Strategic Planning and Web-Based Community Engagement in Small Inner Towns: Case Study Municipality of Nemea – Greece

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Abstract. The present paper aims at supporting small settlements, located in the countryside, towards paving long-term sustainable development pathways. To this end, a methodological framework is developed and implemented in a specific case study area, the lagging-behind region of Nemea. The ultimate goal is the mobilization of local assets in order for the place's attractiveness to be enhanced and ambitious trajectories of economic growth, but also social and territorial cohesion, to be accomplished. The proposed framework is grounded in the concept of place-based approach and strategic planning; and integrates various planning processes, techniques and tools such as spatial data management, scenario planning, as well as F2F and ICT-enabled community engagement. The empirical results unveil the small settlements and rural communities' deficit in online interaction, governance schemes and community engagement practices, a gap that needs to be bridged so as attractiveness and future sustainable development objectives, in a European territory of equal opportunities, to be attained.

Keywords: Small inner towns · Place-based approach · Strategic planning · Scenario planning · Citizens' engagement · Territorial cohesion

1 Introduction

The concept of *participation* appeared in the urban and regional planning theory during the sixties. However, its role and contribution have been greatly acknowledged in recent few decades, since it has vigorously permeated the planning and policy-making realm [23, 24, 30, 34, 42, 44, 45]. Current recognition of its value goes hand in hand with the gradually evolving *planning paradigm* and the transition from a top-down to a bottom-up approach [5, 22, 35, 44, 45]. This implies a shift from an obsolete, regulatory, command and control-driven governmental scheme to a more democratic and inclusive governance model [30], giving prominence to cooperative efforts at the urban and regional context. Furthermore, *participation* lies at the heart of the presently prevalent *smart city paradigm* and the consequent rapid proliferation of technological applications that stem from its adoption; while community empowerment and more substantial engagement are also promoted. In such scenery, the scope and value added to

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the democratization of planning and decision-making practices through the deployment of participation is remarkably broadened. Moreover, mature and user-friendly *digital mediation tools*, capable of bridging decision-making processes and communities, are brought to the forefront [34, 42] in order to craft more sustainable, well-defined, widely acceptable and bottom-up urban and regional strategies.

The above transitions – smart governance, bottom-up decision-making models and community engagement – have been mainly advocated by key *sustainability concerns* at a glocal (global/local) scale; and have streamlined planning approaches during the last two decades [42]. Such approaches emanate from the realization that *sustainability* and *participation* seem to be two tightly interwoven concepts, with the latter being perceived as an enabler of the former. Indeed, as Dalal-Clayton and Bass [13] claim, pursuing sustainability objectives is a rather complex and challenging endeavor, cross-cutting spatial scales; and demands multi- and inter-disciplinary cooperation as well as cross-fertilization of knowledge that emerges from the interaction of various actors, who are associated with a given local ecosystem. It also calls for the cultivation of culture in interaction among all actors and stakeholders involved in each single step of decision-making procedures. The establishment of a new participatory philosophy targets at setting the ground for negotiation and consensus-building in the spatial planning process with regard to a commonly agreed future vision and the pathways for reaching it. This, in turn, strengthens dedication to more aware and responsible patterns of community behavior, as a result of trust and commitment to both the planning process and related outcomes [21, 24, 30, 42, 44. 45].

While the aforementioned noticeable transitions seem to be at the epicentre of discussions on the *ICT-enabled* and *innovation-driven* urban context, a certain *gap* is detected when downscaling to small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs – population between 5.000–50.000 inhabitants) [40]. The gap is further widened when it comes to *very small towns* (VSTs – population < 5.000 inhabitants), thereby realizing that in a high-tech era where competitiveness, embeddedness, social innovation, unimpeded accessibility, networking and interaction are almost exclusively enabled by ICTs and their applications, these types of regions remain – to an extended degree – *neglected*, *overlooked* or *underaddressed* and largely *'invisible'* to the European policy-making and academic smart research agenda [29, 40]. This inconsistency, as highlighted by numerous researchers, is a critical one, taking into consideration the polycentric structure of the European settlement network and its high dependence on small-scale urban constellations [20, 46]. Furthermore, Naldi et al. [32] point out that although *smart, sustainable* and *inclusive growth* (i.e., ambitious policy-oriented targets) have laid the foundations of the European Union's (EU) strategy, as reflected in the ten-year vision 'Europe 2020', the way this could fit a diverse set of SMSTs remains rather obscure. Pursuant to a substantial share of the research community, in order to fulfil these targets, one should abandon the 'one size fits all' and adopt a more *place-based* approach [19, 20]. However, apart from the distinct categories of urban contexts, a place-oriented rationale brings also to the surface the different types of SMSTs that greatly diversify from one another with respect to their proximity to larger urban centers, access to resources and markets, socio-economic conditions and structure, physical attributes and spatial identity, etc. Moreover, it illuminates the peripheral, isolated and disadvantageous position of SMSTs in terms of riding the

technological 'wave' of recent decade as a prerequisite for paving smart, sustainable and inclusive future pathways [43], lacking thus potential for endogenous development [4]. Additionally, smart growth policies are void of specific focus on the peculiar attributes of these regions, especially the rural ones; and therefore, applications tailored to their contexts and/or needs are nonexistent.

Nonetheless, grasping the role and significance of SMSTs, as parts of the urban mosaic and the unique structure of the European settlement network [10], but also the functions offered by them, leads to the conclusion that the 'invisibility' imposed on smaller urban constellations – perceived as falling short in terms of developmental potential, glory etc. and being, in most cases, severely neglected in favor of larger cities – has to be remedied. This way, aspects of socio-economic and territorial cohesion that are in alignment with *smart, sustainable, resilient* and *inclusive growth* objectives, are optimally served. This necessity is further justified by *facts*. More particularly, SMSTs provide essential services in their surrounding rural areas. Actually, as *core centers* of functional regions [20] in the countryside, they possess a much more important role than their size might suggest, while they also impede depopulation of rural areas [10]. Moreover, peripheral and isolated SMSTs constitute vital elements of the European history [40]; while VSTs are deemed to be integral and essential parts of Europe as a predominantly rural region, according to the work of Dijkstra and Poelman [16] on the structural typology of NUTS 3 regions. The share of dwellers living in these types of regions is of equal significance, since they accommodate almost half of the European population. Pursuant to the study of Servillo et al. [38], about 27% of Europeans resides in SMSTs (approximately 8.350 towns with a population density ranging from 300 to 1.500 inhabitants/km^2); while another 19% lives in VSTs.

In harmony with the above discussion, the focus of the present paper is placed on SMSTs located in the countryside that are characterized by morphological, administrative and functional attributes [15, 39, 41]. In this respect, an attempt to explore a series of issues, via empirical results obtained from a Greek small inner town case study, is undertaken, namely:

- How mature and user-friendly ICT applications can underpin *governance* and *cooperation/interaction* of decision-making bodies with community actors in such an urban context?
- How can these applications broaden *community engagement* towards more informed decision-making regarding the future development paths that sustainably exploit these regions' territorial capital and support their functional role in rural territories?
- How transformational potential of *participatory planning* can build consensus on promising future developmental perspectives that ensure: territorial, social and economic cohesion of these lagging behind areas; new chances for gaining attractiveness; extroversion and competitive advantage by means of their territorial capital and historical trajectory?

Bearing the above questions in mind, this work proceeds with the establishment of a strategic planning framework for featuring future development pathways of a SMST. The paper is structured as follows: Sect. 2 elaborates on key methodological concerns of current territorial cohesion policy, i.e., a place-based approach; Sect. 3 delineates the

framework's discrete steps, that are developed and applied on the specific case study of this work, namely the municipality of Nemea which includes the town of Nemea (a Greek SMST); Sect. 4 concisely presents the empirical results that emerge from the implementation of the proposed framework; while finally, Sect. 5 provides some key concluding remarks.

2 'Territory Matters' – The Place-Based Approach as a Frame of Territorial EU Policy

Inequalities and polarized development, observed in the EU, constitute critical obstacles to the realization of the shared aspiration of a united Europe [19]. Despite the ample EU regional development policies implemented so far, polarization still persists, taking the form of constantly escalating economic and social disparities between places and between people, along with environmental pressures and threats [19]. According to Görmar et al. [26], polarized development is roughly appearing as: an increasing *population concentration* in and around large cities, coupled with trends of population decline that occurs in other regions; *accumulation* of investments and economic resources in a few capital and metropolitan areas, leaving behind the rest of cities and regions in the EU; a spatially and socially *uneven distribution of wealth*, which leads to a trust deficit in the European construction, overall frustration of population and a sense of detachment from an inclusive European future vision.

In the age of information society and the surge of the *smart city paradigm*, these inequalities and polarized development are considerably broadened, giving prominence mostly to large urban environments (global cities, mega cities, metropolises, etc.). Conversely, *SMSTs seem to drop behind*, despite the fact that their critical functional and socioeconomic role in the European urban-rural system in general, and the rural development in particular is greatly recognized [11, 17, 29, 48].

This category of *less-favored urban constellations* has recently gained high attention at the policy level, by being incorporated in the EU Cohesion and Territorial Development policy agenda in 2015, during the Latvian Presidency [40]. Nowadays, policy directions regarding such regions are grounded in their valuable *local assets* and *spatial qualities* that are deemed as core factors for appealing to economic agents and guiding local development strategies [37].

In this respect, the issue of small and medium-sized cities' *attractiveness* as a policy concept [25, 36], based on the variety of their assets and territorial capital, is immensely emphasized in the post-2000 period and has enriched the discussion for both EU's territorial cohesion as well as the new strategy and vision for rural Europe towards 2040. What actually seems to be sought is the mobilization of territorial assets and the boosting of attractiveness in order to strengthen competitiveness and attenuate local disparities.

Coping with imbalances and regional backwardness brings to the fore the concept of *place-based approach* as a form of public policy [3, 19, 20] and a *new paradigm* [2] for achieving long-term sustainability objectives, founded on the endogenous development of territorial assets [19, 20, 36]. Such an approach seeks a wiser utilization or motivation of local assets, so that economic efficiency but also social inclusion or equity objectives to be attained. It also sheds light on the tight relationship between every single spatial

context (region) on the one hand; and the nature of efficiency and equity problems that need to be dealt with, as well as the necessity to propose tailor-made interventions on the other hand. Stated differently, as Barca [2:9] suggests, a place-based approach refers to *"…a policy strategy aimed at promoting development from outside (the place) by means of interventions tailored to contexts"*, implying thus the need for a *spatially-aware developmental policy.* Beer et al. [3:5] provide a broader definition of the term by claiming that it *"… embodies an ethos about, and an approach to, the developments of economy and society that acknowledge that the context of each and every city, region and rural district offers opportunities for enhancing well-being. It advocates for a development approach tailored to the needs of each"*. They also state that no settlement can be grasped as too small or too remote for planning its own progress; while they enrich the term 'place' by attributing to it the human dimension, meanings and emotions [3], vital aspects that are critically linked to motivation of community groups and institutional settings. Servillo et al. [39] describe place-based approach as a genuine perspective for putting small towns in their local and regional context, combined with an effort to establish relationships and interaction of these towns with other spatial scales (national and international).

In the post-2000 period, the significance of the place-based approach towards addressing socio-economic and territorial cohesion objectives is remarkably acknowledged; while it is mentioned in numerous strategic documents, thereby forming a *mainstream* in dealing with territorial policies in the EU [12, 18, 19, 36]. This approach can be applied to a variety of territorial typologies including urban contexts, small and medium-sized towns, rural constellations, insular regions, peripheral and sparsely-populated areas. Its key constituents are the use of social capital and territorial assets, coupled with the building of innovation and smart specialisation strategies. The ultimate goal of the place-based or territorial approach is to abrogate inefficiency of resource utilization and social exclusion in terms of income and other well-being features [2].

All the above have provided precious food for thought on the development of the appropriate methodological approach, followed in the specific case study – Nemea locality –, which is marked by: an explicit focus on 'locale' – *place-based approach* – [19, 20], taking into consideration all local assets and the value attached to them by the local community, as well as the full set of opportunities that stem from the broader decision environment; an *integrated approach* [19, 20], attempting to identify and strengthen sectoral interaction and creation of value chains; a *participatory view* – both face-to-face (F2F) and ICT-enabled –, inherent in the place-based approach [12, 19, 20], so that distributed knowledge to be embedded in the planning endeavour and the widest possible consensus, as to the potential future development pathways, to be ensured; a *strategic view* (i.e., a results-oriented, long-term planning approach), targeting future, desirable, identity-based and locally-driven pathways that can offer short but mostly robust medium and longer term inclusive growth. The steps of the proposed framework are described in the following section.

3 Steps of the Methodological Framework

Adopting a place-based approach, the methodological framework for policy analysis of Nemea case study attempts to get a deep insight into the economic, social and spatial

peculiarities of the local context – *the internal environment*. It also delves into the area's broader context – *the external environment* – by exploring potential relationships and interactions with different spatial scales (national and international), as well as challenges and opportunities that emanate from this context. Key drivers for discovering potential future developmental pathways are: quantitative and qualitative spatial data management regarding distinctive *territorial assets* for informing long-term perspectives of sustainable development strategies; a *scenario planning* process, which builds upon a specific combination of territorial assets, integrates distinct community interests and demonstrates spatial choices of scenarios that are transparent, verifiable, forward-looking and can be subjected to citizens' scrutiny; and F2F as well as ICT-enabled *community engagement* for assessing both the current state of the study region and the preferences, with regard to the proposed future pathways, which are expressed during the application of the scenario planning exercise. The steps of the methodological framework are illustrated in Fig. 1.

More specifically, *Stage 1* focuses on a preliminary identification of *problems* and *critical issues* in seeking a sustainable and resilient future of the locality, but also on their relative *prioritization*. To this end, successive interaction processes between the research team and the local community are carried out. Engagement, at this stage, involves specific target groups such as: the mayor and the members of the municipality's council, key municipal employees (directors of municipality's departments) and local community groups.

Stage 2 refers to the shaping of the local *vision* for the future development of Nemea. This task is, initially, accomplished by the research team, by taking into consideration the pieces of information that are collected at Stage 1, the elaboration on the elements of the internal environment, as well as the challenges and opportunities that emanate from the external environment; while it is further detailed at Stage 6, where this vision and a proposed strategic plan for its implementation are scrutinized.

Stage 3 attempts to illuminate the *peculiar attributes* of the study area. Natural and cultural resources, local economic structure, employment pattern, social environment, infrastructures, etc. are explored in this respect. Mapping of pertinent resources and key infrastructures is also carried out as a complementary task for both the planning exercise and the effective communication/interaction with the local community. The insight gained reveals the comparative advantages, but also the weaknesses of the region. This, combined with knowledge gathered at Stage 4 – the external environment – provides valuable input to Stage 2, thereby sharpening the vision by throwing light on constraints, opportunities and risks of the external environment.

Stage 4 regards the deciphering of the key drivers of the *external environment*, elucidating thus the decision context in which the region's strategic objectives will be pursued. Developments of these key drivers may induce either positive or negative effects on the study area. Strategic planning should take advantage of the positive influences and efficaciously handle the negative ones at the same time, in order to secure a sustainable and resilient future. The study of the external environment is based on the *PESTLE analysis* (Political – Economic – Social – Technological – Legal – Environmental) [1, 6]; and elaborates on issues such as climate change, technological developments, economic recession, to name but a few. Furthermore, *developmental* and *strategic spatial choices*

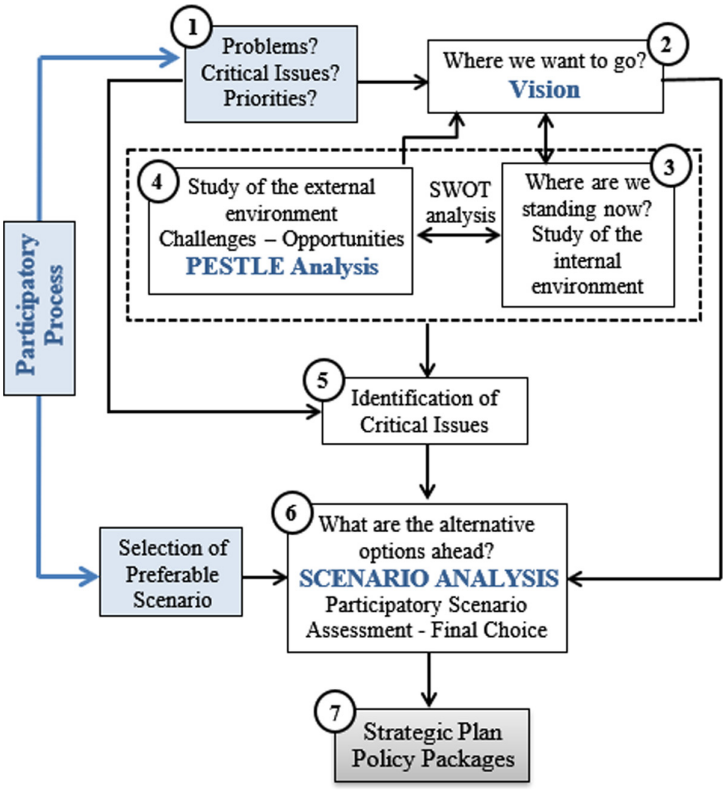

Fig. 1. Steps of the methodological approach of Nemea's strategic planning exercise

that emerge from hierarchically higher policy making levels are taken into account, e.g., the national or regional level.

Stage 5 identifies the *critical issues* that are expected to arise during the study area's 'journey' towards the desirable end state. This is accomplished through the qualitative assessment of information gathered at all the previous stages; whereas the issues illuminated at this step give input into the stage of scenario building.

Stage 6 elaborates on *future alternative scenarios*, capable of attaining a visionary end state, as this is articulated at Stage 2. In the context of the particular spatial planning endeavour, the scenario building process follows the *two uncertainty axes* rationale [14, 47, 49].

Finally, *Stage 7* comprises the policy paths that can bring the selected scenario to life.

4 Featuring Future Development Perspectives of Nemea Municipality – Case Study Results

The particular section presents indicative results that are obtained from the implementation of the previously analyzed framework, while a succinct description of Nemea's municipality profile is also provided.

4.1 The Study Region – The Internal Environment

The study area, i.e., municipality of Nemea (Region of Peloponnese, Greece) has a population of 10.954 inhabitants, according to the 2011 Greek census; and falls under the category of *inner regions*, as these are defined by Servillo et al. [40]. Pursuant to this view, inner regions are mountainous or rural places, at a distance from large urban centers or capitals, that include functionally autonomous small towns. They usually exhibit low or negative job creation rates in all sectors and low level of services, as well as deficient educational/recreation amenities and poor quality of life. Therefore, they are perceived as *marginal territories* in terms of territorial dynamics but also socio-economic frontiers.

Municipality of Nemea is situated in a relatively plain territory surrounded by mountains, hence its characterization as mountainous region. Moreover, the soil composition, the geology, the altitude and the sub-arid and sub-humid climate of the area are conducive to the development of viticulture. Indeed, Nemea possesses the largest vineyard zone met in the Balkans and constitutes the greatest red wine producer and exporter in Greece. It is also endowed with a remarkably wealthy cultural capital, composed of significant archaeological sites, monuments of various historical periods, modern art, local habits and customs as well as well-established cultural events (e.g., Nemean Games) and pertinent infrastructures.

The local economy is strongly contingent on the primary sector with 48,77% of the workforce being engaged in it, whereas 11,32% is involved in the secondary and 39,91% in the tertiary sector. As far as the basic demographical and social characteristics are concerned, the following can be mentioned: Nemea exhibits considerable tendencies of population decline; a substantial share of its citizens (13%) has not completed primary education; unemployment rates remain low compared to the national average; the labor force is considered well-educated; the area is equipped with all the necessary social infrastructures. Additionally, its accessibility is rather problematic due to the inefficiencies and the bad quality of the road network; while a great degree of dependence between Nemea and the nearby urban centers is pretty obvious, a fact that seriously obstructs its developmental perspective and dynamics.

4.2 The Context of Community Engagement

In the context of Nemea's spatial planning exercise, community engagement takes place in two distinct stages of the methodological framework, namely (Fig. 2):

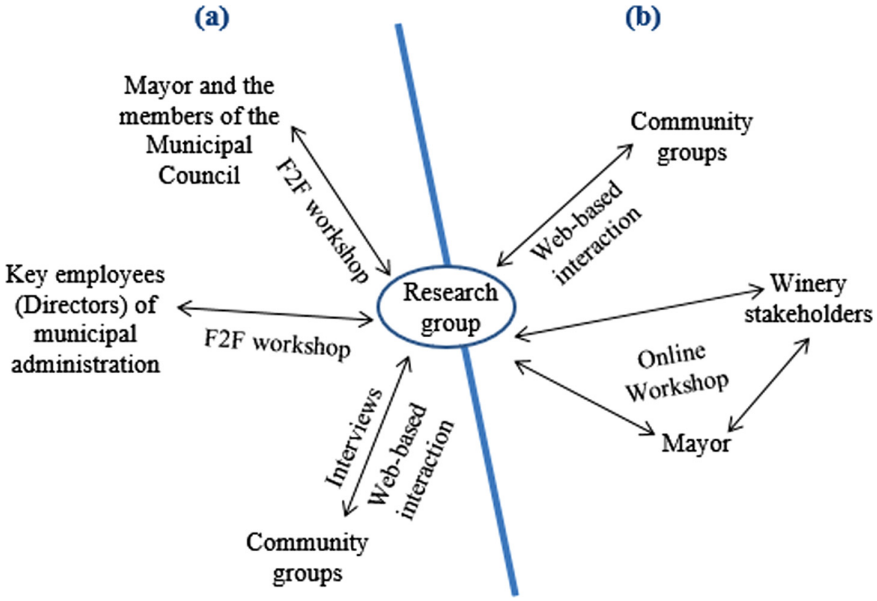

Fig. 2. Target groups and means of interaction between the research group and the community of Nemea at: (a) Stage 1 and (b) Stage 6

- Stage 1 (Fig. 1), where the focus is placed on the identification of *problems, critical issues* and *priorities*, as these are grasped by various local actors and community groups;
- Stage 6 (Fig. 1), where *scenario preferences* of the local community are explored.

More specifically, at *Stage 1*, the participatory approach is implemented through successive interaction procedures that intend to get insight into diversifying views on the *problems*, *critical issues* and their *prioritization.* This whole process involves the following target groups and means of interaction:

- A F2F workshop of the research group with the *mayor* and the *members of the municipal council*, i.e., those in charge of setting up local policies.
- A F2F workshop with *key municipal employees*, who represent the heads of various departments and handle locality's everyday issues and inefficiencies.
- Interaction with local community groups, conducted through a limited number of interviews with Nemea's residents and entrepreneurs (10 persons).

Based on the responses and views that emerge from the traditional interaction (previously described F2F workshops and interviews with community groups), a *Web questionnaire* is structured as a means for extending the participatory process to the local community; and engaging lay people and local entrepreneurs, in order to enrich and therefore improve the planning process and outcome. The *online interaction* is hosted by the municipality's website, where the Web questionnaires are uploaded and responses,

as to the problems, critical issues and priorities, are collected in a time span of one month (from the beginning of August to the beginning of September 2020).

Additionally, at *Stage 6*, the constructed scenarios are communicated by the research team to:

- the *local community* through a Web-based exercise that takes place in September 2020. In this respect, textual description of each scenario narrative and their respective visualization (maps) are embedded in a Google form and uploaded to the municipal website. Afterwards, community groups are asked to express their views as to which one better meets their preferences.
- *influential stakeholders* of the wine sector through an online workshop (October 2020) in order for their preferences, concerning the proposed scenarios, to be explored. The workshop is attended by five of the most important and powerful local winery owners and the mayor of Nemea.

4.3 Building Attractive Future Development Pathways for Nemea Region

> *"Increasingly, competitiveness and prosperity depend on the capacity of the people and businesses located there to make the best use of all of territorial assets."*
>
> *Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, 2008:3*

Following the above statement, an endeavor to mobilize the study area's territorial assets towards *sustainable future images*, which are capable of opening up new opportunities for social, economic and territorial cohesion for local people and businesses, but also for external investments and visitors, is undertaken and is briefly delineated in this section. Development of these future images or scenarios is greatly dependent on the *critical issues* identified in previous stages of the methodological framework (Stage 5), and they principally refer to the: protection of the highly productive agricultural land and the multifunctional exploitation of the wine sector (wine tourism and gastronomy, educational node in wine cultivation and production, wine production clusters, innovation and entrepreneurship); brand creation/place marketing, founded on wine and alternative cultural tourism; development, digitization and promotion of cultural routes – virtual wineries' route, virtual cultural route that links the local archaeological sites, revival of famous myths (land of Hercules); empowerment of local community and ICT skills acquisition; governance – active engagement of local community in decision-making processes; extraversion by means of complementarity and synergies' creation with adjacent cultural tourism destinations.

The above-mentioned critical issues provide substantial food for thought and decisively contribute to the structuring of the study region's future development scenarios. From the set of available methodologies, the *two uncertainty axes* scenario building approach, whose rationale is illustrated in Fig. 3, is applied. Such an approach is based on two uncertainty axes, which reflect two particular objectives of the study region that exhibit the highest degree of uncertainty. More specifically, the *two key uncertainties* used for constructing Nemea's future development scenarios, mostly perceived as the main vehicles for its future perspective, relate to the role of the:

- traditional and well-rooted wine production of the region that ranges from a medium rate of exploitation (current state) to a fully dynamic and innovative sector, a vital component of a strong place branding;
- sustainable exploitation of territorial capital – natural and cultural – that ranges from a mild capitalization of cultural heritage to a more dynamic entry in niche tourist markets, by providing alternative, authentic, multi-thematic and experience-based tourism products.

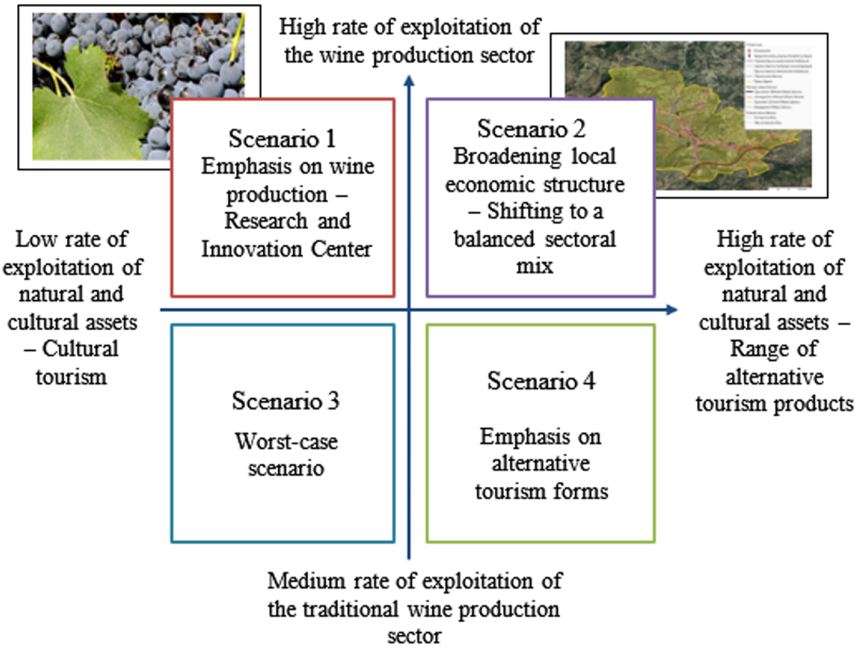

Fig. 3. The 'two uncertainty axes' scenario building approach

Qualitative evaluation of the four scenarios leads to the exclusion of scenarios 3 and 4. In fact, Scenario 3 is perceived as the worst-case scenario and 4 as a scenario that defies the region's long wine tradition and dynamism. The prevailing scenarios 1 and 2 reflect two qualitative, normative and well-differentiated future images. *Scenario 1* – Nemea as a Research and Innovation Center of wine production – aims at triggering innovation, extraversion and productivity of the wine sector (agricultural and winery community), being conceived thus as the cornerstone of the local economic scheme and a 'vehicle' for future growth. *Scenario 2* – Nemea as a multidimensional alternative tourism destination - development and establishment of various of cultural routes – represents a sectoral-balanced, socially-equitable and spatially-deconcentrated future development pattern, totally harmonised with the prominent wine sector. The scenario attempts to combine the long wine tradition with a range of alternative tourism pathways that are built upon the remarkable local natural and cultural assets and comparative advantages.

4.4 Key Results of Nemea's Spatial Planning Exercise

The particular section shortly presents the results that emerge from the community engagement processes of Stage 1 and Stage 6.

Regarding the online questionnaires of the first stage, only 61 of them were submitted. Although the sample can by no means be considered as representative, the obtained results are finally used. This is mainly justified by the research teams' opinion that the degree of online engagement is relatively satisfactory, given the lack of participatory and technological culture of the local people, the significant time constrains (time span and date of conduction) and new priorities' setting due to the outburst of COVID-19. The key findings that stem from the elaboration of the collected questionnaires mainly refer to the: poor quality of life, community's ignorance of projects under progress thereby revealing their 'distance' from local decision-making processes, insufficient and -in many cases- superficial participation in local affairs, extremely limited deployment of municipal e-services and indifferent, low-skilled and rude municipal employees.

Concerning the citizens and stakeholders' viewpoint on the most suitable scenario (Stage 6), 81 responses are gathered. As regards the first scenario (Nemea as a Research and Innovation Center of wine production), 89% of participants fully agree or agree with its fundamentals, whereas 11% disagree, fully disagree or have no opinion on the matter. The second scenario (Nemea as a multidimensional alternative tourism destination – creation of cultural routes) manages to provoke even more positive reactions, since 91% of the participators fully agree or agree with its principal idea, while only 9% holds indifferent or negative opinion. It should be stressed that extensive workshop discussion with the influential stakeholders of the wine sector uncovers a certain preference towards the second scenario, because it is deemed to be the one that better utilizes Nemea's extraordinary cultural resources and optimally fits local competencies, while at the same time it offers new chances for enlarging their marketing footprint. Interesting suggestions on efficient ways of integrating well-established and extroverting viticulture with cultural tourism and local gastronomy, strengthening thus local value chains' creation, are also provided by them.

5 Conclusions

In the era of perpetual and unexpected changes, intense and multifaceted pressures of all kinds, imperative demands and constantly growing needs, every region is called to build and implement a flexible, consistent and integrated developmental strategic plan that seeks to form and maintain a *sustainable, resilient and inclusive* future. In this respect, various planning approaches that incorporate all the above alterations occurring in society, economy, environment, institutions, technology, etc., can be followed for crafting these plans. *Strategic planning*, as such an approach, systematically endeavors to: (a) gain a more detailed insight into a place by demarcating its advantages, disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses (internal environment); (b) identify the opportunities and risks that stem from the broader -external- environment; and (c) promote participation by embedding civic engagement into every stage of the planning process. Additionally, strategic planning is mainly oriented towards action undertaking, effective implementation/monitoring of results and alignment with the desirable outcomes; and

thus, it constitutes an essential tool for shaping a *locale's future state* over a long-term horizon, managing at the same time severe complexity and uncertainty and contributing to the realization of enticing future developments.

The process of creating Nemea's strategic plan reveals a series of crucial issues that may raise interesting questions or instigate vivid discussions; and therefore, they should be taken into serious consideration. To begin with, Nemea is immensely lagging behind in terms of *governance maturity*, *online participation culture* as well as *penetration and assimilation of technology* in general, compared to larger Greek cities. This is a dominant trend at national, but also at European and international level, since small and medium-sized urban environments tend -inter alia- to exhibit poor technological performance. The main reason behind this remark lies at the root of the prevalent contemporary neoliberal notion that perceives large cities as dynamic marketplaces, which can efficaciously serve the interests of particular companies (mostly technological) and states [28]. For over a decade, colossal industries have been monopolizing the diffusion of technology and the development of 'smart' urban environments. Attention is paid almost exclusively to large cities and metropolises because these have the capacity to develop economies of scale and constitute much more attractive investement environments, compared to smaller cities and the limited economic benefits these entail [31]. As a consequence, the critical issue of *digital divide* and the predicament of those who have limited to no access to ICT infrastructures, or are void of the necessary skills [7, 43] is emerging; and is gradually gaining importance among planners and decision makers, as it leads to a certain kind of social inequality and social exclusion [9], thereby nurturing discussions on *technological* [33] and *spatial justice* [27]. Sudden adverse circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, may severely exacerbate the problem, since access to technology, especially during such turbulent, uncertain and restrictive periods, constitutes the *only window to the outer world*.

It should also be mentioned that in recent years, rural policy, in its effort to effectively address and support the specific needs and aspirations of rural places and their citizens, has decisively moved towards a more integrated, society empowering, multi-sectoral and *place-based approach.* This actually reflects the constantly increasing significance of ensuring the: participation of local stakeholders in the decision-making process; detection and assessment of local assets and their sustainable exploitation in favor of rural development; shift from a subsidy- to an investment-oriented approach; and the shift from policy interventions that redistribute local income to the identification of new economic opportunities as well as an *inclusive* and *just* transition towards the smart era [8], based on the available but untapped local capital [43].

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