Tobacco processing factories	1
Refrigerated cabinets	341

Source: Papageorgiou and Kaldis from the book "The Greek Agriculture towards 2010". Papazisis Publications, Athens 1999, p. 383

Tab. 3. *Products distributed by cooperatives in 1990*

Product	% of production
Processed currants	65.6
Tomato juice	41.5
Peaches	38.3
Oranges	36.8
Poultry meat	34.1
Wine	32.3
Edible processed olives	27.5
Dessert grapes	23.2
Cow's milk	19.3
Cucumbers	14.1
Canned whole tomato	12.5
Tomato paste	7.4
Sheep and goat milk	6.4
Potatoes	4.5
Apricots	1.9
Eggs	1.7

Source: Papageorgiou and Kaldis, from the book "The Greek Agriculture towards 2010". Papazisis Publications, Athens 1999, p. 384

3.3. Products

Cooperatives manage the inputs that are necessary to the productive process such as fertilizers and feeding cereals. The role of cooperatives in product management varies. The proportion of the total production managed by cooperatives (1990 data) is presented for certain products in Table 3. As it is obvious, a large proportion of the major agricultural products manufactured in Greece is distributed through cooperatives. Even though data refer to the previous decade, they indicate the significant positions that cooperatives hold in the agricultural sector in Table 2.

3.4. Diversification

In many EU countries, there is a trend especially for manufacturing cooperatives to apply processes of vertical integration and general development of diversification level. The profits at the first stage of the production chain, e.g. the collection and processing of the product, are relatively small due to the intense competition in the product market. On the contrary, the vertical integration is strengthened thanks to the higher profit margin in the following stages of food chain. Moreover, cooperating with a large number of customers and members-users attracts new capitals that can finance part of the activities developed by the cooperative, thus ensuring its enlargement without increasing the financial risks it encounters (Sergaki, 2004).

In addition, diversification decreases seasonal fluctuations in the sales of cooperatives. These fluctuations contribute to the underemployment of their economic and enterprising resources as well as to the weakening of its competitive position in the market. The high seasonality of agricultural production creates problems in the quantity and in the retail prices. Moreover, it creates problems in the smooth operation of agricultural industries, which increases the manufacturing unit cost of agricultural products and UAC profitability (Kitsopanidis and Kamenidis, 1992).

Table 3 groups 93 out of 118 UACs in Greece according to the number of their activities. The UACs' average turnover and commodity, service and product sales have been estimated for each group for the year 2000, in order to establish the close relationship between the variety of activities and sales. It is evident that UACs involved in vari-

Tab. 4. *Relationship between diversification and sales of UACs (in €)*

Variety of Activities	Average			
	Turnover	Commodity Sales	Sales	Product Sales
1	511,707	478,853	279,905	35,207
2	4,430,017	2,955,958	297,822	2,217,016
3	9,885,184	4,604,768	1,150,936	5,023,582
4	13,770,261	8,323,268	1,000,043	4,918,086
5	18,464,519	9,042,324	968,070	8,453,890

Source: 1. Papageorgiou, K. 2004, "Viable Cooperative Economy" p. 424; 2. PASEGES ous activities are financially more robust than those involved in fewer activities.

One of the ways to reduce the intensity of seasonal fluctuations in sales is to increase the business activities of the cooperatives with non-members. The transaction with products not related to those of the members is one type of business activity with non-members that is often encountered abroad. For example, when a dairy cooperative that produces ice cream sells orange juices, it reduces its operating cost to promote the ice cream, since the channels of distribution are the same. This strategy leads to an increased capacity, better exploitation of the cooperative potentials, reduction in the average operating cost due to economies of scale and reduction in seasonal fluctuations (Nilsson, 1997; Kyriakopoulos, 2000).

3.5. Public Policy

Many cooperatives have negative net positions, low working capital and their funds are either not adequate or not satisfactorily exploited. Until recently the practice of state protection of UACs has been quite common by subsidizing their activities. However, protection and subsidies may not lead to achieving the aim of developing the technological potential, but on the contrary they may create side effects: inefficiency, technological stagnancy and waste of resources. Therefore, protection, subsidies or other trade policy measures should not be used to counterbalance high cost and inefficiency that result from other sources and should not be maintained for a large interval, but only for the time needed for technological strengthening. The different times necessary for structuring technological potentials per sector and enterprise support the argument of a selective protection policy (Karamesini, 2002).

Nowadays, because of the withdrawal of state protection, the cooperatives are seeking for non-members investors who will finance part of their activities (Drimer, 1997). In this way, the operating capital is increased and through the development and possibly the more reasonable capital management that is owned to the influence and control exerted by investors, the net position of the cooperatives is increased. The constant increase in the number of members-users, in the customers and the development of new activities, are important for the attraction of new financial resources that will enhance their competitiveness. The cooperative collaboration with a large number of customers and members - users attracts new capitals that can finance part of its activities and ensure its enlargement without increasing the level of financial risk for the cooperative. Furthermore, it reduces the level of business risk since it creates the conditions for stabilizing profits through the risk distribution achieved by undertaking a variety of activities. The attenuation of financial and business risk results in the reduction of the total risk for the cooperative, which is particularly appreciated by the members who are risk averse (Egerstrom, 1996; Dijk , Nilsson and Kyriakopoulos, 1997).

As a conclusion, UACs need to raise their efficiency level. To achieve this aim, the following is needed:

- organizational support of cooperatives that contributes to the agreement between products flow, resources distribution and customer proximity, which Greek cooperatives lack;
- closer contact with customers in international markets, so that insight into their requirements is continuously gained and an innovative differentiation from their competitors achieved;
- focusing on factors beyond quality and cost, such as services integration, flexibility, designing and innovative applications;
- creation of high quality brands; and,
- utilization of the region's traditional characteristics for the creation of differentiated products.

3.6. Financial Data Analysis

For the study of financial elements of UACs in Greece their balance-sheets from 1995 until 2000 were assembled. Also elements assembled by the Greek Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives (PASEGES) were used with the help of a questionnaire dispatched to all the UACs in Greece.

In the year 2000, 118 UACs operated in Greece. Data were collected from their balance sheets. For comparative reasons, the respective data were also collected from the Investor-oriented firms (IOFs) that had more than ten permanent employees from 1995 to 1999 and belonged to all the industrial sectors of Greece (3281). Finally, all the agri-food manufacturing enterprises that had more than ten permanent employees from 1995 to 1999 were included in a distinct category.

Regarding UACs in the year 2000, their average:

turnover	was	7.97 mil. €	
product sales	were	4.13 mil. €,	
commodity sales		4.68 mil. €	and
service sales		0.74 mil. €	

As it is shown in Table 4, a total of 9,782 people were employed in UACs. Half of them were permanent staff and the rest seasonal staff. Finally, from the total staff, 1260 were university or technological institute graduates (source: www.paseges.gr)

If the UACs of all the regions of Greece are compared in terms of their turnover in conjunction with their number, it is established that the UACs in the Aegean islands are less profitable, while those of Thessalia are the most profitable. It should be noted that the long distances among the Aegean islands led to their splintering off. Moreover, the ground morphology and the involvement of the majority of inhabitants in tourism justify the low rate of profitability. On the other hand, the morphology of Thessalia and the exclusive involvement of a large portion of the inhabitants in agriculture made the region progress in the agricultural sector more rapidly than the remaining regions in Greece.

Based on the results (Oustapassidis et al., 2000) of a previous study carried out in the UACs of Crete (in 18 out of

Tab. 5. *Financial data of UACs in Greece, 2000*

Geographical division	UACs	Turnover (in million €)	% of total sales of all UAC	Employment	1st degree agricultural cooperatives	Farmers Members
Sterea Hellada & Evia	17	83,88	8,9	938	866	135.635
Peloponnese	19	139,08	14,7	1.242	1.066	106.060
Ionian Sea Islands/ Hepirus	10	64,89	6,9	662	660	75.303
Thessalia	10	114,87	12,2	1.186	705	85.427
Macedonia	28	208,89	22,1	3.365	1.713	174.774
Thrace	5	91,88	9,7	597	328	30.690
Aegean Sea Islands	11	57,58	6,1	622	302	46.145
Crete	18	152,01	16,1	1.170	710	92.778
Total	**118**	**943,08**	**100**	**9.782**	**6.350**	**746.812**

Source: www.paseges.gr

118 that operate in Greece) outlining their existing situation, the most important problems that the majority of cooperatives face, according to the estimates of chief executives, is the lack of planning and modernization, their negative financial status, small size, inability to have a proper promotion and product commercialization as well as the lack of skilled staff and finally their inflexible structure.

4. Structure of the Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives

Cooperatives are divided in Greece into three levels: primary (local cooperatives), secondary (Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives-UAC) and tertiary (Central Unions). Furthermore, there are joint ventures and cooperative companies. PASEGES (Pan-Hellenic Confederation of Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives) is the coordinating ideological body.

Primary cooperatives (Agricultural Cooperative Organizations) constitute the basis of the cooperative movement pyramid. They focus on the supply of farm inputs, limited processing and selling, credit on behalf of central cooperative or agricultural bank of Greece and logistics. They are distinguished in: multipurpose, selling, production, fishing and others. Its members are individuals. Primary cooperatives face many problems of structural nature. The dispersion of agricultural communities and the communication difficulties due to the mountainous nature of the country as well as the high number of islands, create coordination and profitability problems in the cooperative activities.

The activities of primary cooperatives usually take place at the location specified by the Municipality boundaries. There are also cooperatives, especially those specialized in manufacturing and trading of agricultural products that expand their activities to broader regions. However, in their vast majority, cooperatives are inactive, since they practically cannot provide the necessary services to their members. Therefore, primary cooperatives collaborate and form Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives (secondary degree cooperatives with an average of 55 local cooperatives and 6000 farmers-members). Every primary agricultural cooperative participates in the UAC capital with a sum of money specified by its Articles. Many UACs have undertaken the activities that were formerly taken up by primary cooperatives. Moreover, they have undertaken the product promotion and trading, they control and improve the product quality, they offer marketing services and so on. UAC is the basic institution that represents the interests of a significant percentage of Greek producers. For this reason, we focused on their profile and activities.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The institution of cooperatives was developed in Greece in a period of needs for the agricultural population but also of hopes, at a time when there was a lack of other bodies and institutions. This still weak cooperative was considered a panacea that could solve all the problems (exploitation by local grocers, retailers). However, while it was not possible to exceed the limits of small loans from the Agricultural Bank of Greece (ATE), some efforts to jointly sell products and distribute goods that were rare in the post war conditions, were made. Various individuals and bodies tried to involve these financially-weak organizations as problem-solving instruments, thus resulting in several financial failures. Hence, the necessary link of the members with their cooperative was developed on a financial basis (joint supplies, joint sales) and this institution was still used to a great extent in times of difficulties, a support for the work of state concentrations, works developed by ATE and others (Klimis, 1999)

Nowadays, agricultural cooperatives in Greece, as well as in the other E.U. countries, are in a transitory stage. The important changes imposed by the market have consequences on the financial, social and legal environment of the cooperative institution (Anheier and Ben-ner, 1997). The gradual withdrawal of state protectionism from domestic products, trade liberalization, increased qualitative demands, rapid technological developments, vertically organized companies, preference for innovative products that respond to the modern needs of consumers, global alliances among companies are some of the factors that impose the rapid adaptation of cooperatives to these changes.

The study of these cooperatives' trends has led at least pioneers to find a solution aiming to increase the cooperatives' competitiveness and efficiency. Many studies also found that cooperatives do not operate differently from private companies nor are they less profitable (Lerman and

Parliament 1990; Hind, 1994). Competitiveness mainly depends on the cooperative strategies on issues regarding products, markets, the modernization of the cooperative's organization and management, the implementation of modern technology, the improvement of labor and customer relations and finally the productive and trading cooperation with other companies.

In Greece, the competitiveness of cooperatives is lower than that of private companies. Their size is smaller and they have an average negative net margin of profit. Although sales have increased in absolute sizes during the last years, high leverage and the unbearable operating cost result to a great extent in the difficulty to implement the necessary but expensive strategies that support the increase in the companies' competitiveness. Negative net profit characterizes fifty-five out of the ninety-three Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives which are examined.

Lack of significant economies of scale also constitutes an obstacle to the implementation of competitive strategies resulting in a high cost of production. This burdens the product price extremely and combined with the existence of a few brands due to the financial weakness of the cooperatives to promote them systematically, leads to low market shares even when the product quality is excellent. The above situation has reduced profit margin as its direct consequence.

Cooperatives are activated in a highly competitive industrial sector, whose feature is the dominance of some large private manufacturing companies and the existence of many companies of smaller size that constantly struggle to survive. The market conditions impose the creation of maximization opportunities mainly to reduce the average operating cost and to achieve economies of scale. In general, while private companies use the method of external enlargement and development extensively (that is, mergers, takeovers, strategic alliances, joint ventures etc.), cooperatives prefer internal growth and development in Greece (in the case of successful UACs). This phenomenon is due to many factors (e.g. the aims of the member groups of cooperatives, the allocation of proprietary rights to cooperatives and so on) and it constitutes a severe suspending factor for the maximization rate and the cooperatives' competitiveness. But, even the merger attempts made are rather the result of financial failures than that of strategic planning.

In Europe, the tactic of external maximization is often used and it is widely applied in cooperatives even beyond borders. The cooperatives merger and the development of relations of inter-business collaboration with other small or large companies can either involve the productive activity itself or the creation of infrastructure for the delivery of collective interest services (marketing, product qualitative control, innovative products development, penetration into new markets, raw materials supply and so on). However, at any rate, the collaboration between cooperatives just as between every company contributes to the development of new ideas, cost reduction, easier penetration into the market and thus, increase in competitiveness.

Given the need to adapt Greek cooperatives to the changing market environment, it is necessary that the state encourages UACs to use external growth methods as well as to inform and train cooperators to promote their operation and finally to dispel misleading doubts. Any attempts to unite the UACs should be carefully studied and promoted with the voluntary initiative of the Unions themselves and their agricultural basis, together with the support of a favorable institutional framework and the necessary motivations from the state. Finally, the readjustment of the cooperatives' strategy towards the supply of quality products, branding and differentiation is an essential condition for their survival and development within a free market regime.

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