

Community responses in times of economic crisis: Social support actions in Chania, Greece

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Introduction

Since 2008 Greece has faced an unprecedented economic crisis with dramatic impacts on individuals' lives. Under the burden of recession many local communities all over the country have been mobilized to protest against austerity policies as well as to collectively respond to the crisis' detrimental consequences on individuals' living conditions. The Greek solidarity and social support movement becomes visible in the establishment of new local-based citizen-run health clinics, food banks, 'without middlemen' fresh products distribution networks, cooperative social groceries etc. Alongside the expansion of such alternative forms of solidarity, formal and institutional agencies like Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), local authorities and the Church organize several social support actions in order to assist people in need (Sotiropoulos 2014; Sotiropoulos/Bourikos 2014). Citizens' participation in solidarity activities during crisis is a crucial element not only in terms of accomplishing the support aims in favor of the people but also in terms of creating a new social paradigm, "in favor of another type of organizing, through a deep democratic social transformation" (Solidarity for all 2013: 2).

Inspired from the increase in solidarity actions in Greece, the present study based on a mixed method design explores aspects of tangible social support activity (e.g., soup kitchens, free distribution of material staff, free medical care etc.) organized in the local community of Chania (Crete, Greece) during the recessionary period of 2010-2012 as well as perspectives on citizens' participation in the actions that appear in the public discourse.

Recession's social impacts and community responses

Under the pressure of the severe financial crisis and in order to reduce its budget deficit, the Greek government has implemented (mainly after spring 2010) a series of austerity measures which primarily include new direct taxes, increases in indirect taxes as well as severe cuts in salaries and pensions. These measures have been implemented in addition to a fiscal squeeze that has minimized public spending on health, education and social benefits and negatively affected the well-being of the Greek society (Matsaganis/Leventi 2013, Matsaganis 2012). The most ominous features of austerity's social impacts include the steep rise of joblessness and the significant loss of earnings for those still in employment. Moreover, the massive decrease in incomes and increase in unemployment rates have created new socially vulnerable groups (e.g., jobless households with children) which due to the crisis have -for their first time- experienced poverty and social exclusion (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al. 2014, Matsaganis 2013). Research provides evidence that a considerable number of people has been facing extreme hardship to deal with daily problems, such as inability to cover basic needs (e.g., food and clothing), lack of housing and no

access to healthcare (Matsaganis 2013, Balourdos / Spyropoulou 2012). A recent report by UNICEF (2014) indicates the severe deterioration in the living conditions of Greek youth and the increase in child poverty rate which escalated from 23 % in 2008 to 40.5 % in 2012. Moreover, a sharp increase in homelessness and “neo-homeless” has been detected, i.e. a new generation of homeless people who up until recently had a satisfactory standard of living (Theodorikakou, Alamanou / Katsadoros 2013). Additional reports show an escalating number of patients who have been seeking free medical care and services (Doctors of the World 2013) and an alarming increase in individuals eating free meals in soup kitchens and food banks (Tsatsou 2012).

Despite the worrying reality, local communities respond to crisis’ detrimental consequences by organizing social support and solidarity actions to protect their most vulnerable members. Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) advocate that the rise in social solidarity activity involves free health support, provision of food and shelter, exchange of goods and products as well as free educational services to socio-economically deprived individuals. Similar social support actions are organized by formal and informal agencies including networks and social movement organizations, NGOs and different types of associations as well as the private sector, the local authorities and the Church (Sotiropoulos 2014; Sotiropoulos / Bourikos 2014). The increased mobilization at the community level aims to support either directly the deprived individuals or indirectly by supporting the activity of specific structures (e.g., soup kitchens, social clinics etc.) that existed prior to the crisis or were established during the crisis (Papadaki 2014).

In the present study we examine social support actions organized in the local society of Chania (Crete, Greece). For the purpose of our study, social support action is defined as any organized tangible activity targeting to support community members in terms of health, food, shelter, education and basic material goods. In this respect, social support activity is understood as an instrumental process aiming to assist the vulnerable community members to cope with the crisis’ adverse impacts. However, the severe changes that the crisis generates to people’s lives and the predictions of a late overcome (Matsaganis 2013) lead us to investigate social support activity not only as an instrumental coping procedure but also as an ongoing dynamic process that shapes and it is shaped by the ideas and attitudes of those who organize, participate and benefit from it.

Therefore, the rationale of the mixed method design applied in the study is twofold. First using a quantitative approach we aim to paint a vivid picture of the actions of social support activity that took place in Chania during the recessionary period of 2010-2012. Further, based on a qualitative study we aim to detect different perspectives on citizens’ participation in the actions as captured in the discourse on social support activity of that period.

Methodology

The study explores social support actions based on a concurrent (or parallel) mixed method design, i.e. the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study are conducted during the same time period (Greene et al. 1989). The quantitative method applied is inspired from event analysis, i.e. a methodology which has been primarily used to study collective action events (Earl et al. 2004) and specifically protest events (Koopmans / Rucht 2002). The method is based on the data collection from newspaper articles (published in the most popular daily local newspaper ‘Chaniotika Nea’ between May 2010 and April 2012¹) that

are relevant to the events under study, i.e. social support actions. Overall, data for 229 actions are recorded and used in the analysis.² The aim of the quantitative study is to get an overall picture of the social support activity by depicting the main organizers as well as social support actions' aims and specific forms.³

The qualitative method is based on discourse analysis and examines social support organizers' action-announcements as well as participants' statements or interviews that were published in the local press (Mason 1996). The aim of the qualitative study is to detect distinctive perspectives in the public discourse with respect to the participation of volunteers and beneficiaries in the social support activity.⁴

Quantitative analysis results: Charting social support actions

For the purpose of our study, the main organizing social support agencies are categorized into informal, formal, institutional and private. Informal agencies are "networks and groups of likely minded individuals which do not adopt an officially approved name or sanctioned by judicial authorities as it is the case with formal organizations" (Sotiropoulos / Bourikos 2014:7). In our analysis we identify as such the local social movement organizations⁵ and the informal citizens' groups.

The former are based on a permanent organizational structure characterized by direct decision-making processes, independence from the state and an anti-systemic orientation. Informal citizens' groups involve groups of people that do not form an organization but rather come together to organize a specific social support action (e.g., a group of artists hold an exhibition and give the proceeds to a soup kitchen). Different types of associations (such as scientific associations, women association etc.) and NGOs are categorized as formal organizations (Sotiropoulos / Bourikos 2014) whereas institutional agencies are represented by local authorities, public schools, unions, political parties and the Orthodox Church. Private agencies include small enterprises, private schools etc. that have been recorded as social support organizers during the period under study. Table 1 presents the distribution of social support actions according to the different types of main organizing agencies as well as according to a more detailed categorization within each type.

The results illustrate the high involvement of different social support agencies, hence indicate a mobilized and dynamic community as a whole in terms of social support activity. Further, the analysis identifies the institutional type as the most active organizing agency (organizing 49.33 % of the actions). In addition, it captures the most active agencies within each type of social support organization during the period under study. Those include local authorities and public schools from the institutional type, different associations and NGOs from the formal type and local social movement organizations from the informal type. Particularly local social movement organizations act as the organizing agency with the most intense activity (13.97 %) while the private sector has also a significant presence (7.42 %).

Social support actions from main organizing agencies between May 2010 and April 2012

Type of main organizing agency	Main organizing agency	Number of actions	(%)
Informal	Local social movement organizations (e.g., collectivities assisting immigrants, networks of product exchanges etc.)	32	13.97
	Groups of citizens (e.g., group of artists, group of friends etc.)	12	5.24
	Total number of actions organized by informal agencies	42	19.21
Formal	Associations (e.g., cultural clubs, women associations etc.)	29	12.66
	NGO/local volunteer organizations (e.g., 'Red Cross', 'Doctors of the World', local volunteer organization of 'Splantzia')	21	9.17
	Scientific associations	4	1.75
	Associations with common social characteristics (e.g., association of multi-child families)	1	0.44
	Total number of actions organized by formal agencies	55	24.02
Institutional	Local Authorities	29	12.66
	Public schools (with the participation of students)	23	10.04
	Professional Unions (e.g., union of medical doctors, union of high school teachers etc.)	18	7.86
	Orthodox Church	14	6.11
	Welfare Institutions for children (e.g., caring for children with disabilities or cancer)	14	6.11
	Political Parties	8	3.49
	EU (e.g., free food distribution program)	7	3.06
	Total number of actions organized by institutional agencies	113	49.33
Private	Private sector (e.g., small enterprises, private schools etc.)	17	7.42
	Total number of actions organized by private agencies	17	7.42
Total	Total number of actions	229	

Moreover, the study investigates the principal aims of the recorded social support activity. The results indicate that issues associated with food and health care are the top priorities of social support activity. The high percentage of 41.9% of actions that aim to gather and provide free food or meals reflects the alarming situation of the socio-economically vulnerable individuals in Chania. During the period under study two soup kitchens organized by social movement organizations are added to the existing daily provision of meals by the local volunteer organization “Splantzia”. Moreover, the Church organizes and supports the provision of cooked food in many of its central parishes. The more bureaucratized structure of the “Social Grocery” is organized by the municipality of Chania while an additional social grocery supports specifically the residents of one particular neighborhood called “Chalepa”. The unions, the public schools, the associations and the private enterprises collect food to support the operation of these permanent structures. Especially during Christmas and Easter periods extra care is taken from the Church or organizations such as the “Red Cross” to provide poor families with meat and sweets. Similarly, women associations and cultural clubs occasionally prepare meals for young students attending primary schools.

The majority of actions concerning health issues (37.1% of the total number of actions) aim to support the multi-clinic of the NGO “Doctors of the World” and/or welfare institutions for children with cancer or disabilities. The support includes financial aid and/or collection and supply of medicines. Direct actions of free medical examinations have been conducted from the “Doctors of the World”, the union of medical doctors and the scientific association “University of Oreon” to inhabitants of isolated villages, immigrants and prisoners. During the period under study the main agency providing healthcare on an ongoing basis is the local sector of the “Doctors of the World”. However, the increasing needs in health issues have led to the establishment of the “Social Pharmacy” and the “Social Clinic” by the unions of pharmacists and doctors, respectively. All these permanent structures (operating up to now) aim to support uninsured people with no access to the National Healthcare Service (ESY) and people financially unable to buy their medicines.

The collection of clothes and other basics is also one of the main targets of social support activity (15.7% and 12.2% respectively) usually combined with food collection. Moreover, a very popular way of collecting goods takes place via cultural events (e.g., theater performances, concerts, movie shows etc.) where the equivalent of the ticket is no longer money but for instance, a pasta package or a milk carton. An additional popular activity is associated with gratuitous and exchange bazaars organized by the “Exchange Network of Chania” or by schools and associations.

With respect to the educational support (5.7% of the total number of actions) several agencies including ELME (Union of High School Teachers) and the Church organize free tutoring lessons for students with financial difficulties. Additionally, volunteers of social movement organizations provide Greek language lessons to immigrants while a women association established a new library open to the public.

In terms of shelter and aid to homeless (representing 2.2% of the total number of actions), professional unions provide free heaters and mattresses and the local authorities provide during the cold winter periods shelters to homeless people. Finally, social support actions are recorded (3.9%) that involve direct economic aid for individuals in need. Such actions are organized mainly by schools and parishes providing financial help to poor families.

The overall picture of the organized social support activity illustrates an active community as a whole which responds to crisis' adversity by protecting and promoting the

well-being of its members that are facing lack of healthcare, food, education services, shelter and access to other basic needs.

Qualitative analysis results: Capturing different perspectives on participation

The qualitative study aims to explore different perspectives on participation in social support activity. The analysis pays particular attention in the narrations of social movement organizations partly due to their intense activity as shown in the quantitative study (see Table 1) and partly due to their distinctive character as social support agencies. One of their critical features is associated with their horizontal organizing structure which implies a participation scheme open to all members as well as collective decision-making procedures via general assemblies. The members of local social movement organizations are volunteers of different ages and professions, including among others teachers of the primary and secondary schools, university students as well as immigrants living in Chania. Hence, actions organized by social movement organizations in Chania are exclusively based on inclusive voluntary participation whereas actions organized by institutional and formal organizations are primarily based on professional or semi-professional members (e.g., medical doctors, employees in social services etc.) assisted from volunteers.

The inclusive participation characterizing social movement organizations' structure is reflected in their discourse on social support activity. The analysis indicates that their announcements encourage inclusive participation by emphasizing the values of solidarity and mutual help. For instance, in their social support action announcements we detect their call to the local society to participate, as the following narration is frequently repeated:

The contribution of the local society is crucial and necessary ... Let all of us contribute and participate showing that we have the power to organize a network of solidarity, social support and mutual help in our city ...

Similarly, in an action call for collecting food and prepare 'Sunday meals' organized by the social movement organization "Social Steki-Steki of Immigrants" we read:⁶

The Sunday Food Support is collecting food from everyone that wants to help and participate to this solidarity action (...) it is established in the participation of all the people, even those that can help with something small (...) everyone is welcome to participate in cooking (...) Let's show that we have the capacity to organize a network of social support, mutual aid and solidarity in our town. Nobody will be left alone during the crisis. Solidarity is our weapon!

On the contrary, formal and institutional agencies often frame their social support actions with distinctions in social participation which primarily concerns either the specialists or those who are capable to provide support. For example, during a 'food collection for the poor' organized by the local authorities, the interviewed mayor says:⁷

the economic crisis is big the social crisis is bigger
we call "those who have" to give to "those that don't have"

Almost all the support actions conducted from the local authority and the Church frame social participation as a responsibility that mostly concerns 'those who have'. 'Those who don't have' play the passive role of the beneficiary of these actions, i.e. an approach which is in line with the Orthodox religion's interpretation of philanthropy and help.

Yet, the analysis reveals that inclusiveness and ‘equal rights’ in social support for those in need are essential in the public discourse of the vast majority of organizing agencies.⁸ For example, the narration of a professional doctor and volunteer of the “Doctors of the Word” reflects the dominant perception of social support without social, religious and racial exclusions:⁹

The multi-clinic started to operate (in 2007) to cover the needs of the people with no access to the national healthcare system. Before the crisis this mainly concerned immigrants and people without official papers. Today more and more Greeks are facing poverty. The philosophy of the Doctors of the World is that health is everyone’s right no matter what color, religion or political affiliation.

Similarly, in a networked action between the local Church and the local administration of Chania we read:¹⁰

The Church and the regional administration can do a lot (...) in the difficult times that will come; we can share and organize food support actions in all regions of Chania providing a plate of food to all people, regardless of their color, nationality, race or religion.

However, perspectives of active and equal participation of the beneficiaries in the social support activity are detected only in the discourse of social movement organizations. For instance, in the newspaper article referring to the ‘free lessons’ action of the social movement organization of “Social Steki-Steki of Immigrants” (in cooperation with Secondary Education Teachers Union), we can read the narration of the ‘abilities of the different’, when the aim of the action is described in terms of equal participation and not assimilation of the beneficiaries.¹¹

(...) our aim is to create an environment of solidarity, social trust and understanding (...) we accept that it is not enough to accept the social existence of the “different” but also to recognize its importance and its abilities to the pluralistic process capacities of the societies.

In the same newspaper article, an interviewed immigrant worker who benefits from the ‘free lessons’ action interprets the educational support provided in terms of equal social participation:

The educational support helps us to participate equally in the society. We are learning so we can communicate (...) we cooperate with natives and immigrants and now immigrants are also providing language lessons to natives.

Although the realization of equal participation perspective needs further exploration, the findings of the analysis provide some preliminary indications that social movement organizations in Chania encourage socio-economic vulnerable citizens to become participants through their direct engagement in social support activity.

Discussion

Even though the financial crisis and austerity policies in Greece have had an acute effect in the prosperity of a significant proportion of society, the paper focuses on “the other side of the coin”. The study shifts the attention to aspects of community responses to crisis’ consequences as captured in the social support activity organized by the local community

of Chania. Glimpses on the activity provided by the quantitative analysis uncover a mobilized and dynamic community in order to support and remedy its most affected members. The above is indicated by the high involvement of different local agencies organizing various social support actions including free healthcare, provision of food and other basics, support to homeless and in some cases direct financial aid to deprived individuals.

Further, the qualitative analysis elaborates our understanding of social support activity by providing some preliminary results related to participation issues. More specifically, the analysis indicates that whilst inclusiveness for those in need is essential in the discourse of all organizing social support agencies, only the local social movement organizations publicly promote inclusive participation of volunteers and participants as well as equal participation of beneficiaries. Formal and institutional organizing agencies frame their actions mostly in terms of social distinctions between those who provide help and those who receive it.

Although the present study sheds some light on the different perspectives of social support organizers, further investigation is needed to fully understand organizers' but mostly beneficiaries' and participants' attitudes as well as local society's perceptions of social support as a form of solidarity during the recessionary period. It should be noted that in the context of the crisis the concept of 'solidarity' has become ubiquitous in the public discourse of contemporary Greece. European Union technocrats, political leaders as well as activists and social support organizers have used the term emphatically to frame different issues concerning the Greek crisis (Rakopoulos 2014; Solidarity for all 2013).

In our study the term of 'solidarity' in actions' announcements is the dominant interpretive schema amplified and extended from the local social movement organizations to the discourses of the formal and institutional agencies. However, a preliminary investigation shows that for institutional agencies 'solidarity' is blurred with the concept of 'philanthropy' which is intertwined with the Greek Orthodoxy and interprets support activity in terms of offer of those that have the resources to those who have not. However, a different perspective of 'solidarity' is captured for social movement organizations where the concept is interpreted as self-activity and self-organization of all those in need implying that social support is not only a struggle for survival but for political resistance and change as well as for social overthrow of the severe austerity regimes. It is a question to be further investigated which of the above perceptions of 'solidarity' is dominant in the views of organizers, participants and beneficiaries as well as of the local society as a whole.

An additional future research inquiry should involve the role of social support agencies with respect to the welfare state. Undoubtedly, in the context of the current crisis social solidarity groups have stepped into cover for the gaps in social protection left by the Greek state due to austerity measures and public spending cuts in health and social security as well as other social benefits. Yet, the great challenge for these groups is to be developed not as a substitute of the welfare state but instead to claim for its reconstruction (Sotiropoulos / Bourikos 2014). In the present study we detect a limited number of claims mostly by local social movements, unions and NGOs that underline the necessity of rebuilding rather than replacing the Greek welfare-state provisions. Future research should elaborate our understanding of how formal and informal social support agencies envision social care and how they define their role particularly with respect to the central state.

Taking into account that the acute economic crisis and the severe austerity measures still prevail in Greece; the findings of the study signify the need for further investigation towards a broader understanding of social support actions and their potential merit in forming the current and future social landscapes.

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Notes

- 1 The period under study extends from May 2010 (first bailout received from IMF and EC) up to April 2012 (one month before the national elections of May 2012).
- 2 The unit of data collection and data analysis is the social support action. Often, more than one newspaper article has been used in order to collect data for each unit.
- 3 It should be noted that one of the major limitations of the specific method is that it records only social support actions that have been published in the press, hence it excludes the activities that are not published in newspapers.
- 4 The qualitative analysis presented in the present paper is based on the published material; therefore it is restricted to public statements and announcements that are detected in the local press. However, the analysis is part of a broader qualitative study which includes participant observation and semi-structured interviews.
- 5 Social movement organizations in Chania include the local collectivities “Social Steki-Steki of Immigrants’ and “Immigrants Forum”, both established before the crisis primarily to assist immigrants. Newly established collectivities during the period under study include the “Social Kitchen” and the “Exchange Network of Chania”. The former provides on a daily basis free meals whereas the “Exchange Network of Chania” promotes the exchange of goods and services by using specific vouchers instead of money.
- 6 Published in the local newspaper “Chaniotika Nea” 4/11/2010.
- 7 Published in the local newspaper “Chaniotika Nea” 23/12/2011.
- 8 However, there are also “solidarity actions only for Greeks” or “blood aim support only for Greeks” with a racial frame organized by the far right neo-Nazi political party of “Golden Dawn” providing support only to people that can prove with their I.D. that they are Greek.
- 9 Published in the local newspaper “Chaniotika Nea” 28/1/2012.
- 10 Published in the local newspaper “Chaniotika Nea” 5/8/2010.
- 11 Published in the local newspaper “Chaniotika Nea” 10/10/2011.