

***“Social innovation in an era of socio-spatial transformations.
Choosing between responsibility and solidarity”***

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to identify the impacts of the collapsing welfare state provisions in Athens, after five years of all-embracing socioeconomic and spatial measures.

The rapidly increasing numbers of the unemployed and of persons under poverty level have altered Athens' social landscape, while the austerity policies promoted have intensified economic inequality, social exclusion and socio-spatial segregation. During this period many local initiatives emerged in the neighbourhoods of the Greek capital in order to find a collective path of dealing with the social repercussions of the crisis. Adopting the slogan 'no one alone facing crisis', several grassroots neighbourhood movements, public assemblies and other local initiatives have tried to establish solidarity networks in an attempt to address the on-going survival problems that the majority of the society faces. In such initiatives, social self-organization on a local level is the key in order to reclaim a better life and a different future.

Coming from different origins NGOs, as well as new programs of "community service" founded by the EU, also aim to fill the "gap" of the collapsed social services. Social entrepreneurship is supposed to be the key element of the "European social model". Moreover, many welfare functions of the Central State have been shifted to the Municipalities, which have been encouraged to experiment with pilot programs in cooperation with or out contracting to local non-profit organisations.

Based on field research our paper presents such local responses, which mainly focus on the aspects of providing food, shelter and other teaching and cultural activities. We examine to what extent they can address the social issues, taking also into consideration their progress and evolution during the last five years. Finally, we investigate whether the feeling of solidarity rather than the sense of responsibility is what makes such initiatives more successful or not.

A. Diminishing welfare provisions in insecure times. Who will fill the gap?

At the beginning of the 2000s, Harmut Häußermann demonstrated that we are moving towards the end of the European City, as processes of socioeconomic polarisation and social exclusion mark contemporary cities and “the political support for collective institutions is undermined by individualization and by *neoliberal hegemony*” (Häußermann, 2005:14). In the same context, the British economist, Bob Jessop also outlined the development of a global neo-liberal political-economic regime, where active entrepreneurs and their representations are the driving forces of the so called “successful hegemonic project” (Jessop, 2002). Furthermore, new ways of governance are needed to overcome the consequences of economic, social and political restructuring in the most European cities, and the welfare states in the majority of them are suffering from post-Fordist transformations.

For Jessop the emergence of the Welfare state was closely related to the dominance of the fordist city. The fordist model not only brought revolutionary changes in the industrial production based on the standardization of the products, the mechanization of processes, the scientific organization of work (introduced by Taylor) and also the production chain, but also involved mass production of consumer durables combined with the separation of ownership and control in large corporations, monopoly pricing, union recognition, as well as the state involvement in managing the conflicts between capital and labour (Jessop, 1994). However, Fordism was not only a production model but also a whole logic about the organization of society, mass consumption, a model that has largely determined the progress and evolution of all great western cities. Its dynamics were closely related to the formation and function of the Keynesian welfare state, which in turn had important implications for the dynamic of Fordism. On the one hand, the state managed the wage relation and labour market policies helping to balance supply and demand. On the other hand, by holding out the promise of smoothing economic fluctuations and securing stable growth, the state also permitted fordist firms to secure increasing returns to scale.

After the crisis of 1970 a gradual process of excess, appeal and extension of Fordism described as post-fordism or flexible accumulation begins. Although in “*the light of the Keynesian doctrine of economic policy, the welfare state came as a built-in economic and political stabilizer*” the very diversity of the forces that inaugurated and supported it could not be accommodated forever: “*The machinery of class compromise has itself become the object of class conflict*” (Offe, 1984:68).

So, beginning around the 1970s, even the more advanced welfare state social programs also came under increasing attack and an era commonly referred to as welfare state “retrenchment” began (Clayton and Pontusson, 1998) . The contours of this new era varied across countries in their timing, reach of programs affected and specific nature. However, welfare state expenditures began contracting or at least stabilizing in many countries, whereas program expenditure patterns within welfare systems also began shifting, as did the mechanisms through which benefits were delivered (Anderson, 2014).

The Schumpeterian workfare state came as a post-fordist outcome in an attempt to resolve crisis tendencies within the fordist state and also in a direction of strengthening the dynamic of the new accumulation regime.

“Compared to Keynesian welfare state the Schumpeterian workfare state is ready to cut back the domestic full employment in favour of international competitiveness and the productivist reordering of social policy becomes before the redistributive welfare rights”(Jessop, 1994).

Trying to explain the crisis that the welfare state faces, Gerometta et al. focus on the endogenous as well as the exogenous causes. As they underline, exogenous to the actual welfare state are the internationalisation of national economies, the increase in international competition which puts pressure on cost structures, curtailment of national economic and fiscal policy autonomy through European Union regulations and the general conception of the opposing effects of leveled wages on one side and production sites’ positions in the geography of competition on the other. As endogenous causes, on the other hand, could be considered the lower productivity because of the enlargement of the service economy and consequent lower or more slowly growing state income and tax revenues, the erosion of ‘normal’ employment regimes and the proliferation of maturing welfare states as a result of demographic change (Gerometta et al, 2005).

During the nineties telecommunications and globalization emerged as major forces shaping the organization of urban space and introducing a new type of cities, the Global City. The agglomerations of firms servicing the central functions for the management and coordination of global economic systems are disproportionately concentrated and where the concentrations of functions represent a strategic factor in the organization of the global economy. At the same time, a new ‘impassable dialectic of local and global’ arises, “as state territorial power is not being eroded, but rearticulated and reterritorialized in relation to

both sub- and supra-state scales” (Brenner, 1998). Under the label of “glocal”, Swyngedouw tries to express this re-scaled configuration of state territorial organization (Swyngedouw, 1992), while Harvey attempts to clarify the processes of the reterritorializational strategies, which enable the multiple spatial scale of the global capital circulation (Harvey, 1995). This “glocalisation” of the state territorial power comes as an outcome of the crisis of the 70s, and of the induced socioeconomic transformations of the post-fordist reindustrialization, recreating at the same time the relationship of the state with its major cities and regions (Triantafyllopoulou et al, 2012).

On the whole, we could argue that during the last two decades of the 20th century, neoliberal restructuring projects have redefined the institutional infrastructures upon which Fordist –Keynesian capitalism was grounded, without managing to establish a coherent basis for sustainable capitalist growth. The concept of “creative destruction” was used to describe the geographically uneven, socially regressive and politically volatile trajectories of institutional/spatial change, introducing for every destructive process, “*a moment of neoliberal creation*” (Brenner and Theodore, 2001).

Due to all these economic, political and social transformations, we could also suggest that the crisis within the welfare state is greater within cities. More specifically, social exclusion could be also attributed to the lack of replacement alternatives of the welfare services in the urban centers, as the family ties there are in generally limited and weak, providing little support and as the availability of land for cultivation and other means of reproduction is very restricted:

“Individualisation fosters social fragmentation, emphasises the fault lines between different social groups and thus limits possibilities for integration. At the same time, cities as places of crisis are also places of innovation in governance relations and institutions and are the primary arenas of social movements and other civil society social experiments.”(Gerometta et al, 2005: 2008).

In this new reality of a welfare state in crisis within the urban centres, new replacement strategies in order to fill the welfare gap emerged. In the late nineties, Dees described the idea of social entrepreneurship, as “*a phrase well suited to our times*”, which “*combines the passion of a social mission with an image of business-like discipline, innovation, and determination*”. As he indicated,

“The time is certainly ripe for entrepreneurial approaches to social problems. Many governmental and philanthropic efforts have fallen far short of our expectations. Major social sector institutions are often viewed as inefficient, ineffective, and unresponsive. Social entrepreneurs are needed to develop new models for a new century.”(Dees, 1998).

Social innovators, like social entrepreneurs, are supposed to create social change following at the same time the rules of the market. Fundamentally the most important factor for defining social entrepreneurs and social innovators is the adoption of a social mission to create and sustain social value – value for society that identifies problems, needs and solutions. But as we have to deal with the market, the social mission here is strongly connected with the need of improving profitability.

Coming from a different background, another solution came from the idea of constructing a civil society that could play an important role in fighting exclusion based on self-help and associations. While aware of the ambiguity of civil society’s role in rebuilding governance relationships Gerometta, Häußermann and Longo indicate that under certain conditions, civil society could be a valuable contributor towards more cohesive cities and governance arrangements that promote them.

“But they all have to refer to a common frame of mutual respect and acknowledgement, and this means in the last instance a reference to the overall constitution of a coherent society, sharing some common values of non-violent co-operation and social cohesion (Gemeinwohl).” (Gerometta et al,2005: 2019).

The first decade of the twenty first century was marked by the eruption of the on-going global financial crisis. We now live in the midst of a structural crisis with various social, environmental and spatial impacts, where European cities exhibit dramatic rising levels of social exclusion. It might not be the end of the world, but *“it is the end of one particular world, the world built in the last two decades on a card house of speculative global finance”* (Burkhalter and Castells, 2009:1). The new harsh reality of the crisis has made it even more evident that the sphere of social reproduction has in fact become the site of highly intrusive capitalist activities, as the tentacles of the state’s and capital’s influence and power now proliferate within the spheres of social reproduction in myriad ways (Harvey, 2014). As it is pointed out in the report *“The Welfare State after the Great Recession”* of the Leibniz Information Centre for Economics, the financial crisis quickly turned into a crisis for the public sector and the welfare state. (Hemerijck and Vandenbroucke, 2012).

Additionally, Claus Offe underlines, that we live in an era where the governing capacity is deficient if the state suffers from three all-to-familiar, as well as causally tightly interrelated, kinds of "absences":

"the absence of borders (at which the outward flow of capital and the inward flow of goods and services could be controlled); the absence (due to often giant and generally increasing levels of public debt) of fiscal resources available for the funding of public policies that serve any version of the public good; and the absence of jobs, which would allow the entire working- age population to participate, under acceptable terms, in the production and distribution of economic output." (Offe, 2011: 452)

So, in this new context of the social crisis and the collapsing welfare state, the basic rights to work, housing, education and health care are seriously challenged, while the adopted policies contributed to capitalism's effort to overcome the depression and find new terrains of profitability. Regarding all these aspects, our main research question is the following: ***In the current period of the global financial crisis, which new forms of civic engagement could emerge in order to replace the collapsed social services?***

B. Athens in an era of economic and social crisis

In Greece and in the other so called PIGS countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain) the financial crisis of 2008 occurred with a skyrocketing national debt, which appeared mainly due to bad integration of regional countries in the Eurozone. A decade ago, very little attention was paid to the geographical differences within the EU region. The periphery has lost competitiveness in the 2000s+, therefore is developing current account deficits and accumulating large debts to the financial institutions of the core. In this context Germany emerged as the economic master of the Eurozone. This split is also a clear sign that the contradictions of capital and of capitalism are manifest in space, place and time. Through uneven geographical development capital periodically reinvents itself, proving that the geographical landscape plays a key role in crisis formation (Harvey, 2013). As David Harvey points out in his last book "*Seventeen contradictions of capital*":

"Above all, uneven geographical development serves to move capital's systemic failings around from place to place. Those failings are a perpetually moving target. The

homogeneity now being imposed by an international order dominated by the central banks and a few international institutions, such as the IMF, is from this perspective potentially devastating for capital's future chances of survival." (Harvey, 2014:161)

But this devastating necessity for the survival of capital comes with tremendous social impacts. The arrival of the Troika in 2010 inaugurated a new period for Greek society. The memoranda and the continuing austerity policies have established new regimes of exploitation in a situation marked by very low wages, elimination of labour rights and unemployment explosion. The recent agreement of the Greek Government with the EU, the ECB and the IMF (July, 2015) continues the austerity policies with even harder measures, despite the fact that it is more than clear that austerity has not been effective. As Saskia Sassen pointed out in her article:

"Nine of every 10 euros that Eurozone governments and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have lent to the Greek government since 2010 have gone to the banks and other lenders --not to Greece to help recovery. And today the Troika asks for even more: All additional funding would go to pay back its debts of 175 percent of GDP." (Sassen, 2015)

Over the past five years, the EU and the IMF have imposed unprecedented austerity on Greece. The economy has shrunk by 26%, unemployment has risen to 25%, youth unemployment has reached record levels of 60% and the debt-to-GDP ratio jumped from 120% to 180%. The economic catastrophe has led to a humanitarian crisis, with more than 3 million people on or below the poverty line. The poverty rates of part-time workers reach 29.4% and of self-employed 25.4% (EKKE, 2012). Cuts in the salaries reached in some cases 20-30%, pensions were frozen, but most importantly unemployment rose significantly, especially in the urban areas (Poulios, et al., 2013). As Hadjimichalis observes "the worst affected are non-unionized workers (particularly women), lower-level civil servants and the lower middle classes in urban areas" (Hadjimichalis, 2011). The informal economy of the family unit is threatened even in the traditional case of housing provision.

Furthermore, a new class of homeless has been created by people who lost their property through loans or other debts, young unemployed who cannot afford a house and have moved back with their families, as well as people who lost their jobs just before retirement and cannot find a new one. It is estimated that more than 20,000 citizens are living in the streets or in substandard housing, while many more are at risk of being rendered homeless, although no formal statistical survey has been carried out a yet. In fact, only until recently,

have homeless in Greece been recognized as a Special - Vulnerable Social Group needing specific measures of protection (Act of Parliament N.4052/12).

In the current crisis setting, the management of deprived neighbourhoods becomes more difficult as new vulnerable groups have greater needs and fewer resources, while public funds are lacking (Triantafyllopoulou et al., 2013). Some studies have observed a process of change in the urban geography of Athens, as urban policies currently promoted intensify economic inequality, social exclusion and socio-spatial segregation (Maloutas et al., 2012). Athens is therefore gradually transformed from a relatively coherent social mixed urban system to a fragmented and segregated one (Chatzikonstantinou et al., 2011) and although the demand for a comprehensive social protection program was raised, the provision of income support and social care to the most vulnerable groups has not risen accordingly. Altogether, the economic crisis has led to significant changes in the Greek society, especially in the existing networks of social cohesion and political representation. We can see these transformations unfolding at a spatial level, especially in the city of Athens where the Athenian landscape of low segregation becomes a place of encounter (Chatzikonstantinou et al., 2011). There invisible borders are being created within the multiplicity of the central areas and streets become imaginary boundaries between the neighborhoods where the phenomena of social conflict, racist violence and insecurity are clearly expressed. And in this setting public space becomes the main space of the crisis narratives (Poulios et al ,2013).

On June 26th 2015, a new non-negotiable package (Memorandum) that would entrench austerity was offered by the lenders to the Greek Government. This was followed by a suspension of liquidity to the Greek banks and the imposition of capital controls, as well as by negotiations over a third Greek bailout. In this situation, the government has asked the Greek people to decide the future of the country in a referendum. Greek people and especially the youth voted against the harsh bailout terms set out by creditors, as they have been suffering by the social impacts of the promoted policies. The memorandum agreement, which was finally signed by the Prime Minister of Greece at the EU Summit includes massive austerity, new levels of over-taxation, sweeping privatisations and cuts in wages and pensions - is actually a sellout and a submission to the demands of the Troika. It is also a punishment of the people for their courageous, class based 'NO' vote.

C. "No one alone facing the crisis!"

As the Greek society is suffering so brutally, the need to find direct solutions and answers in order to overcome this reality becomes more and more essential. Furthermore, the majority of the people have lost their trust to the political system. We could say that social crisis has led to a political crisis, as anger and despair have become dominant feelings fuelling both left and right wing paths.

On the one hand, a great percentage of the low income classes and of the unemployed youth accuses immigrants for the insufferable reality and also a remarkable percentage supports the Golden Dawn. In a period of social and humanitarian crisis, the central areas often become battlefields, where racial violence occurs on a daily basis. The dominant discourse, reproduced by the media and the far -right rhetoric, attributes all on-going social problems to immigrants and to the creation of a "ghetto" in the historical central areas of the city. "The city becomes, along these lines, conceptualized as a cell. In racist rhetoric, the centre of the cell is seen as being invaded by alien and hostile forces" (Hatzopoulos, 2010). The presence of immigration is not perceived as ethnic diversity. The final equation is simple: immigrants are criminals, antisocial, dangerous for the urban landscape and for social health (Arapoglou et al, 2009). Golden Dawn's electoral support combines those urban areas that have been more severely hit by the austerity and recession with traditional rural strongholds of conservative voters.

"Its appeal to a predominantly male and relatively young constituency consisting of working-class and traditional petty-bourgeois strata, along with many unemployed, suggests analogies with other fascist movements in history" (Sotiris, 2013).

In all cases, fascism should be approached as a social phenomenon linked to the crisis, which has built strong connections with the most deprived neighbourhoods. On the other hand, Greece has gone through a remarkable sequence of protest and contention, with general strikes, mass rallies, street clashes and the anti-austerity occupation known as the Movement in the Squares (Sotiris, 2013). At the aftermath of the Syntagma Square, one could observe the creation of local assemblies in almost every neighbourhood of Athens. Adopting the slogan 'no one alone facing crisis', several grassroot neighbourhood movements, public assemblies and other local initiatives tried to establish solidarity networks in an attempt to address the on-going survival problems that the majority of the society faces (Triantafyllopoulou et al, 2013).

Five years later, the local assemblies may have shown signs of decay, but we can clearly see the evolution and the continuous creation of social and cultural centres, alternative economies and other collective initiatives. The main aim of these initiatives is to create spaces where the local community can search for survival paths, fostering also cultural expression and creativity. Some of them focus on creating new forms of organizing the unemployed people and the working class at a local level, some others mainly on upgrading the life conditions dealing with cultural and social issues. In the majority cases, by “occupying” public property or the local Park or square, people do not only demand their participation in decision-making processes, prioritizing participatory democracy and social justice against the strict austerity policies. In these terms, organizing at a local level and experimenting with new forms of organization within a sense of community appears to be extremely important.

C. Social networks replacing the welfare provisions. Responsibility or Solidarity?

As already pointed out, all the transformations mentioned above in combination with the wider changes in labour market regulation could not but have serious social repercussions, intensifying economic inequality, social exclusion and socio-spatial segregation. Attempting to deal with this social crisis many local initiatives have searched the collective path of solidarity, revealing paths of resistance to the current situation. Coming from different origins NGOs, as well as new programs of “community service” founded by the EU, also aim to fill the “gap” of the collapsed social services. In our research we were interested to study these local responses of different social networks, examining at the same time whose needs they actually serve and also to what extent they can be successful.

By our field research we have focused on the aspects of providing:

- *food and other relief items*
- *shelter- confronting homelessness*
- *learning support/ remedial teaching and cultural activities*

Therefore we carried out personal interviews with representatives of

1) NGOs- Non Profits

- **Praxis:** is a NGO, which has a wide network all across Greece, but especially in the two major urban centres of Athens and Thessaloniki. Its main goal is “*to combat the*

social and economic exclusion of socially vulnerable groups, and to defend their basic civil and social rights, by providing social and medical services in the areas of treatment, prevention, education, health infrastructure, etc., regardless of colour, race, religion, age, nationality, ideology or political beliefs”

- **Klimaka:** is a NGO operating mental health units such as mental health homes and residencies, protected residencies, mental health mobile units and day care centres- member of FEANTSA (European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless) participates in research projects of the European Conferences on Homelessness

2) **Public- semipublic organisations (with institutional support)**

- **City of Athens Homeless Foundation “KYADA ”:** operates two Hostels where it offers short-term accommodation (for about 3-6 months) to 180 persons. Through Programs like the “social grocery” and the “solidarity for the family”, collect and distribute food, clothing, shoes etc. to those who visit or are hosted at the shelter as well as to families and individuals in need.

3) **Local initiatives** (semi -autonomous- with the participation/ under the influence of political forces)

- **Social cultural centre 'Lampidona':** In 2011 the residents of the neighbourhood of Vironas, decided to re-operate the closed municipal refreshment stand ‘Lampidona’, and to create a social and cultural centre for all citizens, collectives and organizations of their district. The participants organize weekly: support lessons of the secondary education- languages- creative activities for children, collective kitchens, screenings, solidarity actions and open discussions.
- **Labour club in Nea Smyrni:** *Nea Smyrni* is a municipality located at the southern border of the Athens municipality, quite near to the city centre, with almost 73.000 inhabitants. The residents there took the decision of creating a labour club in an attempt to organize the workers and the unemployed of their area, so that they can fight for their rights. They tried to create a place of solidarity for the poor and the oppressed, but also an educational and cultural centre. They organize solidarity lessons to more than 70 students (up to 50 teachers work there as volunteers). Since January 2014 a working group began to collect and distribute food and relief items.
- **Labour Club of Nea Ionia (“Ydragogio”):** *Nea Ionia* is a municipality in the district of

North Domain in Attica and has a population of 67.134 inhabitants. The residents there created a labour club in 2012 in an attempt to unite the workers and the unemployed of their area, expressing also their solidarity to those in need. They have led campaigns helping refugees from Syria, they provide lessons to more than 60 students every year and they also organize cultural activities, like screenings on a weekly basis. Moreover, they also stand by the labour movement of their area, showing solidarity in cases of mass layoffs or in incidents of employer arbitrariness.

Dealing with new homelessness

In our field research we tried to find out which paths could be created in order to deal with the uprising social problem of new homelessness. Here, we have to underline that most of the established services pertain "charity-type" of "short term" benefits without aiming towards the prevention of the phenomenon and, most importantly, towards the reintegration of the homeless to the labour market and their reinstatement within the society.

Examining the actions of the NGOs we found out that "Stavros Niarchos foundation" participates at a pilot program of Social Housing in collaboration with Praksis, aiming to prevent homelessness. The program focuses on the specific support of families, with emphasis on monetary assistance, which will allow them to maintain their financial independence and consequently their homes. It also includes assistance with home security and additional aid (food, clothing etc.). Praksis also participates in the "Plus to Minus" program, which is also founded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and includes following actions:

- Intervention by providing Relief through two (2) Day Center Facilities for the homeless of the greater area of Athens (Attica), aiming for an approximate number of 32,000 beneficiaries on an annual basis, and
- Prevention through the "Households Self Sufficiency Route" for families facing the threat of homelessness aiming to support 200 families / approximately 800 people on a monthly basis.

Within the framework of the integrated program of supporting the homeless and groups at-risk, KLIMAKA operates a Homeless Support Centre and a Short-term Homeless Hostel. It is

estimated that the Homeless Support Day Centre serves almost 350 people per week and the Short-term Homeless Hostel has a capacity of accommodating ten people per night.

PRAKSIS - in collaboration with KLIMAKA (Development Carrier for Human Exclusion), as coordinator, the Municipality of Athens, *DOCTORS OF THE WORLD* and *EQUAL SOCIETY* (Society for Equal Opportunities), and within the framework of the relevant Act entitled "Social Structures tackling poverty in Athens Municipality" which is co-financed by the European Social Fund - is involved in the operation of a Social Network. In this context PRAKSIS enhances the functionality of the Day Center for Homeless which has been operating since May 2012. Therefore, since 5th of July 2013 the Day Centre has been operating on a seven-day basis from 09.00 am to 21.00 pm and providing provision of primary health care and management of medical emergencies, baths and disposable hygiene kits, laundry services, clothes, play corner for the beneficiaries' children, psychosocial support by qualified social scientists, Referrals (to social services agencies and hospitals), lounge for resting, access to internet and phone, beverages etc. The direct target group is homeless (Greeks or foreigners) who are facing specific survival issues. As homeless is regarded any person who does not have access to decent and safe housing. The term "homeless" refers to all people residing in the country and who do not own or rent a house, or live on the streets or in hostels and institutions, or are hosted by acquaintances and friends (often in overcrowded cohabitation), or live in inadequate and unsafe accommodation, without access to basic services such as drinking water, electricity or heating.

The actions and programs planned and implemented by the institutional foundation of KYADA also aim to tackle problems faced by people who are without shelter. KYADA operates two Hostels where it offers short-term accommodation (for about 3-6 months) to 180 persons. Priority is given to Athens's citizens, who can show that they don't have a shelter and a medical certificate that they are not addicts.

Finally, we should also remark that the local initiatives show a specific limit and inadequacy to provide shelter to people in need because of the lack of sources/funding. Despite this fact, they often organize demonstrative actions in cases of auctions, preventing forced evictions of people in poverty who are unable to pay their debts to the banks.

Providing and distributing food

Focusing on the aspect of providing food, we could say that several programs and actions are being implemented. Both Praksis and Klimaka participate in pilot programs, which occasionally distribute food items in families that are under the risk of poverty. The institutional foundation of KYADA promotes programs like the “social grocery” and the “solidarity for the family”, collecting and distributing food, clothing, shoes etc. to those who visit or are hosted at the shelter, as well as to families and individuals in need. Moreover, the “mutual aid node” program has been implemented as a reaction to the new condition that the crisis has created in the urban setting of Athens, involving almost 375 families. But what could be considered as the most important contribution is the provision of 1,200 meals on a daily basis by KYADA (two meals per day) at the Foundation's Meal Provision Centre. It is crucial that everyone has access to these meals, without the precondition of being citizen of the Municipality of Athens or immigrant “with papers”. As the head of KYADA pointed out, at the beginning of the crisis, most of the people who came at the common meals were immigrants. After 2011, there has been a great increase in the number of the natives, estimated to 25% since last January, a working group also began to collect and distribute food and relief items.

The PRAKSIS also participates in a new Operational Food & Basic Materials Assistance Program 2014-2020 / TEBA which is implemented by the Region Of Attica, within the framework of policies for tackling humanitarian crisis.

On the other hand, as the poverty rates grow so rapidly more and more collective kitchens appear every year in Athens. Almost every local initiative organizes collective meals once or twice a week, after the gatherings. But there are several initiatives and assemblies that decided to provide food to those in need on a regular basis. The persons involved with the organization of the collective kitchen are mainly unemployed themselves, although their age varies; there are young people 20 to 35 years old, but also older persons around fifty. The Social cultural center 'Lampidona' and also the Labour Clubs in Nea Smyrni and in Nea Ionia often organize actions like collective meals and they distribute food items on a regular basis:

“The Labour Club couldn't be absent from the fight against food crisis, which is imposed to the Greek society by the dominant policies. Therefore, we decided in our assembly, that we will begin to collect and distribute food and other relief items to those in need” stressed a member of the Labour Club and as he continued: “We do not try to “soften” their poverty, as the state does, the municipalities, the media, the church and businesses giving “charity” to them. And neither have we considered ourselves partly responsible for the problem. On

the contrary we understand that we could be the next ones suffering, if we do not suffer already. We intend to create a society that will not “feed” profits and exploitation, but people. Therefore, we gather food with a long self-life (oil, pasta, coffee, honey, milk, etc.) and other emergency items (eg personal hygiene items) from Monday till Friday, from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. and every Saturday from 12:00 to 15:00. Almost 30 families get support on a permanent basis. ” (Interview with a participant of the Labor Club in Nea Smyrni, 2013)

Furthermore, since February 2014 the Labour Club also operated a Solidarity Clinic and a Pharmacy. Its purpose is the provision of free primary health care and medicines, to unemployed and uninsured. Several doctors, nurses and pharmacists volunteer there on a weekly basis.

Additionally, during the recent hunger strike of Syrian refugees in January 2015, the Labour Club of Nea Ionia organized a huge campaign of gathering essentials (food items, clothes, medicines etc) which took place for more than two months:

“Syrian war refugees were on a hunger strike for days, occupying the Syntagma square and claiming their right to adequate living conditions and to their freedom to travel to other European countries. On December 15th they were violently expelled by the police. The participants of the Labour Club here, we decided to welcome four Syrian women with their four children. We found them a temporary solution by hosting them in an old kindergarten building in Nea Ionia. From the first moment we were on their side, gathering relief items and we have also invited to actively show their solidarity. We continue to collect relief items at our Club, every afternoon from Monday to Saturday and every Sunday morning. (Interview with a participant of the Labour Club in Nea Ionia, 2015)

Teaching and other cultural activities

As a result of the collapsing educational system in Greece, the majority of the students take private lessons in order to cope with the continuous exams. Therefore several local initiatives came up with the idea of providing solidarity lessons to students of all grades whose parents are unemployed, underemployed or of a low income. In many cases, like in the Labour Club in Nea Smyrni, the lessons started in collaboration with the Association of professors in tutoring services. More than seventy students take part at the whole project every year and

more than fifty teachers have volunteered to prepare them for the university entrance examinations.

The members of the Labour Club in Nea Ionia also provide lessons to students in high school. In fact more than 60 students were involved last year in the several classes. As one of the volunteer- teachers point out:

“We have chosen to provide educational support to children of the neighborhood, not only targeting on the success of the children in the exams but mainly aiming to develop their critical thinking, their ability to stand against to any oppression and injustice, to develop their intolerance with racism and fascism. We believe that collective identity can be evolved in places like our Labour Club. Moreover we intend to break the class barriers of the existing educational system. A system that, despite the great efforts of the teachers, does not provide equally the opportunity to children to have access to higher education. In practice this means the abolition of our constitutionally guaranteed right in public and free education.” (Interview with a participant of the Labor Club in Nea Ionia, 2015)

Furthermore, the majority of the local Initiatives create social and cultural centres. The aim is to shelter cultural expression and creativity and also to create a space where the local community can gather and socialize. To organize film screenings, theatrical groups, concerts, theoretical sessions and also to have a place, where local assemblies or other initiatives can discuss and organise their actions. In Lampedona, several “working groups” collaborate in order to operate the centre: a music group, groups that organise solidarity lessons (painting, dancing, support teaching for students of the primary and secondary education), a group which intends to organize the struggle of unemployed people. It also operates as an open cafe every weekend. The participants have also created a library and a reading room, where everyone has free access. Self-organisation and solidarity are the key words for this collective attempt:

“We focus on the values of equality, freedom, justice, solidarity and dignity, as we aim to make them reality for everyone. We call every resident, every collective initiative or organization of our neighbourhood to come and contribute to our activities.”, highlighted a participant of Lampedona (interview with a participant of Lampedona, 2013).

More specifically within the social cultural center 'Lampedona', more than 70 people collaborate in the several working groups. Twenty-two teachers are involved in conducting

the courses and 36 students take part (15 in the support lessons of the secondary education and twenty one in the support lessons of foreign languages). More than thirty people participate in the dancing and music courses and twenty-two people are responsible for the organisation and the carrying out of the collective kitchens. Many of the open events have involved more than 200 people of the neighbourhood and the adjacent areas.

D. Reaching a conclusion: Reclaiming the future of Athens!

Conclusively, we could assume that the dominant strategies for replacing the welfare gap come through pilot programs by the Municipalities or by the Periphery of Attika in cooperation with or out contracting to local non-profit organizations. A set of policies is supposed to integrate programs of different departments both vertically (between state scales) and horizontally (between different state agencies in different policy sectors), with private actors, depending mainly on the resources of other actors and not the central state. We could argue, that to some extent these pilot programs aiming to address social issues in Greece in a period of financial and social crisis, have been promoted broadly on a local scale in other European cities during the last decades. In Germany, for example, local officials have been developing partnerships with informal groups, NGOs and other volunteer organizations since the nineties (Volker et al, 2003).

Focusing on the issue of homelessness, most of the established services pertain "charity-type" of "short term" benefits without aiming towards the prevention of the phenomenon and, most importantly, towards the reintegration of the homeless to the labour market and their reinstatement within the society. On the one hand, the NGOs are supposed to represent an allegedly modern form of social organization and solidarity, which is supported and promoted by the state, the business groups and the EU. Ironically, if we examine the working arrangements of these pilots social programs of the NGOs and the municipalities' partnerships (short term contracts with very low wages and no other benefits), we could say that they reproduce exploitation in the name of softening social problems. They foster hopes for job finding, while they are in breach of basic labour rights. On the other hand, we should also remark that the local initiatives show a specific limit of the extend that they can address

social needs at a local level because of the lack of sources/funding. Altogether, as a result of our field research, we should underline that in all cases the social provisions coming from these programs and from the action of NGOs, institutional organizations and local initiatives are inadequate to address the rapidly rising social issues. They can only provide a short-term relief to specific cases. In their paper "What is to be done?" David Harvey and David Wachsmuth point out that at times of crisis, the irrationality of capitalism becomes plain to see: " Surplus capital and surplus labor exist side by side with seemingly no way to put them back together in the mist of immense suffering and unmet needs." So they ask two "awkward" questions about the current crisis: "What is to be done? And who the hell is going to do it?" (Harvey and Wachsmuth, 2012)

Trying to answer these two difficult questions we have to admit that the most important aspect of the social networks which express solidarity (like Lampidona and the Labour Clubs) is the fact that they encourage urban inhabitants to act collectively about issues of common interest, developing common ideas and forging concrete working plans on how to achieve shared goals (Castells, 1983). The main aim of these initiatives is to create spaces where the local community can search for survival paths, fostering also cultural expression and creativity. Some of them focus on creating new forms of organizing the unemployed people and the working class at a local level, some others mainly on upgrading the life conditions dealing with cultural and social issues.

As the Greek society is suffering so brutally, the majority of the people - have lost their trust to the political system. The social crisis has led to a political crisis, as anger and despair have become dominant feelings, leading to both left and right wing paths. In these terms, in an era of social crisis showing solidarity is mainly important because it prevents social cannibalism, as a great part of the labor class and the low-income groups turn against other vulnerable social groups.

Moreover, it is also crucial that such initiatives give support, as well as the opportunity of resistance for those that the dominant classes want to be in the margins of the society: the unemployed, low income people, immigrants. Secondly, as Arampantzi and Nicholls notice:

"These localized mobilizations serve crucial functions because they bring diverse individuals into the public arena and generate the relational and emotional assets that enable new activists to commit their time and resources to high-risk struggles"(Arampantzi and Nicholls, 2012: 2596).

As Gerometta et al also underline:

“Plurality is a constitutive element of a socially innovative civil society, in contrast to the dominant perception of civil society as a middle-class homogenised sphere in charge of defining Gemeinwohl, representative of the whole of society. “ (Gerometta et al, 2005:2019)

We could say that in the majority cases, by “occupying” public property or the local Park or square, people also demand their participation in decision-making processes, prioritizing participatory democracy and social justice against the strict austerity policies. We should however have in mind that these forms of civic engagement are not static at all. On the contrary, they seem to evolve and transform in relation with the wider social and political changes. Therefore, it is also crucial to pay attention to how social and political conditions structure that associational life (Mayer, 2003).

Especially in a country and in a period where the majority of the labor force is either unemployed or working in small work places, with few other colleagues, we should see how these local networks and collectives could become instruments that will advance social change. Additionally, it is of great importance that we don't let these solidarity actions become 'autonomous islands' in capitalism, ‘refuges’ helping the oppressed parts of the society escape from everyday life, but to connect their action with the struggle against the real causes of the current social catastrophe. In other words, it is an open bet **to evolve them to new forms of organizing the labour class, new forms of expression of the popular interests and needs.**

After all, a genuinely different future would be neither a mere extension of the present nor an absolute break with it. As Terry Eagleton demonstrates, *“Realism and visions here go hand in hand ”* (Eagleton, 2011).

So, if we want to see the present of Athens as it truly is, we will have to see it in the light of its possible transformation.

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