

‘More than wine’. Wine routes as a strategic partnership for local development: The case of the Wine Route of Dionysus in Northern Greece

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Abstract | Food and wine are part of our history and local identity that nowadays give floor to alternative forms of tourism achieving local sustainable development in rural areas and strategic partnerships. One tool available for rural destinations, bringing together a constellation of stakeholders, is the creation of wine routes. The purpose of the paper is to research collaborations between different stakeholders and evaluate the shared benefits of the creation of a wine route in the region of Drama, one of the most famous winemaking regions in Northern Greece. Using a qualitative research, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from the wine tourism ecosystem, such as local winemakers, representatives of rural tourism HORECA, experts from wine and tourism organizations and local development agencies, the paper tries to shed light to causes for non-participation in the wine route and the partnership managing the wine route, as well as to shared benefits from wine tourism in the area, perceived by those experts. From the results we see that people need to put on the table much more than just wine. They need to put trust, culture of cooperation, time, and resources for their strategic partnership to work towards inclusive, local and sustainable development. This is especially true in the post-covid-19 era, which is expected to give alternative forms of tourism and especially wine tourism, a promising future.

Keywords | Networking, Ishikawa-Fishbone diagram, SWOT, LEADER/CLLD

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1. Introduction

Wine is an extremely strong cultural element (Renko, Contò, Vrontis, Fiore & Thrassou, 2014) and a local agricultural product in which a rural destination can invest, either exclusively through wine tourism or in combination to other forms of rural tourism (Tomay & Tuboly, 2023). Wine has more than four thousand years of history in Greece and today there are more than five thousand labels and three hundred indigenous (Greek) grape varieties, and many Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) & Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) wines (Seaofwine, n.d.). According to the World Tourism Organization (n.d.) food and wine are part of our history and local identity, giving floor to alternative forms of tourism that may achieve local sustainable development. In fact, wine tourism has gained popularity at academic and policy debates as an effective local strategy for winemakers and wine regions to develop cellar door sales but also as a bottom-up approach to create diversification of rural economies and a destination brand. Albeit the different conceptualizations of wine tourism, some aspects are commonly accepted and nowadays several scholars have advocated that wine tourism is 'more than wine', as it offers a holistic, lived leisure experience (Kastenholz et al., 2022) rooted in many local-rural amenities including culture, heritage, food and natural scenery (Gaetjens, Corsi, & Plewa, 2023) and ideally is co-created between visitors, residents and diverse agents of supply (Carvalho, Kastenholz & Carneiro, 2021).

Towards this complex experiential direction wine tourism requires partnerships that achieve synergistic outcomes between all local stakeholders in a rural area, ranging from open farms, guesthouses, local restaurants, women's agrotouristic cooperatives and other facilities, to cultural groups, tour operators, local municipalities, tourist boards etc. In other words, wine tourism should be fully embedded in the rural area from which it takes its

key resources, thereby corresponding to the ambitions of an integrated rural tourism, as suggested by Saxena, Clark, Oliver and Ilbery (2007), and presenting more potential to achieve a truly sustainable rural development that meets territory's needs (Salvado & Kastenholz, 2017).

One of the tools available for rural destinations that might serve as a platform for bringing together all the above-mentioned stakeholders is the creation of wine routes (Correia & Brito, 2016). These offer an attractive storytelling on the one hand, and a network effect on the other (Renko et al., 2014). Traveling alongside a wine route allows tourists to engage with the diversity of the natural and cultural features of the area and to value the differences in winescapes and landscapes, within the scope of a thematic experience tailored to specific needs. In addition, businesses participating in a wine route, wineries, and others, are working within a network (cluster) creating economies of scale towards a common goal.

Nevertheless, collaboration and networking within such a partnership comes also with challenges (Brunori & Rossi, 2000) that relate to different aspirations, size of the businesses, shared norms, trust, different level of engagement, quality of experience offered etc. (McGregor & Robinson, 2019). But despite their complexity and the fact that they are time-consuming to establish and to manage, Kastenholz et al. (2022) clearly defend that continuous research on practical network cooperation and governance of the wine routes is very important if we are to create thriving and resilient rural wine tourism destinations.

In this context, the purpose of the paper is to research the collaboration (and its challenges) between different stakeholders involved in wine tourism development in a case study area in Northern Greece. Wine tourism in Greece has been developed since the late '90s and nowadays one can find different wine routes all over the country (Alebaiki, Menexes, & Koutsouris, 2015). We seek to evaluate the shared benefits of the development

of wine tourism and specifically the benefits derived from the creation of a wine route in the region of Drama; labeled as the *Wine Route of Dionysus*¹. In so doing we focus on the perspective of stakeholders (wine and/or tourism-related businesses and local development agents) either members or not of the specific wine route. Especially with the latter we investigate the reasons for their loose involvement in the partnership and the reasons for not being integrated into the wine route. The *Wine Route of Dionysus* is part of a wider network of wine routes called 'The Wine Roads of Northern Greece', which was the pioneer of wine tourism in the country (Bonarou, Tsartas, & Sarantakou; Alebaki, 2012).

The main research question raised by this paper is: to what extent has this route and this partnership activated fruitful collaboration and has contributed to local development in the region, with mutual benefits not only to the wineries but all other local businesses? We elaborate on the above question using mostly qualitative data collected via in-depth interviews with local wine makers, other agri-food and tourism businesses, Local Action Group (LAG) representatives, representatives from the local tourism board and other experts involved in wine tourism in the region. Albeit a case study, with findings that might not be generalized, the paper explores a common problem, in greater detail, that most wine destinations face, how to build an effective and sustainable wine tourism ecosystem (Salvado & Kastenholz, 2017).

2. Wine Tourism and wine routes as a tool for synergies and local development

Wine tourism is one of the most important alternative forms of tourism that drives people who

are interested in wine to the rural. Lately there has been an increasing debate on the centrality of wine (in the wine tourism experience) and an emerging argument of wine being complementary rather than core of the experience, depending on who travels, and the level of involvement with wine. Therefore, wine tourism is recently conceptualized beyond wine tasting to consuming the rural lifestyle and the entire terroir, landscape, and local cultures (Kastenholz et al., 2022; Tomay & Tuboly, 2023).

In this paper we do not aim at exhausting the terminological debate around wine tourism but we accept the references to wine tourism as visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals for which wine tasting and experiencing the attributes of a winemaking region are the motivating factors for visitors but we also embrace the territorial dimension of this activity (Correia & Brito, 2016) and the involvement to a more wider range of activities (Sparks, 2007). Within the Greek context and even though wine tourism has developed in Greece during the 90ies it was only recently, in 2014, defined by the Greek Ministry of Tourism² as: "*The special form of tourism which concerns the provision of reception, guided, hospitality and catering services in areas functionally integrated with winemaking or wine production (vineyards) facilities. These services are offered in combination with activities related to viticulture and wine production*".

The benefits of wine tourism have been documented in many countries. Most of the research advocates on the new personal-lived experiences, satisfaction of different preferences-needs and diverse motives of wine tourists, and on the incentives provided to wineries in terms of comparative advantage and added value to their wines (Getz, & Brown, 2006). Finally, the territorial benefits and opportunities for rural areas such as the creation of jobs and overall wellbeing were also highlighted in

¹In antiquity the area was a center of Dionysian worship. Here, according to Greek mythology, the god Dionysus was raised and with local wine he intoxicated the carnivorous horses of the local king Lycurgus (Wine Makers of Northern Greece, n.d.).

²Law 4276/2014, article 25, paragraph 1.

the relevant literature (Darnay, 2016). When it comes to wine routes, the bulk of literature presents the benefits that arise from the cooperation of local stakeholders involved in all three sectors: primary - agriculture, secondary - wine industry, and tertiary - tourism (Karagiannis & Metaxas, 2020). Therefore, wine routes act as models of multifunctionality in rural areas, promoting new social services, enhancing economic opportunities and the rural economy (Tomay & Tuboly, 2023). So, it is understood that these routes, apart from being a strong marketing tool, offer much more by connecting the main product (wine) with tourism and cultural identity, consequently, promoting sustainable development, integrated rural development and authenticity (Renko et al., 2014).

Regarding wine route collaboration of stakeholders within, challenges also have been identified. Correia & Brito (2016) argue that legislation, the terroir, the infrastructure or even the emblematic wines are not enough for a successful regional development journey based on wine tourism. According to their work the key for substantial improvement and sustainable development is rather stakeholders' commitment to effective cooperation and interaction. Some of the challenges identified relate to the small size of agricultural enterprises (in comparison to the bigger size of some wineries), limited resources that lead to unachievable economies of scale and lack of social capital (Partalidou & Koutsou, 2012). Finally, a serious problem is the lack of skilled staff and the part-time employment of the underqualified - most of the times family members. It is also often observed that the participation in networks is based on personal relations rather than professional reasons and motivations; hence collaboration is challenged by interpersonal conflicts (Jesus & Franco, 2016).

This perspective will be addressed in this study which is focusing on collaboration in the context of a wine route and on how such a strategic partnership of different stakeholders might contribute to the overall local development and shared benefits.

3. Wine tourism in Greece & the '*Wine Roads of Northern Greece*' partnership

Alternative forms of tourism in Greece have been at the forefront the past years as following sustainable principles and aiming at bringing visitors/tourists in close contact with nature, the rural and the culture, thus empowering local communities (Sevastiadou, Charatsari & Partalidou, 2021). Especially, the development of wine tourism seems to be an important priority and towards this end the Greek Ministry of Tourism has established a national label of '*winery open to visitors*' adding a marketing tool and a quality assessment to the wineries³ that are involved in wine tourism. Wineries submit all the appropriate documents and get the label for 5 years and according to the president of the National Committee of wine tourism⁴ (interviewed for this research) until today a total of 87 wineries all over Greece have acquired this label, a number substantially inferior to the 240 wineries that are mapped by Alebaki and Ioannides (2017), some years before, as generally inviting visitors to their wineries during special events and open days.

Actually, the development of an organized form of wine tourism dates back to 1997 when the Union of Winemakers of the Macedonian Vineyard⁵ (established by thirteen winemakers in 1993) organized a wine route with the official name '*Wine Roads*

³Implemented in the framework of Regulations (EC) 479/2008 of the Council and 555/2008 of the European Commission. It is co-funded by the European Union, Greece, and the proposing organisations.

⁴The establishment of the 'National Committee of Winetourism' by the National Professional Organization of Vines and Wine created in 2016 was another landmark. The committee has representatives of the wine producer associations and other stakeholders of public and private sector bodies, which focus on drawing up a long-term development strategy for wine tourism (EDOAO, n.d.).

⁵Later renamed to 'Wine Makers of Northern Greece'.

of Northern Greece' within the framework of the Organization of Thessaloniki Cultural Capital of Europe (1996-1997) and mostly financed by the winemakers themselves. Onwards some of their actions (signposts, publicity material etc.) were funded under the European Union Initiative LEADER II (1997-2001) and LEADER+ (2007-2009) (Alebaki, 2012; Karafolas, 2007). This partnership grew further including more areas and winemaking regions and expanding from Macedonia to Epirus (in the West) and Thrace (in the East). The main goals set by the partnership with the creation of 8 wine routes and the development of other wine tourism activities such as the 'open days' are the *"promotion of the branded standard Greek wine produced by its members education and information of professionals and consumers of wine, the protection and promotion of the regions and designations of origin and the indigenous varieties of the vineyard of Northern Greece, the support of the Greek cultural heritage and the local activities, the contribution to the creation and implementation of an effective institutional and legal framework concerning the wine sector, the promotion of strategic and business planning for Greek wine and the participation and cooperation with international companies and organizations"* (Wine Makers of Northern Greece, n.d.). Their pioneering idea was followed by other regions and other wine producers' association and partnerships, all over the Greek vineyards, using the wine routes as a place branding strategic tool.

Wineries that wish to enter the partnership of the Wine Makers of Northern Greece and gain from all the common activities (wine promotion, seminars, wine route) and events (open days, wine tasting events) organized by the team of the company have the obligation of a yearly monetary remuneration. According to Alebaki (2012), the fact that the funding programmes (LEADER) have ended, and the economic crisis has shown its side effects

to tourism are mainly the reasons behind the decline of the participation of other businesses (other than wineries) in the wine routes. Understanding the way this partnership works and the perceptions of associated stakeholders is key to the functioning and sustainability of the network and its contribution to the overall rural development.

4. Case study area description & Research methods

The Wine routes created by the partnership of the Wine Makers of Northern Greece extend to all northern Greece and offer the opportunity to enjoy wine tourism experiences along eight different sub-routes scattered geographically and involving 28 wineries. One of these eight designated geographical routes will be our case study: the *Wine Route of Dionysus* in the Region of Drama.

Drama (Figure 1) has a total of 98,287 inhabitants and economic activities are mainly found in the primary sector (cotton, tobacco, potato, viticulture, and husbandry), production of food and beverages, as well as marble and metal and wood products. It is one of the most popular wine making regions in Greece with wines of protected origin (PGI Agora, PGI Adriani, PGI Drama) and includes famous wineries established since the late 1980 and early 1990s, but also some new generation wineries since the mid-2000. In tourism there was an increase in hotel infrastructure from 2003 onwards, culminating in 2007 when the largest increase in beds and units was recorded. The existence of the Mountain Falakro Ski Center, the growing demand for special forms of tourism and the financial tools by regional and national programmes that helped businesses, contributed significantly to this upward trend for hospitality services.



Figure 1 | Case study area

In recent years, steps have been taken towards the development of wine tourism with the establishment of a wine route by the Wine makers of Northern Greece and the organization of wine tourism festivals by other local bodies. The wine event-festival of *Draminognosia* (established since 2014) takes place at the end of May and is a big celebration for wine in the city of Drama and through the paths of Dionysus. The event is organized by the Winemakers of Drama Association with the support of the Prefectural Administrative Body of Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, the Municipality of Drama and four other rural municipalities as well as the Greek Ministry of Tourism. During the approximately one week that the festival lasts, all the wineries have their doors open for guided tours and tastings, while at the same time parallel cultural events, lectures, musical events take place in the wineries, as well as throughout the city of Drama and other places nearby (Greek guide gas-

tronomy, n.d.). This event, albeit very famous, is not part of the events that fall within the *Wine route of Dionysus* run by the partnership of the Wine makers of Northern Greece. This is a very crucial point that is going to be raised also by our field research and will be discussed in the section of the results. Finally, there is an ongoing process for the creation of an interpretation center of wine and spirits which will serve as a thematic wine museum funded under the local CLLD/LEADER⁶ initiative.

According to our research and data gathered by the local departments of agriculture and tourism in the Prefectural body of Drama, the total number of wineries interested and engaging in wine tourism in the region is eight⁷ (six out of them have the national official logo of the Ministry of Tourism). This fact (high number of certified wineries) was also a selection criterion for our case study area and case study wine route. Seven of them have

⁶'LEADER' is an acronym for "Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale", meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions'. In the 2014-2020 programming period, the LEADER method has been extended under the broader term Community-Led Local Development (ENRD, n.d.).

⁷There are also other three wineries producing wine in the area but are not welcoming visitors – are not involved in wine tourism at all.

established the *Wines of Drama Association* and launched the Campaign 'Promotion of PGI Drama Wines in Third Countries (USA, Canada, China, Australia)'⁸. Only four out of the eight wineries participate (during the time of the research) in the *Wine Route of Dionysus* managed by the Winemakers of Northern Greece partnership. Other businesses that are part of this wine route, are three hotels and one women's agrotourism cooperative.

It is already obvious, by the abovementioned, that there are different and multifaceted wine tourism initiatives in the region of Drama, managed and run by different bodies from the wine industry, local authorities, and development agencies. This will be further discussed in the results' section. A qualitative method approach was used to answer the basic research questions since the aim was to elaborate on relations, past experiences, perceptions of a social reality, within a non-formal environment of conversation, that would disclose hidden knowledge, most of the times lost in quantitative research (Bryman, 2015).

At this point we must mention that the *Wine Route of Dionysus* covers the region around Mount Paggiaon, which also includes a winery in the close-by region of Kavala. Unfortunately, due to the covid-19 restrictions during the research only wineries located in the same prefecture were used in order to avoid trips between different administrative borders that were prohibited. The selection of both experts and entrepreneurs is based on deliberate sampling (Bryman, 2015), with a basic criterion for the former to be experts in wine tourism and for the latter to participate or be proposed as possible participants in the *Wine Route of Dionysus*.

Data were collected through 22 in-depth qualitative interviews, that lasted one hour and a half using an interview guide during spring 2021: (a) with five key informants-experts at a first stage to

set the framework and formulate the questions and (b) with 17 local entrepreneurs (winemakers and others, members and non-members of the wine route), as shown in figure 2.

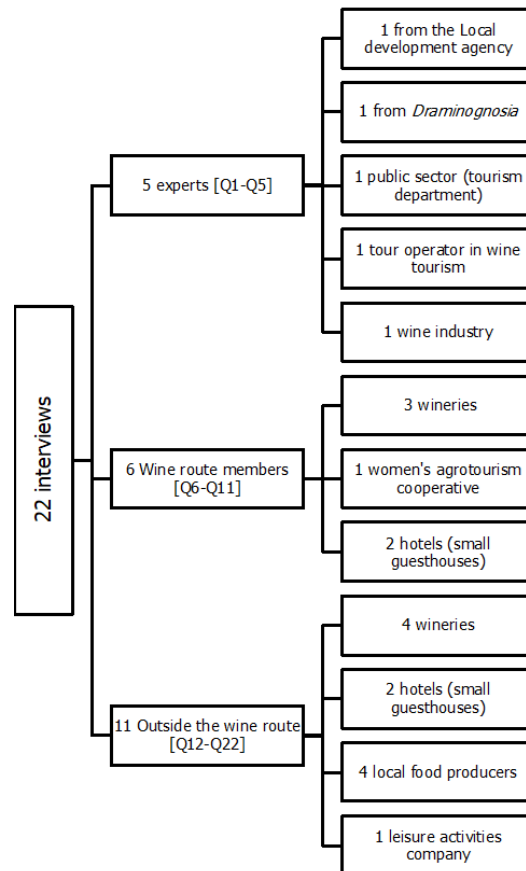


Figure 2 | Sampling of experts and local businesses
Source: Own elaboration

The initial plan was to use a focus group discussion with experts; however, this was not possible due to the pandemic. Thus, adjustments were made, and individual in-depth interviews were conducted, some in presence, separately one from the other, and some online. The group of experts covers key areas for the research questions, such as the public sector (specializing in tourism issues in the region), the local development sector (specializing in local agritourism development programs), the tourism sector (tour operator), wine tourism

⁸Implemented in the framework of Regulations (EC) 479/2008 of the Council and 555/2008 of the European Commission. It is co-funded by the European Union, Greece, and the proposing organisations.

and the wine industry. Onwards interviews with all members of the wine route were conducted. Then, by a snowball technique (asking people – members – to point out some businesses that are either in a proximity or that might have expressed an interest in wine tourism in the past but still are not members of the wine route) the total sample was reached.

The originality of the data collection was that, apart from an interview guide, the Ishikawa- Fishbone diagram (Ilie & Ciocoiu, 2010) was used to help identify the causes of the problem, which is the non-participation in the Wine Route. Through this visual representation, the ‘head’ of the fish represents a problem, and in the herringbone the large and small categories of causes are advocated as contributing to the creation of the problem. Ishikawa diagram (also called fishbone diagram, created by Kaoru Ishikawa in 1968) is a visualization tool for categorizing the potential causes of a problem and identifying its root causes (Bohátová, Schwarcz, Schwarczová, Bandlerová & Tik, 2016).

Finally, at the stage of the data analysis and after the covid-19 restrictions, a follow up field visit to all the wineries (eight wineries both members and non-members of the wine route) was performed by the first author to validate all the results and main points of the research. These field notes were used as a hermeneutic layer. The analysis of the in-depth interviews was undertaken manually by one of the authors using as codes two layers: the Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunity-Threats (SWOT) analysis axis and the Ishikawa- Fishbone diagram axis/themes that were written down by the experts. All transcribed interviews and the field notes were coded through content-thematic analysis and results were discussed amongst the research team, to increase reliability and validity. Quotes and field notes were also used in the presentation of the results in this chapter to highlight narratives shared, keeping in mind all ethical issues and anonymity of the sub-

jects. Hence, the identification [Q₁₋₂₂] after each quote indicates only what field she or he represents (as noted in figure 2), to provide some nuance to the quotes but still safeguard anonymity.

5. Results of the field research

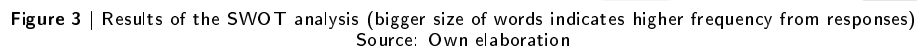
This chapter is structured, as detailed next, according to the three strands of importance identified for the development of wine tourism in the area: (i) topics raised that relate to challenges for overall local development, (ii) the actual or perceived benefits from wine tourism and (iii) the role of the wine route as a collaborative instrument enhancing local development and shared benefits.

(i) Challenges for local development

The major outcome of the field research is that the overall perception of the achievement of local development in the region is very incipient. Local development is interpreted by everyone as economic, social, and cultural and achieved through specific activities albeit not yet evident: “...we see it, we hear it, but we do not feel the impact of local development!” [Q₂₂]. Indeed, there are real geographical exclusions of some businesses due to the obsolete road infrastructure which makes access to several rural villages rather difficult for visitors (railway lines are inactive too). Also, after the prolonged economic crisis there are only a handful of companies left in the manufacturing sector once thriving (marble, wood and clothing). This resulted in high unemployment rates and outmigration of young people, which leaves the region without skilled labor for any local development schemes: “...people need to find business opportunities so that there can be a growth, but this is really difficult these past years. The only business that is thriving is coffee shops and takeaway food; not really sectors with great impact to

Emphasis was also placed on the absence of a common vision and strategy through all local development agencies that in the past have initiated a wine tourism activity. Although there might be a prospect of development, with funding mechanisms from several local and regional bodies, and several wine tourism initiatives, but there is no coordination and creation of a joint effort that will have multiplier effect: “... *there is no common vision for the place, especially when it comes to tourism, everyone - meaning official agents - has*

Nevertheless, there are several opportunities to achieve local development through wine tourism in the area as it's an emblematic wine making region with high value wines that are gaining recognition which attracts more visitors (figure 3).



When it comes to wine tourism and the perceived benefits, some attributed 'elitism' to the wine tourists and the approaches of the winemakers in the past years, mentioning that there is a turn to high quality and expensive wines and an attitude of only attracting wine lovers and ex-

perts in closed wine tasting events. Many local stakeholders, especially those not involved in the wine route, defined the wine tourist as someone *"...the wine tourist must be someone of a higher economic level, because in order to learn to drink wine you need style, you need to have gastronomic skills, in other words you must have a financial comfort. It is a 'sport for the rich' that leaves less*

'room' and less benefits for all" [Q₁₇]. However, this may raise opportunities (as highlighted in the SWOT) for profits if this market was well addressed through the overall development of food-wine literacy and market segmentation.

Some winemakers (already part of the wine route) perceive wine tourism as an opportunity for additional income, through gate sales and 'mouth to mouth' advertisement for their wines. This is also something that according to our experts might work as a driver for some winemakers that currently are not involved in wine tourism. In fact, there are respondents who believe that, except for the last year with Covid-19, wine tourism in Drama has increased and may become close to trends visible in other European countries.

Cooperation amongst winemakers was stressed by many as essential to trigger benefits for all stakeholders. A major point raised, however, was the lack of cooperation towards creating a common wine tourist product: "... we had a difficult time in convincing winemakers to sit at the same table and create common wine tourism events. They are basically interested in their job and to sell good wines. They are entrepreneurs; their main job is to make a profit. I do not say it as an accusation, it's a fact" [Q₂]. Nowadays, especially after the economic crisis (2008) there was a change in mentality: "... what I see is that winemakers are more open to other activities apart from making and selling good wines, some years ago you could only find one or two wineries open during Sunday (non-working hours for the winery). Now more wineries (not all) stay open during the weekends which are the days that tourists can organize a trip" [Q₃].

Another stakeholder emphasizes the lack of connection between wine tourism and other forms of tourism in the region: "... we do not benefit much from wine tourism but more from the Ski Resort visitors. Those two do not meet" [Q₁₃]. On the positive side, the creation of the wine-related brand name and identity for Drama is acknowledged: "... with the development of wine tou-

risms, Drama gained a name in tourism apart from the skiing, which was the only form of tourism developed" [Q₁₈] which, however, is not enough. It is considered necessary to develop more cooperation particularly between the two sectors, wine producing and the tourism industry, because "... these people are winemakers and have nothing to do with tourism! It is not enough just to open your cellar... a cooperation must emerge that will essentially turn this product of theirs into a tourist product, with benefits for the whole area" [Q₁₇].

It goes without saying that the wine event/festival of *Draminognosia*, through which the local wine is promoted, offers some soft outcomes, especially publicity (even more publicity than the Wine Route of Dionysus, as it was mentioned). The wine sector, however, and wine tourism requires better financing and support to be able to produce major outcomes: "... good wine without investment is not possible, high quality wine tourism services without the right people is also not possible, as they say... the tools make the carpenter [Q₄]" . Towards this direction the LEADER/CLLD Initiative has played in the past and could still play an important role in the future, as many suggested and as we already described in terms of new investments and the creation of the new wine museum in the region, but also through offering a platform of cooperation between different sectors of the local economy and different rural areas in the country.

Experts also commented on the seasonality of tourism in the region. "During Christmas and, the international Film Festival and of course during *Draminognosia*, the city of Drama attracts many tourists, but this is it. Throughout the year visitation in the area is rather low, if you also bear in mind the lack of heavy snow for skiing in the winter, there are not that many opportunities. Wine tourism and rural tourism might offer a way out of this seasonality, is almost a 365 [days per] year tourism" [Q₅].

In another case, the benefits on the primary sector are emphasized, as the wine tourist – with

a few exceptions – will not only visit an area for wine but will combine it with other experiences and therefore will discover the local products of other producers, and there is a high chance to extend overnight stays. HORECA entrepreneurs (not members of the wine route) claim that their guests combine their stay with wine tourism, but they do not find it necessary to join the wine route: "...I don't know what the benefits from joining the wine route are. I think this is a closed partnership only for some wine makers" [Q₁₂]. Such quotes turn the attention to a better communication plan of the wine route by the Wine Makers of Northern Greece partnership.

(iii) The Wine Route as a collaborative instrument to enhance local development

Given the challenges of the regional context, wine tourism may only contribute to local development, if well organized and stimulated through network collaboration and synergies. This could also enhance overall development through a well-

managed collaboration of all agents in this wine tourism ecosystem. On the other hand, there are many that don't see these perceived benefits as easily obtained through the participation in a wine route. This is also the major argument for not being part of the wine route, as we described from the beginning, not all local wineries are participating: "...some are members, some are not, some were and left, there is a mixed feeling about this partnership and their wine route" [Q₄]. For non-member wineries, the general feeling is that (especially the smaller ones) do not have a clear picture of what wine routes are. Lack of time and organization, financial costs, geographical isolation of the business are some of the reasons for non-participation. Issues of how the wine route is managed by the Winemakers of Northern Greece were also portrayed: "...they don't manage it properly. This Wine route should be number one in terms of wine tourism, but it's not. It doesn't mean that just because we named it a Wine route, it is one. It requires work every day and effective promotion" [Q₁₁].

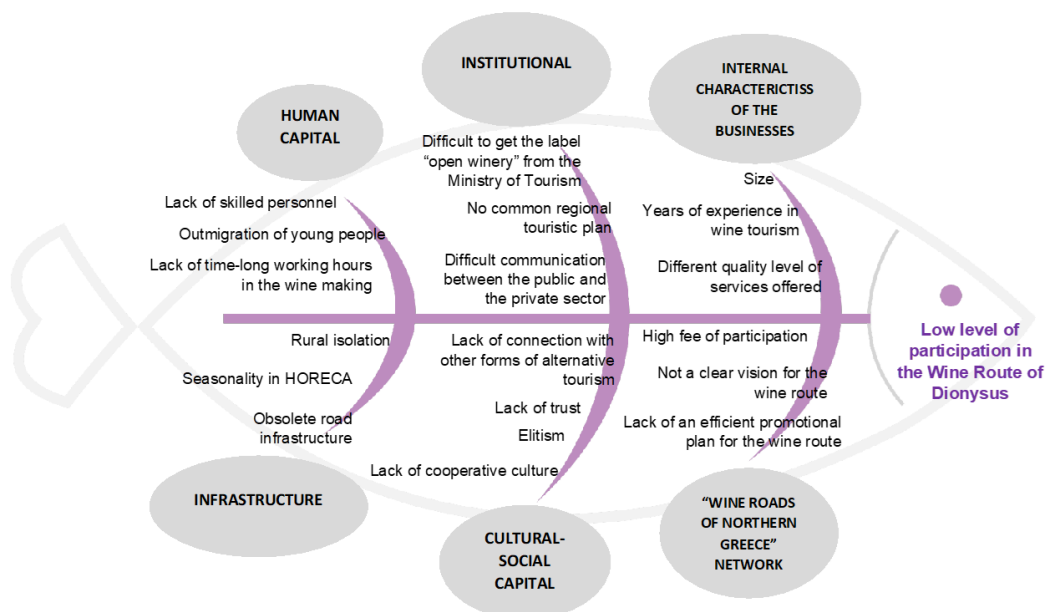


Figure 4 | Visualization of the results on the Fishbone Diagram with experts
Own elaboration

Members also identified the lack of participation from other local businesses and especially the unwillingness from other wineries to be part of the wine route. *"...it would really make sense if all the wineries of Drama participated, if there was only the wine route of Drama, it would be much more inclusive"*[Q₁₆]. But it seems that some winemakers prefer to act on their own or are more focused on wine production instead of wine tourism.

The non-participation in the wine route is visualised in the fishbone diagram (figure 4), which details several difficulties and barriers identified from the empirical research. Overall, the main dimensions that influence the non-participation in the wine routes and the partnership of the winemakers of northern Greece (and to some extent minimum engagement to wine tourism) are six: human capital elements (mainly lack of skilled personal and time), cultural and social capital (trust, elitism, culture of cooperation), internal characteristics of the business (size, quality offered etc.), the partnership itself (as having no clear vision and an insufficient promotional plan), the more institutional (labelling) and infrastructure fragilities (major isolation of the rural areas).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Wine tourism in the Drama region has not yet reached the level where the benefits are visible to all. Direct economic benefits from the wine tourism activity were not identified as potential regional benefit to rural businesses boosting the regional brand and the use of all local resources, despite what the literature advocates (Salvado & Kastenholtz, 2017). Local stakeholders have yet to create powerful network connections valorizing all possible local resources, regionally embedded, corresponding to the notion of integrated rural tourism (Saxena et al., 2007). According to our research, everyone seems to be in favor of collaborations,

although some are more enthusiastic, while others show caution and hesitation, but still realizing the potential benefits. Some actors, such as the smaller wineries and family agri-food businesses, see more opportunities than others. However, as the research shows, they often do not have time nor money to invest in networking activities, which is in line with the theory (Jesus & Franco, 2016) that argues about the size of a business as a drawback to collaboration within sector partnerships or diagonal clusters. This situation makes it difficult for these actors to actively engage in wine routes. Initially, as also described in previous literature on tourism clusters in rural areas (Partalidou & Koutsou, 2012), there seems to be a kind of 'elitism' and arrogance of some large, well-established wineries, which although theoretically supporting the networking of many types of businesses, focus mainly on catering services, effectively 'devaluing' small rural businesses. Therefore, there is no prospect of networking with other important players in the countryside. On the other hand, the level of services of many HORECA in the rural should be considered, before entering a wine route. Quality assessment is in need and there must be some quality requirements and competence that should ensure the delivering of a delightful overall experience (Kastenholtz & Lane, 2021) in order not to influence the overall wine tourism experience and devalue the services offered by wineries.

The literature and our findings do confirm that the concept of collaboration-networking does not seem to be understood in the same way by all parties and that most people perceive networking primarily as a means of promotion and not achieving a common goal in route and regional development (Partalidou & Koutsou, 2012). In any case, the conclusions regarding the wine route highlight its weak presence in the market as it is an 'abstract concept', which was once very innovative and important (in the beginning) but did not evolve accordingly. It seems to be perceived as a 'copy from abroad' that was not explained nor promo-

ted properly and never reached the standards of other areas. Much more, the benefits do not reach the whole region of Drama. Also, these benefits can now be obtained by other means and even without the obligation of monetary remuneration to the official partnership of the winemakers of northern Greece that manage the Wine Route.

As for the wine event /festival of *Draminognosia*, the benefits are again limited. Certainly, it does have a positive effect on the branding of the area and to some extent the local tourism development, but most of the advantages are concentrated in restaurants exclusively in the urban center and wineries located in the peri-urban area and less in the rural areas of the region and businesses located there.

The literature confirms (McGregor & Robinson, 2019) that most wineries are not directly interested in investing in tourism (by hiring people who will deal exclusively with it and not someone jumping from position to position from the production to welcoming and touring). Most do not see wine tourism as a main task, but as something complementary to wine producing. They accept and seek the benefits it offers, but up to a point, because they apparently fear that if they turn too much to tourism, their 'wine identity' will be altered as also noted by findings of Güzel, Ehtiyar and Ryan (2021). Towards this direction, the lack of preparation and training in wine tourism, which should help them understand the dynamics and advantages of a co-operative wine tourism ecosystem and show them how to effectively engage and make the best of their recourses via network support, was evident.

Some responses lead to the conclusion that the conditions may change in the future with the implementation of the new LEADER/CLLD program that is now being implemented and supporting networking of Drama's Hotel Association, with the Wine Maker's Association and some other local food companies, in order to create a common wine tourism identity for Drama. Access to resources

(financial, etc.), such as through LEADER/CLLD, was found to be a very important tool for overall tourism development in the countryside, which gives direction and opportunities, as evidenced by previous literature (European Union, 2013). This is also proven by the present research.

Finally, the problem of non-participation and lack of substantial development of wine tourism in the region is a combination of many things, perceptions and weaknesses that do not allow Drama, although an emblematic wine tourism region with many prospects, to evolve and achieve its goals for development, not excluding the countryside. More than wine, people must put on the table trust, culture of cooperation, effort, time, and resources for any strategic partnership to thrive. Especially in the post-covid-19 era, which is expected to offer opportunities to alternative forms of tourism (especially those developed in the open space, in less crowded places, in the countryside), wine tourism in rural areas may have a promising future.

In our attempt to codify the critical elements in the three main axes of sustainable wine tourism development (challenges for local development, wine tourism and benefits, wine route as a networking-collaboration instrument), some policy proposals emerge. Firstly, social capital should be stimulated to strengthen the whole region. Second, it is important to re-design the wine route, based on other criteria, such as a thematic criterium (enhancing experiences and storytelling) instead of a pure geographical one. Thematic wine routes for example that connect wine and adventure (in the mountain) or wine and art embrace HORECA and other tourism attractions within a common, powerful storytelling approach and not just due to geographical proximity (Seaofwine, n.d.). Thirdly, educating people involved in providing wine tourism experiences will also give an added value by creating jobs and offering high quality experiences, promoting the destination image overall. Training is, indeed, an essential factor for success of a wine tourism network as many participants in the rese-

arch reported the lack of skilled staff (in tourism marketing and wine tourism services). Last but not least, a wine tourism observatory - at national or regional level - that would monitor and measure the effects/impact and problems encountered on a regular basis would also be beneficial in communicating the benefits of participation and the social return of wine tourism to the territory.

The present research is not an exhaustive debate on all issues related to wine tourism but presents a case study wine route, with specific challenges regarding its development that may resonate in other wine producing regions trying to benefit from wine tourism. The fact that the research was conducted during the covid-19 pandemic inevitably influenced both the research tools and the results. One other limitation of the study stems from its qualitative nature, not permitting generalizable results nor any inferential analysis. Finally, the points of view of the wine tourists and the residents of the area have not been incorporated in the present reflection but may lead to a more comprehensive picture of regional development issues. An issue for future research therefore could be how to balance the values of the rural area and its communities with tourism development, given its weaknesses, but also authentic and diverse experiences it may offer, also considering the desires and requirements of modern wine tourists, especially in the post-covid period.

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