

Insularity and Human Development

Social Well-Being, Resilience and Governance

Event Summary

The collaboration between three research institutes and the **Laboratory of Local and Insular Development of the University of the Aegean** brought to the forefront the urgent need for a **national development and social strategy that takes into account the specific conditions of insularity**. Such a strategy should be aligned with **Article 101 of the Greek Constitution**, **Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union**, and the broader European framework recognising the structural challenges faced by island regions.

To date, the absence of a coherent and comprehensive island policy has gradually transformed the inherent characteristics of islands—from comparative advantages into structural disadvantages—turning opportunities into burdens that the state attempts to address primarily through resource transfers rather than through long-term structural policy.

Three years after the passing of **Nektarios Santorinos**, who played a decisive role in promoting the political recognition of insularity and in establishing the **transport equivalent measure for Greek islands**, participants in the conference on insularity delivered a clear message:

“No more words—action is needed, because insularity concerns us all and is intrinsic to Greece itself.”

The conference brought together **leaders and representatives of political parties, local government officials, members of the business community, civil society actors and representatives of the scientific community**, who presented proposals addressing key priorities for sustainable island development.

Strengthening Local Governance

Participants highlighted the need to develop a **stronger model of local governance**, enabling island communities to take decisions on local matters through **special institutional arrangements adapted to their insular character**.

Such a framework would enhance the effectiveness of public administration and challenge the current **highly centralised governance model**, which often deprives local authorities and citizens of fundamental rights such as equal treatment and equal participation in decision-making. These challenges are compounded by shortages in human resources, limited financial capacity and the lack of essential administrative competences at the local level.

A New Development Model for Island Economies

The conference emphasised the need for a **new productive model for island economies**, capable of ensuring **resilient and sustainable development**.

The existing model of speculative growth often reproduces **social inequalities and environmental pressures**, leaving island territories increasingly vulnerable, particularly in the context of the **climate crisis**.

The proposed development framework should therefore be based on:

- **Public policies and public investment**, rather than the privatisation of public land and public goods, recognising that sustainable development requires the protection of common resources.
- **Quality rather than quantity**, ensuring that economic activities remain competitive while maintaining environmental and social sustainability.
- **Diversification of tourism**, transforming tourism from a purely seasonal leisure activity into a more complex and sustainable sector based on the islands' natural, cultural and productive assets.

Particular emphasis was placed on **slow tourism**, focusing on well-being and quality of life for both visitors and residents, as well as on alternative forms of tourism such as **agritourism and ecotourism**, developed within the ecological **carrying capacity of each island**.

Supporting the Primary Sector and the Blue Economy

Participants also stressed the importance of strengthening the **primary production sector**, focusing on high-quality products with strong local identity (PDO and PGI), agricultural practices adapted to climate change, and stronger links between agriculture and tourism.

Such an approach could prevent the risks associated with **tourism monoculture** and enhance the resilience of island economies.

The **maritime dimension surrounding the islands**, which has historically shaped their economic and cultural development, should also be utilised more effectively through the promotion of **blue economy activities**.

At the same time, the island economy should incorporate **organisational and social innovation alongside technological innovation**, enabling trained and skilled human capital to play an active role in shaping a new development model.

Social Cohesion and Public Services

Strengthening the **welfare state and social cohesion** is essential to reducing inequalities across island regions.

This requires investment in **public infrastructure and public services**, ensuring a minimum guaranteed level of services and infrastructure for each island and improving quality of life throughout the year.

Island communities must navigate the challenges of an **“overloaded” summer season and a “dormant” winter period**, which intensify pressures on local services.

Participants highlighted the need to strengthen the planning capacity of both **central government and local authorities**, enabling them to develop infrastructure and provide services in areas such as:

- healthcare
- education
- housing
- transport and connectivity
- public administration
- energy supply and water management
- waste management.

Improving these services is crucial to addressing the factors that reduce the attractiveness of island living and contribute to population decline, particularly among young people.

The conference also emphasised the importance of involving **island residents and local entrepreneurs themselves in the evaluation of policies and the prioritisation of actions**.

The Insularity Clause and Public Service Provision

Participants underlined the need to implement the **insularity clause** in services of general interest.

This includes expanding the existing **transport equivalent measure** into a broader **“island equivalent” framework**, ensuring equitable access to essential services.

Particular priority should be given to healthcare through the introduction of a **healthcare equivalent mechanism**, supported by a dedicated **Island Health System** and a health planning framework that takes into account the specific needs of island populations.

Stronger **cost monitoring and quality control mechanisms** should also be introduced for services of general economic interest, whether provided by private operators or by the wider public sector.

Universities, Knowledge and Innovation

Participants emphasised the important role of **higher education institutions** in strengthening local communities and promoting innovation through the **quadruple helix model**, bringing together academia, government, industry and civil society.

Through research, education and training, universities can contribute to the development of **social innovation and knowledge-based policy design** for island regions.

Resilience, Environment and Climate Adaptation

Ensuring balanced development and long-term resilience requires targeted policies in areas such as:

- the development of **green infrastructure and nature-based solutions**
- the **efficient use of natural resources**, particularly water and energy
- the promotion of **energy communities** as an alternative to energy oligopolies.

Environmental management should also be linked to **civil protection systems**, taking into account the specific organisational needs of island territories and enabling rapid local responses to natural disasters.

Participants further emphasised the need for **carrying capacity studies**, which can support rational spatial planning, prevent environmentally damaging investments and guide sustainable development strategies.

Policy Proposals

To implement the above priorities, participants proposed:

- drafting a **new Development Law focused on insularity**, including measurable targets for employment, support for start-ups created by young people, women and migrants, and the protection of local production and biodiversity
- utilising **European Union resources**, including those available through **ETS II**, to finance a comprehensive strategy for island resilience
- fully implementing the **Island Equivalent policy** to ensure fair redistribution of economic value
- prohibiting **large-scale investments that exceed the ecological carrying capacity of islands**
- ensuring the proper implementation of **European legislation and sustainability standards** in all economic activities.

Participants also stressed the importance of incorporating **specific policy measures for islands within the forthcoming European Strategy for Islands**, expected to be developed by 2026.

Towards a National Strategy for Insularity

The global context has already changed dramatically, and the **climate crisis is now a defining reality**.

Greece's **114 inhabited islands** face varying degrees of economic sustainability under an outdated development model that increasingly produces negative outcomes.

The proposal emerging from the conference represents a **break with this unsustainable model**, advocating a policy framework that serves the broader public interest.

The gathering in **Mytilene**, with both in-person and online participation, marked an important step in a broader process that could lead to the development of a **National Strategy for Insularity**, with policies and actions promoting sustainable and responsible development for all Greek islands—and ultimately for the country as a whole.

After all, **Greece itself is fundamentally an island country**.

Next Steps

Following the conference, the **Scientific Committee** evaluated the outcomes and drafted the present summary of the consultation.

The Committee agreed to:

- communicate the conclusions to the leadership of the political parties and institutions represented at the conference
 - explore ways to disseminate the results of the Mytilene conference and support future joint initiatives by the Institutes and the University of the Aegean
 - organise a **second conference within approximately three months**, possibly in the **South Aegean (Milos or the Dodecanese)**, focusing on the policy proposals discussed and responding to requests from island communities.
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