

Green Cluster Cyprus

Building Disaster Resilient Infrastructures: Supporting small Cypriot producers during the COVID-19 lockdown



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1. The Green Cluster

1.1. What is The Green Cluster?

The Green Cluster is an initiative developed by AKTI Project and Research Centre in 2014¹, with the objective of building a community of small business/producers, its major task being to achieve gender equality and women empowerment, fostering cooperation across different economic sectors and implementing an inclusive growth concept. With more than 300 members in its sixth year of operation², the Green Cluster has evolved into a nation-wide dynamic form of collaboration based on the establishment and development of innovative synergies.

The Green Cluster emerged from the inherent need for continuous business innovation, and the acknowledgement that transformative cooperation - as opposed to pure transactional activity- is essential in the evolution of small businesses. This meant bringing together stakeholders with common interests, in a collective that would enable business growth and extroversion, through shared structures, resources, and access to information, support and funds.

The Green Cluster brings together enterprises from fourteen different economic sectors³ to:

- strengthen joint activities, foster networking, community building and sharing of infrastructure without bureaucracy
- promote business growth, extroversion and internationalisation of ideas, concepts, and efforts by providing information on sources of funding
- support Cypriot entrepreneurs to export their services or products to an international market and boost innovation
- work on women's economic empowerment and gender equality

Recently, AKTI Project and Research Centre self-funded the extroversion of the Cluster, starting its expansion internationally. In just 2 months of a pilot effort, the Cluster has members in ten countries (<https://www.greenclustercy.org/en/international-networks/>). This is an indication of the potential for structures such as the Green Cluster. There is a gap and a need for novel coalitions and partnerships, more participatory and less bureaucratic. Small enterprises are the backbone of several countries' economies. They can thrive through better organization structures, supporting extroversion and international networking.

¹ Green Cluster was developed with funding by the "Global Women, Peace and Security" grant from the United States Department of State as a tool for women economic empowerment withing an inclusive growth concept

² Since 2018 Green Cluster did not manage to have access to funding. So the operation of the Cluster has been limited to keeping the contacts and provide a smuch support to the members as possible

³ the Cluster is structured in 14 [sectors](#)

1.2. Green Cluster Member Benefits

The Green Cluster welcomes Cypriot enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, of any sector to both contribute to - and benefit from - the symbiotic environment offered by the Cluster and its members.

There is no cost for becoming a member; the power of the Green Cluster comes from its evolving networks and synergies. For more information, watch our [Green Cluster video](#) and visit our [Facebook Page](#). (www.greenclustercy.org).

Member benefits from the Cluster include:

- identification of economic, market and networking opportunities
- Organisation of sector-specific and solution-oriented networking events, capacity building workshops and seminars
- access to online tools, the Green Cluster e-platform, database of best practices, and communication channels, to share knowledge and information.
- Scholarships to the members for short trainings abroad
- Technical and promotional support to members e.g. support for the creation of videos, participation in competitions , support them to build their own facebook pages etc
- and much much more.

The Green Cluster Members are listed on this [Map](#).

With more than 300 members, the Green Cluster is now the largest network of small businesses in Cyprus!

- 80% of our members are small producers spread around Cyprus, primarily based in rural areas.
- More than 90% of which are not served by intra- and inter-city distribution networks
- Appr. 60% of the members / small businesses are owned and run by women

2. #WePersistTogether Campaign

2.1. COVID19 lockdown and impact on small producers

The COVID19 lockdown in Cyprus went into force on 15 March 2020, eliminating the access of small producers to their customers and vice versa. Multiple Green Cluster members, concerned about their economic viability, turned to AKTI as the Cluster coordinator for a possible solution that could keep their operations running, albeit in reduced capacity.

Following an examination of the current situation, AKTI grouped its cluster members into the following categories based on their needs:

1. Producers (Farmers) of fresh vegetables and fruits
2. Producers of other edible, non-perishable products such as honey, olive oil, jams, pasta etc., which do not require technical solutions for distribution (i.e. refrigerators)
3. Producers of non-edible products such as natural cosmetics, plant nurseries, , and even services such as small marketing companies

2.2. AKTI's Green Cluster correctly positioned to respond to Covid19

The official ban on outdoor farmers' markets, placed the first group in immediate danger, as most producers of fresh produce in such markets sell directly to consumers . By eliminating the demand for their products, this measure also affected their supply which could not have reached the market otherwise, while costs would continue to be incurred without income.

It quickly became apparent that the economic structures available to small producers had extremely low resilience to crises. AKTI collected testimonials from members, and capitalizing on the cluster infrastructure responded swiftly and well ahead of governmental bodies in raising the alarm for “excluded/ isolated” small producers due to the lockdown measures of the pandemic. The Green Cluster was correctly positioned and with the right structures to respond. If structures like this do not exist, then there is no time for planning the response when a crisis emerges i.e. no time for needs identification, developing support tools, lobbying etc.

2.3. #WePersistTogether Campaign (#επιΜενουμεΜαζι in Greek)

A nation-wide communication campaign was launched only 10 days after the lockdown went into force, with the name #WePersistTogether Campaign (#επιΜενουμεΜαζι in Greek).

A Press Release was circulated on April 1st 2020, outlining the new effort of bridging the gap isolated producers with confined consumers around the island. The message was clear: *the small-scale Cypriot producers are all over the country, they are producing great quality products and they are currently restricted from reaching their customers. Support Small Cypriot Producers.*

In the absence of a formal distribution network, the press release informed the general public that a solution was being drafted in support of the small producers, and was a call to action for relevant entities such as distribution companies, to join this effort. At the same time the campaign targeted all and each one of the citizens, asking them to contact the members of the cluster or any small producer, and purchase the products directly, even if an official distribution scheme was not in place, the producers could find a way.

The dissemination strategy:

AKTI outlined a dissemination strategy for the “#WePersistTogether” campaign, to maximize exposure and impact. Communication and dissemination activities utilized all available channels; print media, TV & Radio, online and social media of AKTI and the Green Cluster itself. **Since the launch of the campaign, there has been unprecedented interest by mass media to replicate the message, which served as a positive spin on a very difficult period for all.**

To monitor the impact and effectiveness of the campaign, AKTI’s staff voluntarily followed the reach and engagements in media

**During the three weeks of the campaign, AKTI’s dissemination effort reached
MORE THAN 13.150.000 engagements within Cyprus**

More details in Appendix.

The Help desk:

Parallel to the media campaign, AKTI formed a spontaneous **Help Desk**.

- **Telephone:** Since everybody was working from home, 2 of AKTI’s staff members volunteered to act as a non-formal call center. More than **280 phone calls from consumers and producers** have been received during the 3 weeks of the Campaign.

- **Email/Facebook Messenger communication** with more than **100 consumers and producers.**

From farm to fork – create the culture!

It was evident that the lack of a delivery network, to deliver the products to the door of the consumers, was a major obstacle for the producers to sell and for consumers to buy. It was also evident that there was no time to set up a delivery scheme now, but more direct actions were needed. This gap is what the campaign targeted, to both spread awareness and help deal with it now, during the crisis of the pandemic. The campaign encouraged all citizens, to contact the members of the cluster or any small producer and purchase the products directly. Even if an official distribution scheme was not in place, the producers could find a way.

AKTI found a way to monitor the results of the campaign on this target: to estimate the number of consumers that actually were inspired and encouraged to reach out to the producers. This was not an easy task since AKTI did not have the required resources and could not allocate the human resources that would be needed during the pandemic. So, in order to have at least some indicative numbers of consumers that reached out to producers encouraged by AKTI's campaign, we asked from the beginning 10 representative producers to keep a record for us. These producers were selected to cover the most important areas, i.e. dairy products, honey/carob honey, olive oil, natural cosmetics, a plant nursery, fresh pasta and wine. The 10 producers reported that in total approximately 150 consumers contacted them and purchased products during the 3 weeks of Covid19 lock down.

Our estimate is that 60 producers have been promoted and actively participated in this campaign. All of them had only direct sales before the lock down. These producers had no sales at all, due to the lock down. According to our estimates approximately 700 consumers directly contacted the producers through AKTI's campaign and purchased products. Since the benchmark was a zero (zero sales) this result marks a success.

There was a mainstreaming task during the campaign: to stress the positive impacts of the direct purchase of products from the producers themselves. We want the Farm to fork concept to step up, to become a habit for consumers to direct acquisition from the producer, which might be a winery, brewery, ranch, fishery, or other type of small food producer. The whole campaign was based to promote this concept for the day-after-the-lockdown.

Lobbying

The first suggestion of the Ministry of Agriculture was to support the development of an on-line sales tool. This suggestion was immediately discussed with the producers, through the Green Cluster platform. The small vegetable farmers were very strong about it: “our crops are destroyed NOW. It is very complicated and it will take time, to develop an on-line market for fresh vegetables, based on small farmers’ products. This can be done with large producers or intermediaries. Small farmers who produce fresh vegetables need to have open air markets.”

Open air markets have been, however, closed as one of the first measures of the lock down in Cyprus. Small farmers were furious about this governmental decision. They claimed that they could control the entrance of people into the open air markets, just as the entrance was controlled in the supermarkets.

AKTI did a lot of lobbying transferring the voice of the small farmers to the Minister and other officials, through radios, posts, announcements. Together with agricultural organizations, AKTI’s voice had the impact: open air markets were part of the first relaxation measures, i.e. on of the first lock down measures that have been rescinded.

Also, a lot of consumers have been sensitised: they are calling to AKTI to find ways to contact small farmers, small producers, small enterprises, even after the lock down. This is an important impact: to promote the direct bond between farmers and consumers!

3. Conclusions

Lessons learned so far of #WePersistTogether (#επιΜενομεΜαζι) campaign lead to the main conclusion: the resilience to disasters of small countries or regions can be significantly boosted through these innovative community-based approaches, such as the Green Cluster.

In more detail:

1. The Green Cluster structure is not only a the platform (a registry) but also the relations among the members and AKTI (the manager), which were established 6 years ago. These strong bonds of trust gave the Cluster the ability to rebound quickly. Even if the resources were not available, the platform acted as a *COMMUNITY* with strong engagement and partnership based on trust and solidarity.
2. Reconfirming and validating the need for the Green Cluster as a small business network – crises result in innovation
3. Community resilience precedes overarching digitalisation of services – grassroots solidarity and personal contact still persist in Cypriot economic activity
4. The Green Cluster is not an online tool, it is not an online structure. It is a physical platform and a digital registry. It can have a spin-off for on-line market, but this is not the core task of the Cluster. The backbone of the Green Cluster are in the bonds that have been created among the members, through the synergies, the networking activities, the innovative capacity building sessions, the shared resources, the trust. In an era of digitisation, there are some sectors in which social bonds should be in place. There are parts of the community that are “small” and “vulnerable”, such as the small producers in rural areas. These parts of the community are the core of the production of goods, and thus they need support. If initiatives such as Green Cluster, had been endorsed and supported by governments or other entities, rural economy would have definitely been different. The resilience to disasters of small countries or regions can be significantly boosted through these innovative community-based approaches, such as the Green Cluster.
5. Have tools in place and use them: one of the most helpful tools was the DeCyDe-4 decision support method that AKTI implements to identify gaps, needs, solutions/suggestions. The method gave us a fast and efficient tool to identify immediate ways to react and help the producers within the available resources AKTI has. Robust, participatory, solution-oriented decision support methods should be inherent part of any community-based network/structure, in order to provide with the ability for a quick rebound in disasters.

6. Rural women entrepreneurs make up the 60% of Green Cluster members. Many of them face barriers that limit their ability to be independent and strong. While women play an indispensable role in the rural economy, few can be economically independent and most women who manage to have a small business are extremely vulnerable to any disaster's impacts. Economic empowerment of rural women to sustain their small businesses is crucial for achieving a more equitable and sustainable world.

Clusters such as the Green Cluster lack access to funding. They are not the ordinary ways to manage rural economy, or to empower women, youth or even to promote good agricultural practices etc. However, it is obvious that Clusters like the Green Cluster can launch transformation changes. They can act as coalitions to amplify efforts for robust rural economy, achieving gender balance communities and they can have an important impact in the community resilience to disasters.

This experience from the pandemic shows that significant regulatory modifications are urgently needed. Smart strategic decisions and innovative concepts should be incorporated within the rebound efforts in the post-pandemic period. The viability of small producers, small farmers and the rural economy need urgent transformation. Governments must act today if they are to recover in the near future. We need to have a robust plan, to reflect on the consequences of the pandemic and plan the recuperation and the future- proof post-pandemic, rural economy. This is the challenge and the opportunity.

APPENDIX

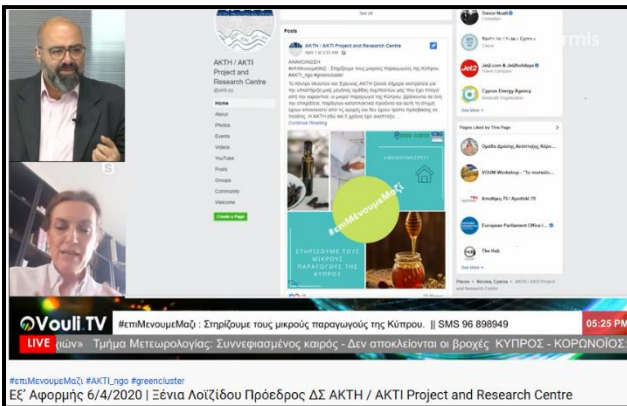
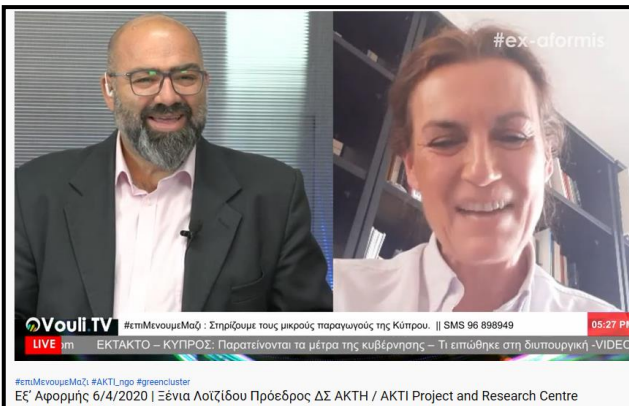
Total Public Outreach Results 1st April to 27th April per channel

TOTAL Public Outreach: MORE THAN 13.150.000 engagements

TV:

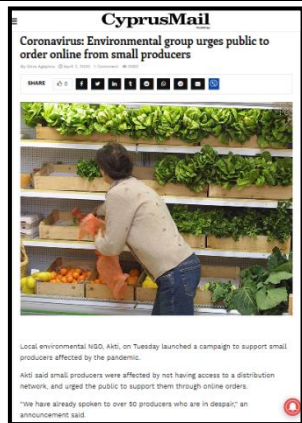


- 4 TV interviews presenting #επιΜενουμεΜαζί with approximately 67.600 views.

DATE	TV CHANNEL	LINK	PEOPLE REACHED
01/04/2020	FAROSNAIR	https://www.facebook.com/farosonair/videos/544690592714752	3100
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">   </div>			
06/04/2020	VOULI.TV	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsuBUJgNEaU&feature=emb_title	7000

			
09/04/2020	RIK1 -HAPPY HOUR	-	32.500
26/04/2020	OMEGA - AIXMES	-	25.000

Press:



- **Printed Press: 4** articles published in **Newspapers** with approximately **17.100** readers.

DATE	NEWSPAPER	TITLE	LINK	PEOPLE REACHED	PHOTOS
07/04/2020	CYPRUS-MAIL	Coronavirus: Environmental group urges public to order online from small producers	https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/04/07/coronavirus-environmental-group-urges-public-to-order-online-from-small-producers	2.530	
07/04/2020	PAFOS PRESS	Το Κέντρο Μελετών Ακτή στηρίζει τους μικρούς παραγωγούς της Κύπρου σε περιόδους καραντίνας	https://pafospress.com/to-kentro-meleton-akti-stirizei-toys-mikroys-paragogyis-tis-kyproy-se-periodoy-karantinas/	3.000	
08/04/2020	POLITIS	Στηρίζτε τους μικρούς παραγωγούς	https://politix.com.cy/politis-news/kypros/stirixte-toys-mikroys-paragogyis	9.100	


11/04/2020	ADESMEUTOS PAFOU	Διέξοδος στους παραγωγούς από την AKTH	https://www.facebook.com/akti.cy/post/s/2757539824299849	2.500	
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Online press:

- 7 publications in Online Magazines with approximately 1.141.000 readers.

DATE	ONLINE MAGAZINE	TITLE	LINK	PEOPLE REACHED	PHOTOS
01.04.2020	MY LIFE.COM	Στήριξε κι εσύ τους Κύπριους μικρούς παραγωγούς	https://mylife.com.cy/people/stirixe-ki-esy-toys-kyprioyis-mikroyis-paragogyis	170.000	
01.04.2020	TASTE AND HOSPITALITY	#επιΜένουμεΜαζί: Στηρίζουμε τους μικρούς παραγωγούς της Κύπρου	https://tasteandhospitality.com/2020/04/01/epimenoumemazi-stirizoume-tous-mikroyis-paragogyis-tis-kyprou/?fbclid=IwAR0-FH8Uu-e47hUo_vCZITHVdBUMtyO-b90u5joW3sucFNAZM_sfXfCsozU	80.000	

01/04/2020	AVANT GARDE	Η ΑΚΤΗ στηρίζει τους μικρούς παραγωγούς της Κύπρου	https://avant-garde.com.cy/articles/impossible-works/i-akti-stirizei-toys-mikroys-paragogyis-tis-kyproy	200.000	
07/04/2020	Ο ΤΑΧΥΔΡΟΜΟΣ24	Κέντρο Μελετών Ακτι: Υποστηρίζει τους μικρούς παραγωγούς της Κύπρου	https://www.taxidromos24.com/2020/04/07/kentro-meleton-akti-ipostirizei-tous-mikroys-paragogyis-tis-kyproy	170.000	
07/04/2020	IN-CYPRUS	Campaign to support small scale producers during lockdown	https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/campaign-to-support-small-scale-producers-during-lockdown/	200.000	
11/04/2020	ΔΙΑΛΟΓΟΣ	«Στηρίζουμε τους μικρούς παραγωγούς της Κύπρου»	https://dialogos.com.cy/stirizoyme-toys-mikroys-paragogyis-tis-kyproy/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=astrat2092%2C8&source=facebook	130.000	

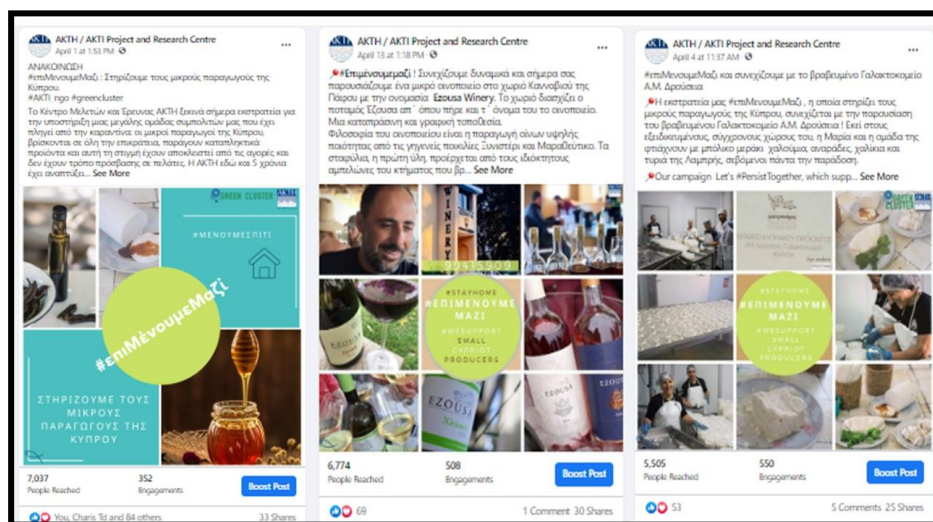
12/04/2020	BRIEF	Ο ρόλος των μικροπαραγωγών στην οικονομία- «Επιμένουμε μαζί»	https://www.brief.com.cy/analyseis/o-rolos-ton-mikroparagogon-stin-oikonomia-epimenoyme-mazi	197.000	
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Radio interviews:

- 2 Radio interviews with approximately 3000 listeners.

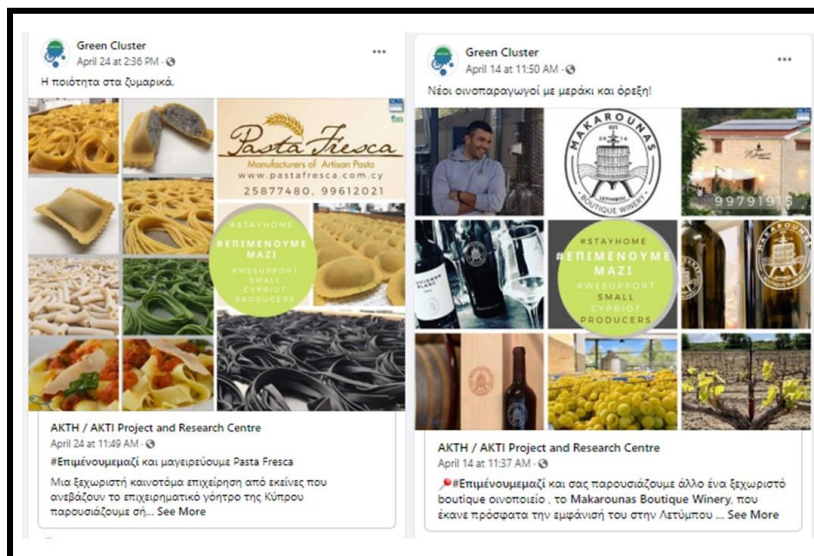
Social Media:

- 51 posts on AKTI's Facebook Page. With a combined reach of over 76,000
- Examples of #επιΜενουμεΜαζι posts on AKTI's Facebook Posts:



- 13 post on Green Cluster's Facebook Page with approximately 2.300 people reached.

Examples of #επιΜενουμεΜαζι posts Green Cluster Facebook Posts:



- 24 posts on AKTI's Instagram Page with approximately 7.624 people reached.

Examples of AKTI's Instagram Posts:

