Chapter 10

Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives in Greece during the Financial Crisis[1]

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Introduction

Over the last five years, a dramatically increasing number of citizens' initiatives have been emerging throughout Greece, as a response to both deteriorating living standards and a new social and political landscape, brought about by the harsh austerity measures taken by Greek governments, in return for loans from the IMF and European institutions. The range of activities of these initiatives is impressive: they involve tangible, result-oriented projects, collective kitchens, solidarity pharmacies, schools, medical centres, social grocery shops, and so on, thus addressing the basic needs of the most disadvantaged members of the community. They also organise cultural events, awareness-raising activities and political activism against Greece's austerity measures. A special place in this spectrum of initiatives is occupied by social solidarity economy activities, such as labour collectives, cooperatives, time banks and community exchange networks.

A considerable number of these initiatives emerged through Citizens' Assemblies organised at the municipality or neighbourhood level, in the aftermath of the 'indignados' movement on Syntagma Square in 2011. Others were undertaken by existing groups of citizens to which the crisis environment has given new impetus. In the present chapter we refer to them as *citizens' initiatives*.

Alongside these initiatives there are also activities undertaken on a project basis by a variety of actors, such as NGOs, various associations, including church, professional and scientific associations, and municipalities. They too seek to support the neediest citizens, through the provision of food, education, health, and accommodation. The majority are funded by the state, in the framework of a new social strategy, which substitutes the traditional welfare state model with pilot social programmes based on cooperation between central government, local authorities and non-profit organisations. Alternatively, such activities are sponsored by private foundations, in the framework of a philanthropic policy.

The very few studies which seek to map the broader spectrum of solidarity initiatives in Greece have begun to develop approaches to categorising them. Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) distinguish between formal and informal structures, whereas Afouxenidis (2012) argues in favour of institutionalised/ non-institutionalised and spontaneous initiatives. Most of the literature, however, focuses on institutionalised NGOs activities and only a distinct, steadily developing research looks specifically at the alternative solidarity economy (Sotiropoulou, 2012; Kavoulakos, Gritzas and Amanatidou, 2012; Nikolaou, 2013).

The focus of this chapter is citizens' initiatives. It is argued that their dynamic and constantly changing nature resists the above clear-cut categorisations: informal initiatives might become formal by taking the legal form of a non-profit company and yet be very different, in terms of principles of operation, from other schemes of that kind.

A different strategy is employed here, in order to tackle the above complexities and disjunctions. We firstly problematise the notion of solidarity (a key element of these initiatives) applied in different contexts, and we then investigate the rationale, principles of operation and motivation of the people involved. This approach leads to the identification of certain defining characteristics of these initiatives, which help us to better analyse them and to evaluate their impact. Furthermore, this approach allows for a comparative analysis, revealing differences and similarities between grassroot solidarity initiatives that emerged as a bottom-up response to the crisis, on the one hand, and activities implemented by traditional NGOs, municipalities and church foundations, and funded by the state or private donors, on the other hand.

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first section offers an overview of the field, based on the activities of such initiatives, answering the 'What' question. The second section looks at their rationale (the 'Why' and 'How' questions) and analyses the distinct characteristics which define them. The third section attempts an evaluation of their impact, and the last section deals with the various challenges these initiatives encounter and draws an agenda for future research.

Methodology

This chapter is based on data collected through different methods. To begin with, quantitative and qualitative data were collected, through online desk research regarding the number and type of solidarity structures established over recent years of the crisis in Greece. Online databases were used: *Solidarity 4 All*, *Project Omikron*[2] *Networking Platform-Another World* and *www.antallaktiki.gr*. It should be noted that such databases should not be considered as completely comprehensive. Some structures established within the last six months do not

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2   2nd edition map of grassroots groups in Greece, June 2014, available at http:// omikronproject.gr/, [Accessed 25 July 2014].

appear on existing databases, while some other structures which do appear are now inactive. Although the *Solidarity 4 All* database seems to be sufficiently updated, it does not provide information for certain solidarity structures. As 'V',[3] from the Metropolitan Medical Centre at Elliniko argues, the reason for this is that the structures themselves have requested not to be included in this database because *Solidarity 4 All* is funded by left-wing SYRIZA, the main opposition party in Greece over the last few years. For all these reasons, the relevant information has been cross-checked, using different sources and research methods.

Secondly, discourse analysis was conducted, focusing on how different collectives are presented in the texts on their websites and blogs.

Thirdly, the realities on the ground were investigated through empirical work. In-depth interviews were held with no fewer than 20 representatives involved in different solidarity structures in the region of Attica. The selection of interviewees was based on two main criteria: the inclusion of different types of structure (i.e. medical centers, cooperatives, time banks, citizens' assemblies, solidarity schools), and the role of the individual in the specific structure, in order to ensure that founders and decisionmakers as well as members of the structures' assemblies were interviewed.

These methods were combined with participant observation, conducted in four such initiatives: the Citizens' Assembly of Holargos-Papagos, the Time Bank of Holargos-Papagos, the European Village and the Solidarity and Social Economy Festival. This observation included visiting the various structures, talking with participants and actively taking part in their activities (discussions, talks, seminars) over an 18-month period (September 2012–March 2014). The observation data were further enriched by social media material such as e-mail, Twitter feeds, Facebook updates, blog entries, websites, and videos.

A research questionnaire referred to the *raison d'être* of citizens' initiatives, the organisation of their activities with emphasis on the decision-making process, and the impact of their involvement on themselves/other participants/society in general. Last but not least, citizens' initiatives were compared, where appropriate, with state- and charity foundation-funded solidarity initiatives.

Overview of Activities of Solidarity Initiatives

From 2010 onwards, the economic crisis in Greece has been continuously deepening. Poverty and unemployment particularly hit low- and middle- income strata (see also Chapter 1). Citizens' initiatives appeared not only in major cities, such as Athens and Thessaloniki but also in towns, such as Alexandroupolis in the north, and Sparta, in southern Greece.

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3   In order to protect their anonymity, respondents are referred to by initials only throughout this chapter.

These initiatives involved alternative solidarity and cooperative economy activities and structures. They covered basic needs, i.e, food, health, education, clothing and engaged upon cultural and political activism. Below follows an indicative account of different activities that the citizens' solidarity structures usually undertake. In most cases, several types of activities are organised by the same group or initiative.

Social Solidarity Economy

Many people hit by the crisis turn to different types of cooperative economic activity. The social solidarity economy is described in the literature as a non-market economy, in which production and distribution are under the control of society, not of the market (Kotsakis, 2012). Its aim is not to make a profit but to meet the needs of the people, while, at the same time, respecting human labour and the environment. The social solidarity economy constitutes a huge field of research in itself. Petropoulou (2013) studied its theoretical origins and a first typology and evaluation have been attempted by Greek scholars (Kavoulakos, Gritzas and Amanatidou, 2012; Nikolaou, 2013).

The *Solidarity 4 All* database, under the category 'Solidarity Economy', includes 151 Greek initiatives of different types, such as cooperatives, labour collectives and direct producer-to-consumer networks. As research on other databases, such as antallaktiki.gr, has revealed, there are more activities to be added to this list, which at any rate requires constant updating.

Many of these initiatives have acquired legal entity status. Other initiatives are quite informal, such as the Time Bank of Syntagma and Holargos-Papagos and the direct producer-to-consumer networks (of 'SPAME').

The SPAME networks were launched in February 2012, when potato producers distributed their products directly to consumers at a low price; this spread across the country incorporating other products, agricultural or otherwise. Different collectives have organised days of direct distribution of products. This practice has proved beneficial to both producers and consumers.

Furthermore, alternative currency networks have developed in different cities and towns throughout Greece e.g., *Koino* in Kalamaria, *Fasouli* in Athens. Members of the networks exchange services and goods in lieu of credits. As Grigoriou, one of the founders of TEM, claims, 'for many, [alternative currency networks] play a double role of supplementing lost income, while at the same time creating a protective web at this difficult juncture in their lives'.

Last but not least, regular bazaars have been organised, in which people exchange clothes and other items in good condition, in order to cover real needs, to learn the meaning of 're-using' and to get to know each other (e.g. bazaars organized by Votsalo – The Network of Solidarity Economy of Korydallos, the Time Bank of Neapoli-Sikeon, and the Network of Exchanges of Chania).

Solidarity Medical Centers

As estimated by the Greek Minister of Health, in April 2014, the number of people without social security in Greece, stood at between 1.9–2.4 million people (D.K., 2014). These people are not allowed to use public health structures, unless they pay in cash. Social Solidarity Medical Centres already existed in Greece for migrants without official documents. The first social solidarity medical centre and pharmacy to respond to the needs of Greeks was established in 2011, at Elliniko. Since then, no fewer than 50 such centres have been established nationwide. These centres operate through the services of volunteer medical and other personnel. According to data issued by *Solidarity 4 All*, for six such centers, 179 doctors of different specialisations have been mobilised. There are three social dental centres through which 44 dentists provide services. Furthermore, the social pharmacies included in 16 medical centres are supported by 35 pharmacists. Additionally, the operation of these medical centres is secured by 247 volunteers who provide administrative support.

Regarding the recipients of the services, up to October 2013, in only six out of the 16 medical centres recorded by *Solidarity 4 All*, 20,303 citizens had received medical services by October 2013. No fewer than 5,870 patients have received medicines from social centers and 3,072 have visited the dental centres. As for the profile of patients, data from the five centers in which such records have been kept are as follows: 1,629 Greeks, 651 migrants, 1,148 women, 966 men, and 166 children/teenagers.[4]

Social Solidarity Kitchens and Collective Gardens

Several solidarity groups have included solidarity kitchens in their activities, in order to cover the increased need for food, in particular amongst the unemployed and the homeless. In some cases, anyone can eat for free or for a small amount of money, and can participate in the cooking process. Collective kitchens can be found around Athens, mainly downtown, and also throughout the country. They vary in terms of their infrastructure and their access to donated food. Examples include 'Trofosyllektes', the 'Wednesday' collective kitchen, and the 'The Other Human' collective kitchen.

Similarly, groups of people, either alone or with the support of municipalities, have transformed abandoned pieces of land into collective gardens for families hit by the crisis. An example of such an initiative is a self-managed field at Elliniko.

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4   Data from the Coordination Committee of Social Medical Centres, Pharmacies, Networks of Solidarity, available at http://www.solidarity4all.gr/el/support-article/ %CF.%83%CF.%84%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF.%87%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%B1- %CE%B1%CF.%80%CF.%8C-%CE%BA%CE%B9%CF.%86%CE%B1, [Accessed May 2014] .

Solidarity Schools

There are two main types of school under this category. First are those which provide free lessons to schoolchildren who cannot afford private tuition.[5]

Many solidarity structures have integrated free tutoring into their action plans. According to the *Solidarity 4 All* database, solidarity schools operate in the municipalities of Kifisia, Pefki-Likovrisi, Keratsini, Tavros, Nea Makri, Megara, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Herakleion, Chania, Korinthos, Patra, Nafplio, Egio, Xanthi and Preveza.

Secondly, as cuts in the state budget for education have led to important changes in the educational system, considered by many to be compromising the quality of education provided, some parents decided to experiment with alternative schools. In some cases, five or six families have come together and established their own kindergarten (Roumelioti, 2013).

Awareness-Raising, Political and Cultural Activism

Most solidarity structures organise awareness-raising, political, educational and cultural activities, aiming to enhance solidarity and community building, and to mobilise, inform and educate people on topics related to an alternative social, economic and political way of life.

The most common activities encountered in this respect are open discussions on current issues related to the Greek debt and the austerity measures. Different initiatives distribute leaflets and host websites, blogs, and facebook pages, inviting people to participate in coordinated action such as petitions and demonstrations, for example against new increases of taxes, or the cost of electricity.

Apart from such negative campaigning, the citizens' initiatives hold educational activities (lectures, presentations, 'learning by doing' workshops) related to issues such as food, health and energy, often influenced by the principles of the so-called Degrowth movement (Latouche, 2009). Some initiatives also organise cultural events, such as book presentations, music and dance events, painting and photo exhibitions, workshops and film nights. As respondents J and N put it, 'this is an act of ultimate resistance to the austerity measures which gradually lead us to be concerned only about the basics and lose our human nature, that is, spirit, culture and art. In that sense, these cultural activities are solidarity activities as well'.

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5   It should be noted that 90% of Greek school children hoping to pass university entry exams take private lessons, as the state school system is considered inadequate. However, private lessons are expensive, and, following soaring taxes, drastic cuts in salaries and the general business recession, the middle- and low-income Greek family cannot afford such expenses.

The Anatomy of Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives

In this section, the question to be answered does not relate to 'what grassroot citizens' solidarity structures actually do' but rather 'why and how they do whatever they do'. The answer goes beyond labels and general assumptions, investigating the meaning behind key words, such as solidarity and volunteerism, so commonly used but not sufficiently defined.

Research has led to the identification of the following characteristics of citizens' solidarity structures: a set of underlying values, with solidarity being clearly distinct from philanthropy, the political stance of direct democracy, a 'glocal' character, an activist vs. volunteer controversy and independence from state funding. The above key features cut across different forms of organisations, as they can qualify both formal and informal initiatives. At the same time, these characteristics help to draw clear borderlines between citizens' solidarity initiatives, on the one hand and activities undertaken by traditional NGOs, municipalities and other institutions, on the other.

The Notion of Solidarity vs. Philanthropy

The term 'Solidarity' appears in the charters of many of citizens' initiatives. On the other hand, many NGOs and foundations also use the term 'solidarity' to define their activities.

It is argued here that there is a fundamental qualitative difference, with important practical implications, between citizens' solidarity initiatives on the one hand and the state-/philanthropic-/foundation-funded solidarity projects on the other. The former involve a strong element of reciprocity and social justice, whereas the latter have a strong philanthropist tenet.

Interviewees were asked to explain how they relate to 'solidarity' and 'philanthropy'. They all referred to the notions of reciprocity, equality, cooperation, mutual and shared responsibility, and addressing of social injustice, as the content of solidarity. Conversely, 'philanthropy' was conceived as an one-way and top-down process (one party having the economic power, providing for those who do not).

This distinction is eloquently described on the website of Free Social Space of Solidarity 'Istos' in Haidari:

> Istos' action in no way is philanthropist under the mainstream meaning of the word. In the center of its action is of course the human being and the environment within which (s)he lives, works, studies, is entertained, grows up children or socializes. However, [Istos' action] is constructed on the principles of equal participation, solidarity, self and other help, autarchy, cooperation, in the broader sense of the word and not charity.[6]

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6   Available at: http://istosxaidari.wordpress.com/page/3/.

An apt illustration of this notion of 'Solidarity' vs 'Philanthropy', is the contrast between solidarity kitchens in terms of the meals provided. In the former case, there is an all-inclusive philosophy, as people can participate in the cooking process and then eat together, sharing their experiences. In the latter case, food is provided to those in need, people stand in long queues, waiting for food which they either take away or eat in silence only to leave the place immediately afterwards.

A grocery cooperative representative explained the thin line between the two types of 'giving': 'We cooperate with a citizens' group and provide food and other items to be distributed to people in need … We asked ourselves why this was a solidarity action and how it was differentiated from charity. Then, we decided to keep on giving but under one condition: anyone in need who took something, if (s)he is not prohibited by some health or other serious problem, should also be involved actively in this process (e.g. helping with the distribution of stuff, supporting people with disabilities etc.). In that way, we tried to engage people in the process and communicate the message of solidarity through praxis. And the reaction of the people was positive!'.

The practical implementation of solidarity is empowering, because it mobilises people, through the principles of equality and reciprocity, to take on responsibility for themselves and other members of their communities. It raises awareness about the many possibilities and consequently the capacities/resources each person has, including the very people who are in need of food. On the other hand, as the interviewees underlined, philanthropy could have the opposite effect, because it could allow people to indulge in self-misery and dependence on the provided support and the provider.

Political Stance of Direct Democracy in Action

An explicit goal of these initiatives is not only to address the *consequences* of the crisis but to tackle its *causes* too. They do not merely meet the emerging needs but also provide a political analysis of the situation on the ground and a platform in search for long-term solutions to eminently political issues, namely food, health, accommodation and work, which affect the lives of all citizens. In what follows, the foundations of this platform are being investigated as well as its key organising concept of horizontality.

The conceptual foundations of citizens' initiatives are based, in most cases, on a leftist ideology of solidarity. Their initiators tend to have a long experience in political activism (e.g. ecological activism) and even extreme leftist, anarchist perspectives. Many of them participated in the 'indignados' Syntagma Square movement of 2011. Having said that, members of the coordination committees of the Time Banks of Holargos-Papagos and Syntagma Square underlined that: 'although there is a clear leftist driving force, among the participants are also people with a diverse political background (former centre-right and right-wing parties) and ideologies too. These people had no strong political ideology or action

before the crisis. Now, they participate looking for answers and ways to address the drastically changing environment around them'.

Participants in these initiatives tend to make clear that they do not mobilise in favour of any political party, nevertheless their action is deeply political, as it upholds a democratic spirit, a culture of dialogue and respect for basic rights (the right to work, health care, education, information and participation in decision-making) which they argue are currently under severe attack, due to the neo-liberal austerity.

The scope of these initiatives is not only to support the neediest but also to shape a community of solidarity which will reverse the austerity policies and their dire results, with regards to the welfare state and the environment. As Loukidou (2014) puts it, they are politicised and confrontational. Furthermore, citizens' initiatives are not only concerned with issues of direct individual implications (tax increases, cuts to social services), but they also oppose the announced privatisation and 'sell-out' strategy of public estate (the former 'Elliniko' airport, coastal zones etc.) and major utility services (energy, water, telecommunications and waste disposal).

A pertinent example is PROSKALO (Cooperation Initiative for the Social and Solidarity Economy) established in 2011, in Thessaloniki. According to its founding declaration, it aims 'to promote social solidarity economy and direct democracy in various sectors and especially in 'commons' such as water, food, energy, waste management, education etc.'. Furthermore, it critically analyses the capitalist model of production which has led 'to declining standards of living, lack of public and natural goods and the risk that these 'commons' could be destroyed or sold'. It includes 'an Action Plan towards a comprehensive system of work, consumption and life that will lead to the social liberation of man on a sustainable planet'. Loyal to these principles, PROSKALO participates in the establishment of social and solidarity economy structures and has played an active role in the citizens' referendum against water privatisation in Thessaloniki.

The website of 'To Steki Allileggiis' (Solidarity Café) in Volos is indicative of the political agenda and mode of operation of an average citizens' solidarity structure:

> The aim of the Steki is resistance to the crisis through solidarity and self-organization … We collect and distribute food, clothing and other basic goods to households hit by the crisis. We will operate a social medical center, a social school, legal support and any other group the Assembly of Steki will decide … To Steki is organized through citizens' assemblies. This collective practice will allow us to become active citizens against the policies of the Memorandum which want us inactive at home.[7]

The defining key elements related to the political stance of these structures are firstly the decision-making process and secondly the type of action they undertake

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7   Available at: http://steki-allilegyis.blogspot.gr/2013_01_01_archive.html.

to oppose governmental policies. Concerning the first aspect, there is a horizontal decision-making process, through assemblies, based on the principle of 'direct democracy from below' that is, everyone participates in and expresses his/her opinion about the issues at hand. There is an effort to ensure that all decisions be based on consensus instead of a majority vote, thereby working according to a circular rather than a pyramidal model of decision making.

Such cooperative and horizontal forms of organisation contradict dominant relationships and anticipate a participatory society. The fact that these initiatives challenge hierarchical social relations also distinguishes them from the majority of NGOs, which have a clearly hierarchical structure, whereby the ones making decisions are usually not those who implement them.

Moreover, if traditional political action meant until recently demonstrations and strikes, the innovation here is a call for action to construct 'a different world which exists' (this is the slogan used in many activities organised by different collectivities). In other words, solidarity bazaars, kitchens, schools and alternative economy structures pave the way to a new model of political, economical and social relations.

'Glocal' Character

The target region of these initiatives is primarily local, as they operate at the level of the neighborhood or municipality. Nevertheless, they are not confined to their own localities. Most of them have an interest in what happens at the national and global levels. Since 2013–2014 we have witnessed a major effort to enhance cooperation and exchange among these initiatives at local, regional, national and global levels.

Looking at the local level, different cooperative cafes, restaurants and shops operate not only as social enterprises but also as informal meeting points, providing the time, space and appropriate environment for building ties among initiatives in the same region.

At the same time, different initiatives have joined forces and now cooperate in organising training events, festivals and cultural activities. For example, the European Village collaborates with eco-communities, such as Spithari, the alternative community Peliti in Drama, the network Dryades, and the cooperative Syn Allois; and the successful outcome of the citizens' referendum against water privatisation was the result of an alliance of over 50 citizens groups).

Contact and cooperation among collectives is facilitated through regional and national networks (such as the coordination network of 24 collectives for waste management at the national level established in March 2014, the network of social cooperative enterprises of Northern Macedonia, established in July 2014), coordination committees (such as the committee of medical centres established in early 2014), coordination meetings (such as the first meeting of 83 structures of food solidarity that took place in March 2014), online platforms and information projects (e.g. *Solidarity 4 All*, www.Kinitorama, www.antallaktiki.gr and Omikron

Project) and festivals (such as the second Solidarity and Social Economy Festival in October 2013, which attracted approximately 2,500 visitors).

These initiatives are active in communication and cooperation at the global level too. Well-researched articles are uploaded onto their websites, as well as documentation regarding relevant issues and good practices from all over the world. The following examples illustrate this point: Mondragon, the world leader in the cooperative movement serves as an example to the Greek initiative PROSKALO; and representatives of both Spanish (Marinaleda municipality) and Venezuelan initiatives (the association of cooperatives Cecosecola) have been invited to meetings in Athens. Along the same lines, initiatives such as the cooperatives Syn Allois in Athens and Terra Verde in Chania have forged close ties with cooperatives from Latin America (the movement of Zapatistas since 2011) and Palestine (since 2014), organising the importation and distribution of their products in Greece.[8]

Activism vs. Volunteeism

Words are very important, as they carry specific meanings and connotations. In the field of solidarity initiatives, in Greece, the term 'kinimatikos' (meaning an individual actively involved in social movements and translated as 'activist') is often used as a self-description by people active in these structures. Here it is analysed in opposition to 'volunteer', another term widely used in solidarity projects.

It should be stressed that before the crisis the term 'kinimatikos' was associated, with an anarchist approach. However, following the 'indignados' movement of Syntagma Square the term was increasingly adopted by people who do not espouse anarchism, but consider themselves members of a broader social movement with the above characteristics.

During the interviews conducted for the present research, people were asked to describe themselves with regard to these two terms, 'activist' and 'volunteer', on the basis of the official ILO's definition of volunteerism. None of the interviewees considered themselves to be a 'volunteer', that is involved in the projects and activities of NGOs. They have a strong feeling of ownership of their initiatives, a strong commitment and a sense of personal profit, because the 'common good' is considered a personal gain too. To be sure, there is no expectation of profit-making in terms of money. These structures are perceived as platforms for free expression for those in search of solutions vis-à-vis austerity policies which have violently imposed a new socio-economic environment. For example, respondent R argues that solidarity initiatives are 'a source of personal stability in a constantly changing and stressing environment, a safety net for these times characterized by instability'. Respondent C complements this by saying that 'we do not consider this as something to rest upon; rather it is a call for continuous action'.

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8   See http://synallois.org/.

Thus, the term 'volunteer' and the consequent characterisation of these initiatives as 'voluntary' do not depict reality. Civil society literature in Greece often ignores this important distinction, with solidarity initiatives being seen as a form of volunteerism, closely associated with the volunteerism practiced by NGOs, without further clarification.

Funding and Autonomy

Another feature that distinguishes solidarity initiatives from NGO structures is their autonomy vis-à-vis state funding. In most cases, the operational costs of these structures are met through donations, the support of local authorities, fundraising through concerts or bazaars and crowd funding. To give but one example, the medical centre in Thessaloniki is hosted on the premises of the Workers Housing Organisation (Organismos Ergatikis Estias) and its running costs are covered by the Labour Centre of Thessaloniki. Medical materials are purchased through donations made by citizens and social institutions, such as workers' unions, municipal councils, etc. According to its website, 'The Social Solidarity Medical Center chose not to become one more NGO or to be involved in EU funding programs – because the EU imposed those hard policies – neither to be involved in Greek-state funding programs – because the State chose to legislate the way it does, making health another commodity which will lead many of our fellow citizens to poor quality of life and eventually death.'[9]

There is an ongoing discussion regarding the pros and cons of EU funding. Many express the fear that the donor's money will lead to a gradual alignment with individual interests and compromise the objectives of the structure. On the other hand, some of the initiatives, which have acquired some legal form, use EU funding to implement projects which promote their overall objectives, arguing that this is money from the people of the EU (e.g. European Village, Nea Guinea). Respondent L explains the considerations that have to be taken into account: 'for a structure that people acknowledge as an independent initiative, the visibility signs (on its premises, website etc.) that usually accompany the award of a grant could cast a doubt on its independence from the government (which is the focus of its criticism) and therefore question its very principles of operation'.

Overall, the question of funding can be answered only on an *ad hoc* basis, depending on the particular conditions of the structure and the reasons of the funding.

Exploring the Impact of Solidarity Initiatives

Evaluating the impact of these structures is no easy task. For one thing, it is too early to evaluate them, as many of these structures have only been operating for a

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9   http://www.kiathess.gr/index.php/2012-09-24-23-44-35.

few months or up to two years. Secondly, there is a serious lack of systematic data collection. Beyond observing the general increase in their numbers, we have no approximate calculation of the number of people involved in these initiatives or any thorough trend analysis that might describe their dynamics and evolution over the last few years in Greece.

Nonetheless a first qualitative evaluation will be attempted, in order to provide indications based on collected data and the information offered by people who participate in these structures. Three main areas of impact are identified, namely: i) the support given to the neediest, ii) the empowerment for those participating and iii) the political import of such initiatives.

It is not necessary to expand further on the ability of these structures to support the most disadvantaged groups of the community. Despite identified limitations, all data presented above regarding the number of people supported and the rapid expansion of this type of initiatives throughout the country, clearly demonstrate their success.

It should be emphasised however that the target group of these initiatives is not solely the neediest who receive support to cover their immediate needs. An equally important target group comprises those who actively participate in these structures as well as the society at large. Citizens' initiatives are perceived by participants who might not be (some of them rephrase this as 'might not yet be') in need of material support, as islands of solidarity, knowledge and creativity and a space in search of an alternative to the existing political, economic and social model. These initiatives constitute a huge field of personal learning for this particular group. For many participants, their involvement is a path toward profound self-education and an experiment in the reconstruction of social relations. Learning how to engage in a productive democratic dialogue within a group, as well as building self-confidence and facilitation skills, repeatedly came up during the interviews as important personal gains for all involved.

Interviewees explained their conviction that these initiatives also have the potential to shift cultural norms advocating consumerism and individualism towards a new set of non-material human values, such as reflection, friendship and cooperation. It is through these initiatives that people learn to experiment with the power of the community vs. the power of individuals and start to consider that money is not their only available resource; rather knowledge, skills, ideas and above all cooperation could offer ways of addressing crises.

An indication of this shift is the reinterpretation of the 'commons', i.e. public goods belonging to all people alike. The recent overwhelming vote against the privatisation and commodification of water in Thessaloniki, in an unofficial referendum held on 18 May 2014, with 218,000 citizens opposing it, demonstrates the dynamics of this approach. The campaign and referendum were organised by more than 50 citizens' groups, the activities of which do not focus solely on water issues (Sovitsli, 2014).

Although empowerment is difficult to measure, it is argued that people are empowered when they build their skills, their social relations are changed and they

mobilise to transform their social and economic condition. By taking responsibility for their community (including the most disadvantaged members), their food (including its production and distribution), their health and other 'commons', these structures have the potential to foster optimism that there can be a 'way out' of the crisis and that solutions are in the hands of the people who can influence change through the ability to take control of crucial material and non-material resources.

Coming to the political import of these initiatives, it is argued that citizens' solidarity initiatives contribute to the re-politicisation of civil society, in a concrete and innovative way. Politicisation is broadly described as a set of activities which people undertake collectively, aiming to regulate important aspects of their common social conditions through communication, persuasion and formal rule-setting (Young, 2006). The increase of citizens' initiatives, the nature of their activities and their experimentation with the practice of 'real' inclusive democratic decision-making substantiates this argument.

Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) stress 'the risk of over politicization' of these structures, arguing that the ideological dimension to their solidarity activities 'creates a risk of a different kind, namely the possibility that they are patronized and coordinated by political parties with which they share an ideological affinity. The risk is that, they may be turned into a front organization of a political party'. Nevertheless, this approach implies a narrow definition of politicisation which dismisses altogether its positive and healthy aspects. A political system without opposition is static and can even be totalitarian. The kind of conflict these initiatives bring to the fore could also guarantee possibilities for change, as they point out ways of achieving social transformation. Last but not least, these potential 'risks' are not substantiated either through robust research or through data and analysis.

This section will conclude with two questions relevant to the impact of solidarity initiatives. Firstly, the question of the future sustainability of citizens' initiatives as such and secondly, the place of Greek solidarity initiatives in the world society. Regarding the first question, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives depends on the continuous engagement of citizens, and their ability not only to challenge common patterns of economic, political and social relations but also to present convincing alternatives. Similarly, it depends on their capacity to address the difficulties they encounter (such as inconsistencies on the path from theory to practice, a lack of capabilities and an antagonistic relationship with funded solidarity projects).

As for the second question, the model of direct democracy and horizontal solidarity can be identified in different contexts around the world, such as the Zapatistas movement, the alter-globalisation movement (Style, 2002), the 15 May 2011 movement in Spain, and the Occupy movement (Maeckelbergh, 2012), which in turn inspired the 'indignados' Syntagma Square movement of 2011, in Athens. Thus, an emerging viewpoint could recall Maeckelbergh's (2009) argument that the most promising model of global democracy does not come from political parties or international institutions, but rather from the global networks of resistance to neo-liberal economics. The question, however, as to the ways in

which citizens' initiatives evolve and connect within their communities and with the global society requires a detailed investigation which goes beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Challenges

This section points to the major challenges solidarity initiatives face. It is by no means an exhaustive list as there are inherent discrepancies between different initiatives. The aim here is to provide an understanding of the nature of challenges encountered by solidarity initiatives through concrete examples. Below can be found three different kinds of challenges: i) challenges related to certain identified inconsistencies on the path from theory to practice, ii) a lack of capabilities and iii) coexistence with state-funded solidarity initiatives.

Inconsistencies on the Path from Theory to Practice

Many of the solidarity initiatives presented here undoubtedly cover real needs through the provision of goods and services, often replacing the state. Therefore, they are essential for survival in the ongoing crisis. However, there are also evident limitations. Healthcare is a case in point with an ever-increasing number of self-organised medical centers in major cities around the country. On one hand, as mentioned above, they do not accept funding by governmental or EU agencies; but on the other hand, as the crisis deepens, they face the risk of running into a deadlock, with an increasing demand for medical supplies and decreasing donations. Another contradiction seems to be their claim for universal free health care, attempting its decommodification in practice, and thus rivalling their own demand for autonomy.

Furthermore, as the need for health services increases, the energy of the people involved is devoted to responding to these needs. They deal with the symptoms of the problem instead of raising awareness about its underlying causes and consequences or working on a strategy to address them, although this was part of their initial action plan. From that point of view, these structures do not differ from state-funded NGOs implementing solidarity projects which lack a deeper reasoning for their action or a vision. People in need, receiving health services, might 'walk in and out' of these structures without being aware of their own position in a solidarity relationship. A reference to the notion of solidarity and good intentions do not alone suffice, if the aim is to establish a solidarity community. Appropriate responses must be formulated to redress this pitfall.

There are also significant risks for those who voluntarily provide services. The coexistence of unpaid health workers alongside private clinics, and a shrinking public health service might lead, if proper measures are not taken, to the exploitation of these workers at a broad social level. This is not irrelevant to the phenomenon referred to by many activists as 'the burnout effect'. As a few people

undertake a lot of work, sometimes in more than one collective, they are faced, at some point, with the consequences of burnout.

Another challenge related to the founding principles of these structures is the following: people in most solidarity structures argue that they practice dialogue and democracy based on the principles of horizontality, equality and respect; however participants in such meetings feel at times that their voice is not heard. There are instances where some monopolise the discussion or a group within a group manipulates decision-making through the use of specific tactics, consensus is never reached and this creates a fatigue and leads eventually to withdrawal. These functional problems account for the slow down or even gradual dissolution and lack of stability and continuity in these initiatives. One major cause can be traced to the lack of a mature culture of dialogue and cooperation in Greece – which is hardly surprising as the educational system does not cultivate this culture. Another cause is the low degree of awareness and commitment of participants in relation to the above principles or the rather opportunistic use of these initiatives to meet personal needs. In other instances, to be sure, the reason for long and non-productive dialogue is merely the lack of appropriate techniques and skills, an important issue discussed in the next sub-section.

Lack of Capabilities

There are important differences among citizens' solidarity initiatives, in terms of their capacities and skills. Some are well organised and supported by dedicated people with a long experience in democratic decision-making procedures, planning and the implementation of collective action. In other cases, citizens' solidarity structures are established by people who lack experience, and who hardly know each other, but still have to work in a team for a common purpose. Inevitably, they stumble upon several obstacles.

Most of these structures have elaborated a set of principles and aims. However, their statutory documents do not always include or even reflect a clear strategy. (The term 'strategy' is not used as an abstract general notion but as involving an explicit participatory process for strategy development and specific elements, such as a vision, mission, values and objectives towards the development of a realistic action plan). The lack of strategy is due to the following problems. Firstly, drawing up a strategy requires know-how and specific skills. Secondly, the term 'strategy' is not appealing – if not appalling – to those circles of people who establish that type of structures, as they associate it with more professionalised types of organisation within the technocratic and neo-liberal world. Although such pitfalls have already been identified by people involved in these structures, efforts to find remedies and more effective techniques are quite slow.

As a remedy to the lack of vision and elaborate action plans, a vibrant dialogue has started on alternative social, economic and political systems and directions, for example the theory and practice of the Degrowth movement. This dialogue seems to provide 'flesh and blood' into those structures with concrete directions

for action. The People's University of Social Solidarity Economy (UnivSSE) which offers online lectures and has attracted 35,000 visitors in less than a year, covers a real need for know-how, informed dialogue and reflection, as well as coordinated action.

Another challenge for these structures is their low levels of penetration within society, as the majority of local initiatives simply lack the skills to reach out and involve fellow citizens in dialogue and action. This is also related to the fact that there is no plan for moving from a solidarity group formation to bigger structures.

Lastly, there is an inability to manage differences and an almost inherent absence of conflict resolution skills. It is revealing that these circles are usually keen on attending experiential workshops and discussions related to non-violent communication, in order to be further educated and trained on this topic.

Antagonism between Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives and Funded Solidarity Projects

Previous parts of this chapter discussed differences between citizens' solidarity initiatives and state- and foundation-funded solidarity projects implemented by NGOs and municipalities; they are clearly different in terms of target groups, vision, aims and mode of operation. In this section, it is further argued that solidarity projects and solidarity initiatives are often in conflict with or even undermine each other.

In the current crisis setting, the government, in order to deal with social protest, seeks to substitute the welfare state with pilot social programmes based on cooperation between local authorities and NGOs. Funding provided through ESPA (the National Strategic Reference Framework for EU funding) has led to the establishment of a number of 'social/solidarity' structures, such as medical centres, pharmacies, and time banks. Similarly, other organisations (e.g. Soros' Open Society Foundations) also provide funding for similar purposes. Triantafyllopoulou, Pouliou and Sayas (2014, n.p.) conclude that:

> 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 one examines the working arrangements of pilot social programs of the NGOs and the municipality partnerships (short-term contracts with very low wages and no additional benefits), one concludes that they reproduce exploitation in the name of softening social problems. They foster hopes for job finding, while they are in breach of basic labor rights.

Thus, this mode of operation could contribute to the perpetuation and aggravation of social problems that citizens' solidarity structures aim to address, namely social injustice and the violation of basic rights. What is more, focusing on the survival problems of an increasing number of citizens without problematising their causes could also be read as implicit support for and ultimately legitimation

of the austerity policies. This would be another significant point of antagonism with citizens' solidarity structures.

Furthermore, there are also practical problems with this coexistence. To use an example from the health sector, while public health services are shrinking, the government is providing funding for the establishment of solidarity medical centres and other solidarity structures through partnerships between NGOs and municipalities (see the relevant website of the government (Step, 2014)). However, people from citizens' structures claim that the budget provided for this kind of medical centers does not cover medicine supplies, only the salaries of some, not all, employees, as these centres also rely on the contribution of volunteers. As explained on an article signed by the Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko, after visiting state-funded centres, patients turn to solidarity pharmacies, thus overstretching the capacities of the latter and revealing the different but inherent limits of both types of initiatives i.e. citizens and state-funded (Metropolitan Community Clinic, 2014).

Last but not least, participants in solidarity structures perceive themselves as activists as opposed to volunteers. Over the five last years of crisis in Greece, there has been an effort to enhance volunteerism and increase the number of volunteers supporting the solidarity projects. This effort has been buttressed by a number of seminars on volunteerism and calls for volunteers, along with public figures promoting the ideal of volunteerism. As Clarke argues in this volume (Chapter 5), being a volunteer might involve positive benefits for both the individual and the society. However, as she also argues, understanding the multiple-faceted dynamics and implications of volunteerism in the complex crisis context requires careful research and analysis. Gaynor's well-articulated argument about the critical risk of depoliticisation, inherent in these endeavours, appears to be pertinent for the Greek case (2014). Gaynor argues that volunteerism in the Irish context 'substitutes self-help for redistribution, self-reliance for state accountability, in the process contributing towards an ongoing depoliticisation of the principles and practice of community development and affording 'ordinary' people little say over the direction of their country and their lives'. In Greece likewise, there is an increasing concern amongst citizens' solidarity initiatives, regarding the existing negative impact of volunteer initiatives. If, as argued above, citizens' solidarity initiatives, in the present crisis environment, contribute to the re-politicisation of civil society, this volunteer type of solidarity project could have the opposite effect, that is to de-politicise it.

The above criticism should not overlook the fact that hundreds of people working as professionals and volunteers in these solidarity projects have good intentions and sincerely believe that they support the most vulnerable. And, in practice, they do indeed, as they provide food, clothes, accommodation and health services to them, working long hours in harsh conditions. But there are crucial questions to be asked regarding the way in which this support is provided and its long-term impact on society. This section has demonstrated that this is a complicated issue with multiple facets. Although the fast-expanding state-funded

initiatives, based primarily on a philanthropic perspective, do not directly lead to the disempowerment of their target groups, the nature of the support they provide, could, in combination with other factors, contribute to such an outcome.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored citizens' solidarity initiatives which have emerged as a response to the crisis in Greece over the last five years, in terms of their aims, rationale and impact. Their aim is to address the basic needs of the most vulnerable as well as the emerging need of the Greek society to deal with the dramatic changes the crisis and the austerity policies have brought about. Despite their differences, citizens' initiatives work on the basis of a common understanding of the causes of the current crisis, which they consider to be not only financial but deeply political and social too. Their innovation is that they seek to provide comprehensive alternatives to the hierarchy-laden system of neo-liberal governance, experimenting with new economic, political and social relations structures.

Focusing on the raison d'être and the principles of operation of citizens' solidarity initiatives helped to deepen the analysis and provided useful insights into their nature and impact. The field research conducted led to concrete defining elements that cut across a variety of organisational forms, namely the understanding of solidarity as based on the notions of reciprocity, equality and social justice, a specific political stance, that is of direct democracy based on horizontality, the activist vs the volunteer controversy, the 'glocal' character and autonomy vis-à-vis state funding.

While in state-funded initiatives people in need simply receive support, in solidarity initiatives they claim what is their own right, be it food, work or quality social services. This collective and democratic experience supports the neediest and, at the same time, it empowers the participants to formulate their own vision for their lives and most importantly, to start building them. The orientation towards action, in particular, constitutes an innovative practice of resistance to austerity policies. The last few years' experience demonstrates that citizens' initiatives have the potential to foster a culture and communities of cooperation and ultimately shape a social movement which could be instrumental in effecting social change on a wider scale. Furthermore, their political impact can be identified in the new forms of citizens' organisation, including meetings and assemblies, and in the expression of their needs and interests.

Having said that, their impact depends, in the long-run, on a number of factors, including the way they address the challenges encountered. In many cases, although intentions are good, the outcome is not as expected. The reasons for this vary according to the case under examination. Some initiatives seem to lose sight of the forest for the trees, as the practical aspects of their work obscure their vision and goals, so that they ultimately run out of steam. In other instances, they have to overcome fundamental contradictions along the path from theory to practice.

Furthermore, they have to effectively face a 'silent internal foe', namely their participants' own prejudices and stereotypes, conflicts, personal agendas and a lack of skills and capacities along with an absence of resources. Last but not least, as argued above, state-funded solidarity schemes seem to pose another critical challenge, which has not yet been adequately problematised, let alone addressed. The overwhelming majority of the activities funded by the state or sponsored by private foundations and implemented by NGOs or through partnerships between municipalities and NGOs, only temporarily address the negative consequences of the crisis and do not query how they have come about. It has been argued that the provision of services to those in need through a one-way process and on a top-down basis can have both a short- and a long-term negative impact on the community.

The above discussion on diverse responses to the crisis undoubtedly calls for a rethinking of the role of different civil society actors in the current crisis context and their possible relation to state mechanisms employed to restore public legitimacy. In this framework, an analysis has been proposed addressing a significant weakness in the relevant literature, namely an often unbalanced focus on NGOs and institutionalised structures. The need to ask critical questions, as well as to deepen research and analysis through collecting first-hand data has been emphasised. This will help to avoid generalisations and simplifications, and will allow for a better understanding of the possible negative implications of different so-called 'solidarity projects' as well as the richness of citizens' solidarity initiatives and their potential impact.

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Chapter 10

Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives in Greece during the Financial Crisis[1]

Eugenia Vathakou

Introduction

Over the last five years, a dramatically increasing number of citizens' initiatives have been emerging throughout Greece, as a response to both deteriorating living standards and a new social and political landscape, brought about by the harsh austerity measures taken by Greek governments, in return for loans from the IMF and European institutions. The range of activities of these initiatives is impressive: they involve tangible, result-oriented projects, collective kitchens, solidarity pharmacies, schools, medical centres, social grocery shops, and so on, thus addressing the basic needs of the most disadvantaged members of the community. They also organise cultural events, awareness-raising activities and political activism against Greece's austerity measures. A special place in this spectrum of initiatives is occupied by social solidarity economy activities, such as labour collectives, cooperatives, time banks and community exchange networks.

A considerable number of these initiatives emerged through Citizens' Assemblies organised at the municipality or neighbourhood level, in the aftermath of the 'indignados' movement on Syntagma Square in 2011. Others were undertaken by existing groups of citizens to which the crisis environment has given new impetus. In the present chapter we refer to them as *citizens' initiatives*.

Alongside these initiatives there are also activities undertaken on a project basis by a variety of actors, such as NGOs, various associations, including church, professional and scientific associations, and municipalities. They too seek to support the neediest citizens, through the provision of food, education, health, and accommodation. The majority are funded by the state, in the framework of a new social strategy, which substitutes the traditional welfare state model with pilot social programmes based on cooperation between central government, local authorities and non-profit organisations. Alternatively, such activities are sponsored by private foundations, in the framework of a philanthropic policy.

The very few studies which seek to map the broader spectrum of solidarity initiatives in Greece have begun to develop approaches to categorising them. Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) distinguish between formal and informal structures, whereas Afouxenidis (2012) argues in favour of institutionalised/ non-institutionalised and spontaneous initiatives. Most of the literature, however, focuses on institutionalised NGOs activities and only a distinct, steadily developing research looks specifically at the alternative solidarity economy (Sotiropoulou, 2012; Kavoulakos, Gritzas and Amanatidou, 2012; Nikolaou, 2013).

The focus of this chapter is citizens' initiatives. It is argued that their dynamic and constantly changing nature resists the above clear-cut categorisations: informal initiatives might become formal by taking the legal form of a non-profit company and yet be very different, in terms of principles of operation, from other schemes of that kind.

A different strategy is employed here, in order to tackle the above complexities and disjunctions. We firstly problematise the notion of solidarity (a key element of these initiatives) applied in different contexts, and we then investigate the rationale, principles of operation and motivation of the people involved. This approach leads to the identification of certain defining characteristics of these initiatives, which help us to better analyse them and to evaluate their impact. Furthermore, this approach allows for a comparative analysis, revealing differences and similarities between grassroot solidarity initiatives that emerged as a bottom-up response to the crisis, on the one hand, and activities implemented by traditional NGOs, municipalities and church foundations, and funded by the state or private donors, on the other hand.

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first section offers an overview of the field, based on the activities of such initiatives, answering the 'What' question. The second section looks at their rationale (the 'Why' and 'How' questions) and analyses the distinct characteristics which define them. The third section attempts an evaluation of their impact, and the last section deals with the various challenges these initiatives encounter and draws an agenda for future research.

Methodology

This chapter is based on data collected through different methods. To begin with, quantitative and qualitative data were collected, through online desk research regarding the number and type of solidarity structures established over recent years of the crisis in Greece. Online databases were used: *Solidarity 4 All*, *Project Omikron*[2] *Networking Platform-Another World* and *www.antallaktiki.gr*. It should be noted that such databases should not be considered as completely comprehensive. Some structures established within the last six months do not

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2   2nd edition map of grassroots groups in Greece, June 2014, available at http:// omikronproject.gr/, [Accessed 25 July 2014].

appear on existing databases, while some other structures which do appear are now inactive. Although the *Solidarity 4 All* database seems to be sufficiently updated, it does not provide information for certain solidarity structures. As 'V',[3] from the Metropolitan Medical Centre at Elliniko argues, the reason for this is that the structures themselves have requested not to be included in this database because *Solidarity 4 All* is funded by left-wing SYRIZA, the main opposition party in Greece over the last few years. For all these reasons, the relevant information has been cross-checked, using different sources and research methods.

Secondly, discourse analysis was conducted, focusing on how different collectives are presented in the texts on their websites and blogs.

Thirdly, the realities on the ground were investigated through empirical work. In-depth interviews were held with no fewer than 20 representatives involved in different solidarity structures in the region of Attica. The selection of interviewees was based on two main criteria: the inclusion of different types of structure (i.e. medical centers, cooperatives, time banks, citizens' assemblies, solidarity schools), and the role of the individual in the specific structure, in order to ensure that founders and decisionmakers as well as members of the structures' assemblies were interviewed.

These methods were combined with participant observation, conducted in four such initiatives: the Citizens' Assembly of Holargos-Papagos, the Time Bank of Holargos-Papagos, the European Village and the Solidarity and Social Economy Festival. This observation included visiting the various structures, talking with participants and actively taking part in their activities (discussions, talks, seminars) over an 18-month period (September 2012–March 2014). The observation data were further enriched by social media material such as e-mail, Twitter feeds, Facebook updates, blog entries, websites, and videos.

A research questionnaire referred to the *raison d'être* of citizens' initiatives, the organisation of their activities with emphasis on the decision-making process, and the impact of their involvement on themselves/other participants/society in general. Last but not least, citizens' initiatives were compared, where appropriate, with state- and charity foundation-funded solidarity initiatives.

Overview of Activities of Solidarity Initiatives

From 2010 onwards, the economic crisis in Greece has been continuously deepening. Poverty and unemployment particularly hit low- and middle- income strata (see also Chapter 1). Citizens' initiatives appeared not only in major cities, such as Athens and Thessaloniki but also in towns, such as Alexandroupolis in the north, and Sparta, in southern Greece.

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3   In order to protect their anonymity, respondents are referred to by initials only throughout this chapter.

These initiatives involved alternative solidarity and cooperative economy activities and structures. They covered basic needs, i.e, food, health, education, clothing and engaged upon cultural and political activism. Below follows an indicative account of different activities that the citizens' solidarity structures usually undertake. In most cases, several types of activities are organised by the same group or initiative.

Social Solidarity Economy

Many people hit by the crisis turn to different types of cooperative economic activity. The social solidarity economy is described in the literature as a non-market economy, in which production and distribution are under the control of society, not of the market (Kotsakis, 2012). Its aim is not to make a profit but to meet the needs of the people, while, at the same time, respecting human labour and the environment. The social solidarity economy constitutes a huge field of research in itself. Petropoulou (2013) studied its theoretical origins and a first typology and evaluation have been attempted by Greek scholars (Kavoulakos, Gritzas and Amanatidou, 2012; Nikolaou, 2013).

The *Solidarity 4 All* database, under the category 'Solidarity Economy', includes 151 Greek initiatives of different types, such as cooperatives, labour collectives and direct producer-to-consumer networks. As research on other databases, such as antallaktiki.gr, has revealed, there are more activities to be added to this list, which at any rate requires constant updating.

Many of these initiatives have acquired legal entity status. Other initiatives are quite informal, such as the Time Bank of Syntagma and Holargos-Papagos and the direct producer-to-consumer networks (of 'SPAME').

The SPAME networks were launched in February 2012, when potato producers distributed their products directly to consumers at a low price; this spread across the country incorporating other products, agricultural or otherwise. Different collectives have organised days of direct distribution of products. This practice has proved beneficial to both producers and consumers.

Furthermore, alternative currency networks have developed in different cities and towns throughout Greece e.g., *Koino* in Kalamaria, *Fasouli* in Athens. Members of the networks exchange services and goods in lieu of credits. As Grigoriou, one of the founders of TEM, claims, 'for many, [alternative currency networks] play a double role of supplementing lost income, while at the same time creating a protective web at this difficult juncture in their lives'.

Last but not least, regular bazaars have been organised, in which people exchange clothes and other items in good condition, in order to cover real needs, to learn the meaning of 're-using' and to get to know each other (e.g. bazaars organized by Votsalo – The Network of Solidarity Economy of Korydallos, the Time Bank of Neapoli-Sikeon, and the Network of Exchanges of Chania).

Solidarity Medical Centers

As estimated by the Greek Minister of Health, in April 2014, the number of people without social security in Greece, stood at between 1.9–2.4 million people (D.K., 2014). These people are not allowed to use public health structures, unless they pay in cash. Social Solidarity Medical Centres already existed in Greece for migrants without official documents. The first social solidarity medical centre and pharmacy to respond to the needs of Greeks was established in 2011, at Elliniko. Since then, no fewer than 50 such centres have been established nationwide. These centres operate through the services of volunteer medical and other personnel. According to data issued by *Solidarity 4 All*, for six such centers, 179 doctors of different specialisations have been mobilised. There are three social dental centres through which 44 dentists provide services. Furthermore, the social pharmacies included in 16 medical centres are supported by 35 pharmacists. Additionally, the operation of these medical centres is secured by 247 volunteers who provide administrative support.

Regarding the recipients of the services, up to October 2013, in only six out of the 16 medical centres recorded by *Solidarity 4 All*, 20,303 citizens had received medical services by October 2013. No fewer than 5,870 patients have received medicines from social centers and 3,072 have visited the dental centres. As for the profile of patients, data from the five centers in which such records have been kept are as follows: 1,629 Greeks, 651 migrants, 1,148 women, 966 men, and 166 children/teenagers.[4]

Social Solidarity Kitchens and Collective Gardens

Several solidarity groups have included solidarity kitchens in their activities, in order to cover the increased need for food, in particular amongst the unemployed and the homeless. In some cases, anyone can eat for free or for a small amount of money, and can participate in the cooking process. Collective kitchens can be found around Athens, mainly downtown, and also throughout the country. They vary in terms of their infrastructure and their access to donated food. Examples include 'Trofosyllektes', the 'Wednesday' collective kitchen, and the 'The Other Human' collective kitchen.

Similarly, groups of people, either alone or with the support of municipalities, have transformed abandoned pieces of land into collective gardens for families hit by the crisis. An example of such an initiative is a self-managed field at Elliniko.

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4   Data from the Coordination Committee of Social Medical Centres, Pharmacies, Networks of Solidarity, available at http://www.solidarity4all.gr/el/support-article/ %CF.%83%CF.%84%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF.%87%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%B1- %CE%B1%CF.%80%CF.%8C-%CE%BA%CE%B9%CF.%86%CE%B1, [Accessed May 2014] .

Solidarity Schools

There are two main types of school under this category. First are those which provide free lessons to schoolchildren who cannot afford private tuition.[5]

Many solidarity structures have integrated free tutoring into their action plans. According to the *Solidarity 4 All* database, solidarity schools operate in the municipalities of Kifisia, Pefki-Likovrisi, Keratsini, Tavros, Nea Makri, Megara, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Herakleion, Chania, Korinthos, Patra, Nafplio, Egio, Xanthi and Preveza.

Secondly, as cuts in the state budget for education have led to important changes in the educational system, considered by many to be compromising the quality of education provided, some parents decided to experiment with alternative schools. In some cases, five or six families have come together and established their own kindergarten (Roumelioti, 2013).

Awareness-Raising, Political and Cultural Activism

Most solidarity structures organise awareness-raising, political, educational and cultural activities, aiming to enhance solidarity and community building, and to mobilise, inform and educate people on topics related to an alternative social, economic and political way of life.

The most common activities encountered in this respect are open discussions on current issues related to the Greek debt and the austerity measures. Different initiatives distribute leaflets and host websites, blogs, and facebook pages, inviting people to participate in coordinated action such as petitions and demonstrations, for example against new increases of taxes, or the cost of electricity.

Apart from such negative campaigning, the citizens' initiatives hold educational activities (lectures, presentations, 'learning by doing' workshops) related to issues such as food, health and energy, often influenced by the principles of the so-called Degrowth movement (Latouche, 2009). Some initiatives also organise cultural events, such as book presentations, music and dance events, painting and photo exhibitions, workshops and film nights. As respondents J and N put it, 'this is an act of ultimate resistance to the austerity measures which gradually lead us to be concerned only about the basics and lose our human nature, that is, spirit, culture and art. In that sense, these cultural activities are solidarity activities as well'.

5　It should be noted that 90% of Greek school children hoping to pass university entry exams take private lessons, as the state school system is considered inadequate. However, private lessons are expensive, and, following soaring taxes, drastic cuts in salaries and the general business recession, the middle- and low-income Greek family cannot afford such expenses.

The Anatomy of Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives

In this section, the question to be answered does not relate to 'what grassroot citizens' solidarity structures actually do' but rather 'why and how they do whatever they do'. The answer goes beyond labels and general assumptions, investigating the meaning behind key words, such as solidarity and volunteerism, so commonly used but not sufficiently defined.

Research has led to the identification of the following characteristics of citizens' solidarity structures: a set of underlying values, with solidarity being clearly distinct from philanthropy, the political stance of direct democracy, a 'glocal' character, an activist vs. volunteer controversy and independence from state funding. The above key features cut across different forms of organisations, as they can qualify both formal and informal initiatives. At the same time, these characteristics help to draw clear borderlines between citizens' solidarity initiatives, on the one hand and activities undertaken by traditional NGOs, municipalities and other institutions, on the other.

The Notion of Solidarity vs. Philanthropy

The term 'Solidarity' appears in the charters of many of citizens' initiatives. On the other hand, many NGOs and foundations also use the term 'solidarity' to define their activities.

It is argued here that there is a fundamental qualitative difference, with important practical implications, between citizens' solidarity initiatives on the one hand and the state-/philanthropic-/foundation-funded solidarity projects on the other. The former involve a strong element of reciprocity and social justice, whereas the latter have a strong philanthropist tenet.

Interviewees were asked to explain how they relate to 'solidarity' and 'philanthropy'. They all referred to the notions of reciprocity, equality, cooperation, mutual and shared responsibility, and addressing of social injustice, as the content of solidarity. Conversely, 'philanthropy' was conceived as an one-way and top-down process (one party having the economic power, providing for those who do not).

This distinction is eloquently described on the website of Free Social Space of Solidarity 'Istos' in Haidari:

> Istos' action in no way is philanthropist under the mainstream meaning of the word. In the center of its action is of course the human being and the environment within which (s)he lives, works, studies, is entertained, grows up children or socializes. However, [Istos' action] is constructed on the principles of equal participation, solidarity, self and other help, autarchy, cooperation, in the broader sense of the word and not charity.[6]

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6   Available at: http://istosxaidari.wordpress.com/page/3/.

An apt illustration of this notion of 'Solidarity' vs 'Philanthropy', is the contrast between solidarity kitchens in terms of the meals provided. In the former case, there is an all-inclusive philosophy, as people can participate in the cooking process and then eat together, sharing their experiences. In the latter case, food is provided to those in need, people stand in long queues, waiting for food which they either take away or eat in silence only to leave the place immediately afterwards.

A grocery cooperative representative explained the thin line between the two types of 'giving': 'We cooperate with a citizens' group and provide food and other items to be distributed to people in need … We asked ourselves why this was a solidarity action and how it was differentiated from charity. Then, we decided to keep on giving but under one condition: anyone in need who took something, if (s)he is not prohibited by some health or other serious problem, should also be involved actively in this process (e.g. helping with the distribution of stuff, supporting people with disabilities etc.). In that way, we tried to engage people in the process and communicate the message of solidarity through praxis. And the reaction of the people was positive!'.

The practical implementation of solidarity is empowering, because it mobilises people, through the principles of equality and reciprocity, to take on responsibility for themselves and other members of their communities. It raises awareness about the many possibilities and consequently the capacities/resources each person has, including the very people who are in need of food. On the other hand, as the interviewees underlined, philanthropy could have the opposite effect, because it could allow people to indulge in self-misery and dependence on the provided support and the provider.

Political Stance of Direct Democracy in Action

An explicit goal of these initiatives is not only to address the *consequences* of the crisis but to tackle its *causes* too. They do not merely meet the emerging needs but also provide a political analysis of the situation on the ground and a platform in search for long-term solutions to eminently political issues, namely food, health, accommodation and work, which affect the lives of all citizens. In what follows, the foundations of this platform are being investigated as well as its key organising concept of horizontality.

The conceptual foundations of citizens' initiatives are based, in most cases, on a leftist ideology of solidarity. Their initiators tend to have a long experience in political activism (e.g. ecological activism) and even extreme leftist, anarchist perspectives. Many of them participated in the 'indignados' Syntagma Square movement of 2011. Having said that, members of the coordination committees of the Time Banks of Holargos-Papagos and Syntagma Square underlined that: 'although there is a clear leftist driving force, among the participants are also people with a diverse political background (former centre-right and right-wing parties) and ideologies too. These people had no strong political ideology or action

before the crisis. Now, they participate looking for answers and ways to address the drastically changing environment around them'.

Participants in these initiatives tend to make clear that they do not mobilise in favour of any political party, nevertheless their action is deeply political, as it upholds a democratic spirit, a culture of dialogue and respect for basic rights (the right to work, health care, education, information and participation in decision-making) which they argue are currently under severe attack, due to the neo-liberal austerity.

The scope of these initiatives is not only to support the neediest but also to shape a community of solidarity which will reverse the austerity policies and their dire results, with regards to the welfare state and the environment. As Loukidou (2014) puts it, they are politicised and confrontational. Furthermore, citizens' initiatives are not only concerned with issues of direct individual implications (tax increases, cuts to social services), but they also oppose the announced privatisation and 'sell-out' strategy of public estate (the former 'Elliniko' airport, coastal zones etc.) and major utility services (energy, water, telecommunications and waste disposal).

A pertinent example is PROSKALO (Cooperation Initiative for the Social and Solidarity Economy) established in 2011, in Thessaloniki. According to its founding declaration, it aims 'to promote social solidarity economy and direct democracy in various sectors and especially in 'commons' such as water, food, energy, waste management, education etc.'. Furthermore, it critically analyses the capitalist model of production which has led 'to declining standards of living, lack of public and natural goods and the risk that these 'commons' could be destroyed or sold'. It includes 'an Action Plan towards a comprehensive system of work, consumption and life that will lead to the social liberation of man on a sustainable planet'. Loyal to these principles, PROSKALO participates in the establishment of social and solidarity economy structures and has played an active role in the citizens' referendum against water privatisation in Thessaloniki.

The website of 'To Steki Allileggiis' (Solidarity Café) in Volos is indicative of the political agenda and mode of operation of an average citizens' solidarity structure:

> The aim of the Steki is resistance to the crisis through solidarity and self-organization … We collect and distribute food, clothing and other basic goods to households hit by the crisis. We will operate a social medical center, a social school, legal support and any other group the Assembly of Steki will decide … To Steki is organized through citizens' assemblies. This collective practice will allow us to become active citizens against the policies of the Memorandum which want us inactive at home.[7]

The defining key elements related to the political stance of these structures are firstly the decision-making process and secondly the type of action they undertake

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7 Available at: http://steki-allilegyis.blogspot.gr/2013_01_01_archive.html.

to oppose governmental policies. Concerning the first aspect, there is a horizontal decision-making process, through assemblies, based on the principle of 'direct democracy from below' that is, everyone participates in and expresses his/her opinion about the issues at hand. There is an effort to ensure that all decisions be based on consensus instead of a majority vote, thereby working according to a circular rather than a pyramidal model of decision making.

Such cooperative and horizontal forms of organisation contradict dominant relationships and anticipate a participatory society. The fact that these initiatives challenge hierarchical social relations also distinguishes them from the majority of NGOs, which have a clearly hierarchical structure, whereby the ones making decisions are usually not those who implement them.

Moreover, if traditional political action meant until recently demonstrations and strikes, the innovation here is a call for action to construct 'a different world which exists' (this is the slogan used in many activities organised by different collectivities). In other words, solidarity bazaars, kitchens, schools and alternative economy structures pave the way to a new model of political, economical and social relations.

'Glocal' Character

The target region of these initiatives is primarily local, as they operate at the level of the neighborhood or municipality. Nevertheless, they are not confined to their own localities. Most of them have an interest in what happens at the national and global levels. Since 2013–2014 we have witnessed a major effort to enhance cooperation and exchange among these initiatives at local, regional, national and global levels.

Looking at the local level, different cooperative cafes, restaurants and shops operate not only as social enterprises but also as informal meeting points, providing the time, space and appropriate environment for building ties among initiatives in the same region.

At the same time, different initiatives have joined forces and now cooperate in organising training events, festivals and cultural activities. For example, the European Village collaborates with eco-communities, such as Spithari, the alternative community Peliti in Drama, the network Dryades, and the cooperative Syn Allois; and the successful outcome of the citizens' referendum against water privatisation was the result of an alliance of over 50 citizens groups).

Contact and cooperation among collectives is facilitated through regional and national networks (such as the coordination network of 24 collectives for waste management at the national level established in March 2014, the network of social cooperative enterprises of Northern Macedonia, established in July 2014), coordination committees (such as the committee of medical centres established in early 2014), coordination meetings (such as the first meeting of 83 structures of food solidarity that took place in March 2014), online platforms and information projects (e.g. *Solidarity 4 All*, www.Kinitorama, www.antallaktiki.gr and Omikron

Project) and festivals (such as the second Solidarity and Social Economy Festival in October 2013, which attracted approximately 2,500 visitors).

These initiatives are active in communication and cooperation at the global level too. Well-researched articles are uploaded onto their websites, as well as documentation regarding relevant issues and good practices from all over the world. The following examples illustrate this point: Mondragon, the world leader in the cooperative movement serves as an example to the Greek initiative PROSKALO; and representatives of both Spanish (Marinaleda municipality) and Venezuelan initiatives (the association of cooperatives Cecosecola) have been invited to meetings in Athens. Along the same lines, initiatives such as the cooperatives Syn Allois in Athens and Terra Verde in Chania have forged close ties with cooperatives from Latin America (the movement of Zapatistas since 2011) and Palestine (since 2014), organising the importation and distribution of their products in Greece.[8]

Activism vs. Volunteeism

Words are very important, as they carry specific meanings and connotations. In the field of solidarity initiatives, in Greece, the term 'kinimatikos' (meaning an individual actively involved in social movements and translated as 'activist') is often used as a self-description by people active in these structures. Here it is analysed in opposition to 'volunteer', another term widely used in solidarity projects.

It should be stressed that before the crisis the term 'kinimatikos' was associated, with an anarchist approach. However, following the 'indignados' movement of Syntagma Square the term was increasingly adopted by people who do not espouse anarchism, but consider themselves members of a broader social movement with the above characteristics.

During the interviews conducted for the present research, people were asked to describe themselves with regard to these two terms, 'activist' and 'volunteer', on the basis of the official ILO's definition of volunteerism. None of the interviewees considered themselves to be a 'volunteer', that is involved in the projects and activities of NGOs. They have a strong feeling of ownership of their initiatives, a strong commitment and a sense of personal profit, because the 'common good' is considered a personal gain too. To be sure, there is no expectation of profit-making in terms of money. These structures are perceived as platforms for free expression for those in search of solutions vis-à-vis austerity policies which have violently imposed a new socio-economic environment. For example, respondent R argues that solidarity initiatives are 'a source of personal stability in a constantly changing and stressing environment, a safety net for these times characterized by instability'. Respondent C complements this by saying that 'we do not consider this as something to rest upon; rather it is a call for continuous action'.

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8   See http://synallois.org/.

Thus, the term 'volunteer' and the consequent characterisation of these initiatives as 'voluntary' do not depict reality. Civil society literature in Greece often ignores this important distinction, with solidarity initiatives being seen as a form of volunteerism, closely associated with the volunteerism practiced by NGOs, without further clarification.

Funding and Autonomy

Another feature that distinguishes solidarity initiatives from NGO structures is their autonomy vis-à-vis state funding. In most cases, the operational costs of these structures are met through donations, the support of local authorities, fundraising through concerts or bazaars and crowd funding. To give but one example, the medical centre in Thessaloniki is hosted on the premises of the Workers Housing Organisation (Organismos Ergatikis Estias) and its running costs are covered by the Labour Centre of Thessaloniki. Medical materials are purchased through donations made by citizens and social institutions, such as workers' unions, municipal councils, etc. According to its website, 'The Social Solidarity Medical Center chose not to become one more NGO or to be involved in EU funding programs – because the EU imposed those hard policies – neither to be involved in Greek-state funding programs – because the State chose to legislate the way it does, making health another commodity which will lead many of our fellow citizens to poor quality of life and eventually death.'[9]

There is an ongoing discussion regarding the pros and cons of EU funding. Many express the fear that the donor's money will lead to a gradual alignment with individual interests and compromise the objectives of the structure. On the other hand, some of the initiatives, which have acquired some legal form, use EU funding to implement projects which promote their overall objectives, arguing that this is money from the people of the EU (e.g. European Village, Nea Guinea). Respondent L explains the considerations that have to be taken into account: 'for a structure that people acknowledge as an independent initiative, the visibility signs (on its premises, website etc.) that usually accompany the award of a grant could cast a doubt on its independence from the government (which is the focus of its criticism) and therefore question its very principles of operation'.

Overall, the question of funding can be answered only on an *ad hoc* basis, depending on the particular conditions of the structure and the reasons of the funding.

Exploring the Impact of Solidarity Initiatives

Evaluating the impact of these structures is no easy task. For one thing, it is too early to evaluate them, as many of these structures have only been operating for a

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9   http://www.kiathess.gr/index.php/2012-09-24-23-44-35.

few months or up to two years. Secondly, there is a serious lack of systematic data collection. Beyond observing the general increase in their numbers, we have no approximate calculation of the number of people involved in these initiatives or any thorough trend analysis that might describe their dynamics and evolution over the last few years in Greece.

Nonetheless a first qualitative evaluation will be attempted, in order to provide indications based on collected data and the information offered by people who participate in these structures. Three main areas of impact are identified, namely: i) the support given to the neediest, ii) the empowerment for those participating and iii) the political import of such initiatives.

It is not necessary to expand further on the ability of these structures to support the most disadvantaged groups of the community. Despite identified limitations, all data presented above regarding the number of people supported and the rapid expansion of this type of initiatives throughout the country, clearly demonstrate their success.

It should be emphasised however that the target group of these initiatives is not solely the neediest who receive support to cover their immediate needs. An equally important target group comprises those who actively participate in these structures as well as the society at large. Citizens' initiatives are perceived by participants who might not be (some of them rephrase this as 'might not yet be') in need of material support, as islands of solidarity, knowledge and creativity and a space in search of an alternative to the existing political, economic and social model. These initiatives constitute a huge field of personal learning for this particular group. For many participants, their involvement is a path toward profound self-education and an experiment in the reconstruction of social relations. Learning how to engage in a productive democratic dialogue within a group, as well as building self-confidence and facilitation skills, repeatedly came up during the interviews as important personal gains for all involved.

Interviewees explained their conviction that these initiatives also have the potential to shift cultural norms advocating consumerism and individualism towards a new set of non-material human values, such as reflection, friendship and cooperation. It is through these initiatives that people learn to experiment with the power of the community vs. the power of individuals and start to consider that money is not their only available resource; rather knowledge, skills, ideas and above all cooperation could offer ways of addressing crises.

An indication of this shift is the reinterpretation of the 'commons', i.e. public goods belonging to all people alike. The recent overwhelming vote against the privatisation and commodification of water in Thessaloniki, in an unofficial referendum held on 18 May 2014, with 218,000 citizens opposing it, demonstrates the dynamics of this approach. The campaign and referendum were organised by more than 50 citizens' groups, the activities of which do not focus solely on water issues (Sovitsli, 2014).

Although empowerment is difficult to measure, it is argued that people are empowered when they build their skills, their social relations are changed and they

mobilise to transform their social and economic condition. By taking responsibility for their community (including the most disadvantaged members), their food (including its production and distribution), their health and other 'commons', these structures have the potential to foster optimism that there can be a 'way out' of the crisis and that solutions are in the hands of the people who can influence change through the ability to take control of crucial material and non-material resources.

Coming to the political import of these initiatives, it is argued that citizens' solidarity initiatives contribute to the re-politicisation of civil society, in a concrete and innovative way. Politicisation is broadly described as a set of activities which people undertake collectively, aiming to regulate important aspects of their common social conditions through communication, persuasion and formal rule-setting (Young, 2006). The increase of citizens' initiatives, the nature of their activities and their experimentation with the practice of 'real' inclusive democratic decision-making substantiates this argument.

Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) stress 'the risk of over politicization' of these structures, arguing that the ideological dimension to their solidarity activities 'creates a risk of a different kind, namely the possibility that they are patronized and coordinated by political parties with which they share an ideological affinity. The risk is that, they may be turned into a front organization of a political party'. Nevertheless, this approach implies a narrow definition of politicisation which dismisses altogether its positive and healthy aspects. A political system without opposition is static and can even be totalitarian. The kind of conflict these initiatives bring to the fore could also guarantee possibilities for change, as they point out ways of achieving social transformation. Last but not least, these potential 'risks' are not substantiated either through robust research or through data and analysis.

This section will conclude with two questions relevant to the impact of solidarity initiatives. Firstly, the question of the future sustainability of citizens' initiatives as such and secondly, the place of Greek solidarity initiatives in the world society. Regarding the first question, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives depends on the continuous engagement of citizens, and their ability not only to challenge common patterns of economic, political and social relations but also to present convincing alternatives. Similarly, it depends on their capacity to address the difficulties they encounter (such as inconsistencies on the path from theory to practice, a lack of capabilities and an antagonistic relationship with funded solidarity projects).

As for the second question, the model of direct democracy and horizontal solidarity can be identified in different contexts around the world, such as the Zapatistas movement, the alter-globalisation movement (Style, 2002), the 15 May 2011 movement in Spain, and the Occupy movement (Maeckelbergh, 2012), which in turn inspired the 'indignados' Syntagma Square movement of 2011, in Athens. Thus, an emerging viewpoint could recall Maeckelbergh's (2009) argument that the most promising model of global democracy does not come from political parties or international institutions, but rather from the global networks of resistance to neo-liberal economics. The question, however, as to the ways in

which citizens' initiatives evolve and connect within their communities and with the global society requires a detailed investigation which goes beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Challenges

This section points to the major challenges solidarity initiatives face. It is by no means an exhaustive list as there are inherent discrepancies between different initiatives. The aim here is to provide an understanding of the nature of challenges encountered by solidarity initiatives through concrete examples. Below can be found three different kinds of challenges: i) challenges related to certain identified inconsistencies on the path from theory to practice, ii) a lack of capabilities and iii) coexistence with state-funded solidarity initiatives.

Inconsistencies on the Path from Theory to Practice

Many of the solidarity initiatives presented here undoubtedly cover real needs through the provision of goods and services, often replacing the state. Therefore, they are essential for survival in the ongoing crisis. However, there are also evident limitations. Healthcare is a case in point with an ever-increasing number of self-organised medical centers in major cities around the country. On one hand, as mentioned above, they do not accept funding by governmental or EU agencies; but on the other hand, as the crisis deepens, they face the risk of running into a deadlock, with an increasing demand for medical supplies and decreasing donations. Another contradiction seems to be their claim for universal free health care, attempting its decommodification in practice, and thus rivalling their own demand for autonomy.

Furthermore, as the need for health services increases, the energy of the people involved is devoted to responding to these needs. They deal with the symptoms of the problem instead of raising awareness about its underlying causes and consequences or working on a strategy to address them, although this was part of their initial action plan. From that point of view, these structures do not differ from state-funded NGOs implementing solidarity projects which lack a deeper reasoning for their action or a vision. People in need, receiving health services, might 'walk in and out' of these structures without being aware of their own position in a solidarity relationship. A reference to the notion of solidarity and good intentions do not alone suffice, if the aim is to establish a solidarity community. Appropriate responses must be formulated to redress this pitfall.

There are also significant risks for those who voluntarily provide services. The coexistence of unpaid health workers alongside private clinics, and a shrinking public health service might lead, if proper measures are not taken, to the exploitation of these workers at a broad social level. This is not irrelevant to the phenomenon referred to by many activists as 'the burnout effect'. As a few people

undertake a lot of work, sometimes in more than one collective, they are faced, at some point, with the consequences of burnout.

Another challenge related to the founding principles of these structures is the following: people in most solidarity structures argue that they practice dialogue and democracy based on the principles of horizontality, equality and respect; however participants in such meetings feel at times that their voice is not heard. There are instances where some monopolise the discussion or a group within a group manipulates decision-making through the use of specific tactics, consensus is never reached and this creates a fatigue and leads eventually to withdrawal. These functional problems account for the slow down or even gradual dissolution and lack of stability and continuity in these initiatives. One major cause can be traced to the lack of a mature culture of dialogue and cooperation in Greece – which is hardly surprising as the educational system does not cultivate this culture. Another cause is the low degree of awareness and commitment of participants in relation to the above principles or the rather opportunistic use of these initiatives to meet personal needs. In other instances, to be sure, the reason for long and non-productive dialogue is merely the lack of appropriate techniques and skills, an important issue discussed in the next sub-section.

Lack of Capabilities

There are important differences among citizens' solidarity initiatives, in terms of their capacities and skills. Some are well organised and supported by dedicated people with a long experience in democratic decision-making procedures, planning and the implementation of collective action. In other cases, citizens' solidarity structures are established by people who lack experience, and who hardly know each other, but still have to work in a team for a common purpose. Inevitably, they stumble upon several obstacles.

Most of these structures have elaborated a set of principles and aims. However, their statutory documents do not always include or even reflect a clear strategy. (The term 'strategy' is not used as an abstract general notion but as involving an explicit participatory process for strategy development and specific elements, such as a vision, mission, values and objectives towards the development of a realistic action plan). The lack of strategy is due to the following problems. Firstly, drawing up a strategy requires know-how and specific skills. Secondly, the term 'strategy' is not appealing – if not appalling – to those circles of people who establish that type of structures, as they associate it with more professionalised types of organisation within the technocratic and neo-liberal world. Although such pitfalls have already been identified by people involved in these structures, efforts to find remedies and more effective techniques are quite slow.

As a remedy to the lack of vision and elaborate action plans, a vibrant dialogue has started on alternative social, economic and political systems and directions, for example the theory and practice of the Degrowth movement. This dialogue seems to provide 'flesh and blood' into those structures with concrete directions

for action. The People's University of Social Solidarity Economy (UnivSSE) which offers online lectures and has attracted 35,000 visitors in less than a year, covers a real need for know-how, informed dialogue and reflection, as well as coordinated action.

Another challenge for these structures is their low levels of penetration within society, as the majority of local initiatives simply lack the skills to reach out and involve fellow citizens in dialogue and action. This is also related to the fact that there is no plan for moving from a solidarity group formation to bigger structures.

Lastly, there is an inability to manage differences and an almost inherent absence of conflict resolution skills. It is revealing that these circles are usually keen on attending experiential workshops and discussions related to non-violent communication, in order to be further educated and trained on this topic.

Antagonism between Citizens' Solidarity Initiatives and Funded
Solidarity Projects

Previous parts of this chapter discussed differences between citizens' solidarity initiatives and state- and foundation-funded solidarity projects implemented by NGOs and municipalities; they are clearly different in terms of target groups, vision, aims and mode of operation. In this section, it is further argued that solidarity projects and solidarity initiatives are often in conflict with or even undermine each other.

In the current crisis setting, the government, in order to deal with social protest, seeks to substitute the welfare state with pilot social programmes based on cooperation between local authorities and NGOs. Funding provided through ESPA (the National Strategic Reference Framework for EU funding) has led to the establishment of a number of 'social/solidarity' structures, such as medical centres, pharmacies, and time banks. Similarly, other organisations (e.g. Soros' Open Society Foundations) also provide funding for similar purposes. Triantafyllopoulou, Pouliou and Sayas (2014, n.p.) conclude that:

> 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 one examines the working arrangements of pilot social programs of the NGOs and the municipality partnerships (short-term contracts with very low wages and no additional benefits), one concludes that they reproduce exploitation in the name of softening social problems. They foster hopes for job finding, while they are in breach of basic labor rights.

Thus, this mode of operation could contribute to the perpetuation and aggravation of social problems that citizens' solidarity structures aim to address, namely social injustice and the violation of basic rights. What is more, focusing on the survival problems of an increasing number of citizens without problematising their causes could also be read as implicit support for and ultimately legitimation

of the austerity policies. This would be another significant point of antagonism with citizens' solidarity structures.

Furthermore, there are also practical problems with this coexistence. To use an example from the health sector, while public health services are shrinking, the government is providing funding for the establishment of solidarity medical centres and other solidarity structures through partnerships between NGOs and municipalities (see the relevant website of the government (Step, 2014)). However, people from citizens' structures claim that the budget provided for this kind of medical centers does not cover medicine supplies, only the salaries of some, not all, employees, as these centres also rely on the contribution of volunteers. As explained on an article signed by the Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko, after visiting state-funded centres, patients turn to solidarity pharmacies, thus overstretching the capacities of the latter and revealing the different but inherent limits of both types of initiatives i.e. citizens and state-funded (Metropolitan Community Clinic, 2014).

Last but not least, participants in solidarity structures perceive themselves as activists as opposed to volunteers. Over the five last years of crisis in Greece, there has been an effort to enhance volunteerism and increase the number of volunteers supporting the solidarity projects. This effort has been buttressed by a number of seminars on volunteerism and calls for volunteers, along with public figures promoting the ideal of volunteerism. As Clarke argues in this volume (Chapter 5), being a volunteer might involve positive benefits for both the individual and the society. However, as she also argues, understanding the multiple-faceted dynamics and implications of volunteerism in the complex crisis context requires careful research and analysis. Gaynor's well-articulated argument about the critical risk of depoliticisation, inherent in these endeavours, appears to be pertinent for the Greek case (2014). Gaynor argues that volunteerism in the Irish context 'substitutes self-help for redistribution, self-reliance for state accountability, in the process contributing towards an ongoing depoliticisation of the principles and practice of community development and affording 'ordinary' people little say over the direction of their country and their lives'. In Greece likewise, there is an increasing concern amongst citizens' solidarity initiatives, regarding the existing negative impact of volunteer initiatives. If, as argued above, citizens' solidarity initiatives, in the present crisis environment, contribute to the re-politicisation of civil society, this volunteer type of solidarity project could have the opposite effect, that is to de-politicise it.

The above criticism should not overlook the fact that hundreds of people working as professionals and volunteers in these solidarity projects have good intentions and sincerely believe that they support the most vulnerable. And, in practice, they do indeed, as they provide food, clothes, accommodation and health services to them, working long hours in harsh conditions. But there are crucial questions to be asked regarding the way in which this support is provided and its long-term impact on society. This section has demonstrated that this is a complicated issue with multiple facets. Although the fast-expanding state-funded

initiatives, based primarily on a philanthropic perspective, do not directly lead to the disempowerment of their target groups, the nature of the support they provide, could, in combination with other factors, contribute to such an outcome.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored citizens' solidarity initiatives which have emerged as a response to the crisis in Greece over the last five years, in terms of their aims, rationale and impact. Their aim is to address the basic needs of the most vulnerable as well as the emerging need of the Greek society to deal with the dramatic changes the crisis and the austerity policies have brought about. Despite their differences, citizens' initiatives work on the basis of a common understanding of the causes of the current crisis, which they consider to be not only financial but deeply political and social too. Their innovation is that they seek to provide comprehensive alternatives to the hierarchy-laden system of neo-liberal governance, experimenting with new economic, political and social relations structures.

Focusing on the raison d'être and the principles of operation of citizens' solidarity initiatives helped to deepen the analysis and provided useful insights into their nature and impact. The field research conducted led to concrete defining elements that cut across a variety of organisational forms, namely the understanding of solidarity as based on the notions of reciprocity, equality and social justice, a specific political stance, that is of direct democracy based on horizontality, the activist vs the volunteer controversy, the 'glocal' character and autonomy vis-à-vis state funding.

While in state-funded initiatives people in need simply receive support, in solidarity initiatives they claim what is their own right, be it food, work or quality social services. This collective and democratic experience supports the neediest and, at the same time, it empowers the participants to formulate their own vision for their lives and most importantly, to start building them. The orientation towards action, in particular, constitutes an innovative practice of resistance to austerity policies. The last few years' experience demonstrates that citizens' initiatives have the potential to foster a culture and communities of cooperation and ultimately shape a social movement which could be instrumental in effecting social change on a wider scale. Furthermore, their political impact can be identified in the new forms of citizens' organisation, including meetings and assemblies, and in the expression of their needs and interests.

Having said that, their impact depends, in the long-run, on a number of factors, including the way they address the challenges encountered. In many cases, although intentions are good, the outcome is not as expected. The reasons for this vary according to the case under examination. Some initiatives seem to lose sight of the forest for the trees, as the practical aspects of their work obscure their vision and goals, so that they ultimately run out of steam. In other instances, they have to overcome fundamental contradictions along the path from theory to practice.

Furthermore, they have to effectively face a 'silent internal foe', namely their participants' own prejudices and stereotypes, conflicts, personal agendas and a lack of skills and capacities along with an absence of resources. Last but not least, as argued above, state-funded solidarity schemes seem to pose another critical challenge, which has not yet been adequately problematised, let alone addressed. The overwhelming majority of the activities funded by the state or sponsored by private foundations and implemented by NGOs or through partnerships between municipalities and NGOs, only temporarily address the negative consequences of the crisis and do not query how they have come about. It has been argued that the provision of services to those in need through a one-way process and on a top-down basis can have both a short- and a long-term negative impact on the community.

The above discussion on diverse responses to the crisis undoubtedly calls for a rethinking of the role of different civil society actors in the current crisis context and their possible relation to state mechanisms employed to restore public legitimacy. In this framework, an analysis has been proposed addressing a significant weakness in the relevant literature, namely an often unbalanced focus on NGOs and institutionalised structures. The need to ask critical questions, as well as to deepen research and analysis through collecting first-hand data has been emphasised. This will help to avoid generalisations and simplifications, and will allow for a better understanding of the possible negative implications of different so-called 'solidarity projects' as well as the richness of citizens' solidarity initiatives and their potential impact.

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