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The new trajectory of social policy in Greece: An ambulance service or a sustainable pathway to social policy improvement at the local level?

Kyrillos Spyridopoulos

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The new trajectory of social policy in Greece: An ambulance service or a sustainable pathway to social policy improvement at the local level?

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Η νέα πορεία της κοινωνικής πολιτικής στην Ελλάδα: μια υπηρεσία πρώτων βοηθειών ή μια βιώσιμη πορεία προς τη βελτίωση της κοινωνικής πολιτικής στο τοπικό επίπεδο;

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether the EU co-financed project “structures for the provision of essential goods: social grocery, common meals, social pharmacy” that is implemented horizontally in Greece since 2014, can navigate its beneficiaries out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE). To this end, the paper surveys, through in-depth semi-structured interviews, beneficiaries of the project in the municipality of Pavlos Melas. The findings of the case study suggest that the project constitutes an important safety net, helping beneficiaries experiencing severe material deprivation address manifold needs, including social and psychological. However, at the same time, the project is limited in scope, fails to meet demand and rarely addresses the root causes of poverty. While the project is suggestive of the advantages that a local approach to social policy has to offer, its implications are not far-reaching.

KEY WORDS: AROPE, Kallikratis, local social policy, municipalities.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο εξετάζει το συγχρηματοδοτούμενο έργο «Δομές παροχής βασικών αγαθών: κοινωνικό παντοπωλείο, παροχή συσστίου, κοινωνικό φαρμακείο» που εφαρμόστηκε στην Ελλάδα κατά την τρέχουσα Προγραμματική Περίοδο και από το 2014, με κύριο στόχο την πλοιόγηση των αφελούμενων μακριά από τον κίνδυνο της φτώχειας και του κοινωνικού αποκλεισμού (AROPE). Η έρευνα, μέσω εις βάθος συνεντεύξεων με ημι-δομημένο ερωτηματολόγιο, πραγματοποιήθηκε σε ωφελούμενους του προγράμματος στο Δήμο Σπύρου Μελά. Τα ευρήματα της μελέτης-περίπτωσης καταδεικνύουν ότι οι παροχές του προγράμματος υφαίνουν ένα βασικό δίκτυο κοινωνικής ασφάλειας μέσω συνδυασμένων υπηρεσιών υλικής στήριξης αλλά και ψυχολογικής υποστήριξης. Την ίδια στιγμή οι περιορισμένοι πόροι του, αποτυγχάνουν να διαμορφώσουν συνθήκες μονιμότητας στους μηχανισμούς βοήθειας περιορίζοντας τα τυχόν οφέλη των στοχευμένων χωρικά παροχών.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Πρόγραμμα Καλλικράτης, τοπική κοινωνική προστασία, δήμοι.

1. Introduction

The welfare system of the south European countries has been well-documented to show common characteristics such as statist/paternalistic and familialist/male breadwinner patterns that differentiate it from the welfare system of Northwest Europe (Ferrera, 1996; Petmesidou 2013). In the case of Greece, the historical consolidation of these characteristics resulted in a welfare system that has been historically inefficient in reducing poverty (Dafermos and Papatheodorou, 2010, 2011) and singularly unfit to absorb the consequences of the 2010 economic crisis (Matsaganis, 2012). The crisis has led to an exponential increase in the number of people at-risk-of-poverty-and-social exclusion (AROPE) (Eurostat, 2020), at a time when the Memoranda signed between Greece and the so-called Troika (EC, ECB, IMF) limited the capacity of the central government to respond. Fiscal concerns legitimized extensive cuts in social protection expenditure undermining the already anaemic social protection system of the country (Sakellaropoulos, 2018). In this context, the Greek government attempted to address rising social needs through a nexus of social policy projects implemented at local government level that relied continuously on the structural funds of the European Union (Chardas and Skamnakis, 2016). While these projects initially emerged as a front-line response to crisis, they have gradually been consolidated and become the norm in the field of social protection in the country. Despite this, to present, little is known as to their effectiveness to reduce AROPE, with the results of existing studies suggesting that they are limited both in terms of nature and scope (Skamnakis and Pantazopoulos, 2014; Skamnakis, 2016; Kourachanis, 2016). This paper probes these findings through surveying beneficiaries of one of the most widely implemented projects in a case study in the municipality of Pavlos Melas. In doing so, it contributes to the evidence-base on the effectiveness of the project to support people AROPE and puts the nature of social policy in the country into a critical perspective.

The paper is structured as follows: The second section considers the evolution of social policy in Greece in a historical and comparative perspective and summarises the most recent debates regarding its scope and nature, placing the case study within them. Section 3 discusses the methodology of the paper, including its strengths, limitations, and mitigation actions. Section 4 presents the findings of the paper. Section 5 discusses the findings vis-à-vis the literature on the nature of the new trajectory of social policy in the country. The section considers the evidence base which suggests that the social policy projects are limited in character and without significant long-term impact to address AROPE. Finally, Section 6 weighs the evidence, calling for a reorientation of the nature of social policy and bringing forward policy recommendations.

2. Social Policy and crisis in contemporary Greece

2.1 *The evolution of social policy in Greece in historical and comparative perspective*

Many of the features of the social welfare system in Greece are rooted in the choices made in the social, economic and political field after the Second World War (Papatheodorou, 2009: 225). In the country's post-war development, the state emerged as a huge apparatus treating welfare provisions not on the basis of citizenship rights but rather as a privilege to those having political bargaining power or access to its clientele clusters (Petmesidou, 1996: 329). This led to the development of vertical state-society relations based on personal affiliations, sometimes resulting in significant dif-

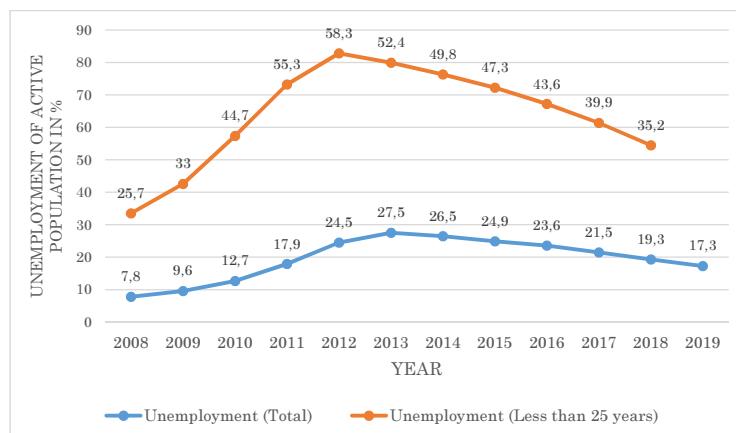
ferences on welfare protection entitlements, even within the same socio-professional group (Adam and Papatheodorou, 2016: 273). In this highly fragmented welfare system, family was embedded as a key-unit compensating for the inefficiencies of the social protection system (Skamnakis and Pantazopoulos, 2014: 99). Not only did the family house have a material and symbolic significance but as Papadopoulos and Roumpakis note (2013: 215), it also constituted a shock absorber in response to the country's rudimentary social assistance regime (Matsaganis, 2000).

The properties described above are not unique to Greece. Rather, the development pathway of the Greek welfare system shares common traits and trajectories with other south European countries, namely, Spain, Italy and Portugal (Papatheodorou, 2009: 238). In a seminal paper, Ferrera (1996: 18) classified these countries as a separate cluster in the universe of the welfare states, called the south European model of welfare. This classification holds a certain level of abstraction and there is a longstanding debate since the early 1990s on whether it indeed, holds merit (for an overview of this debate, see Karamessini, 2007). Nonetheless, these attributes differentiate the south European model from both the social-democratic model of the northwest countries (based on universal coverage) and the conservative-corporatist model of central European countries (based on patterns of occupational income maintenance) in terms of its capacity to reduce poverty (Dafermos and Papatheodorou, 2010; Andriopoulou and Tsalkoglou, 2010; Balourdos and Naoumi, 2010).

2.2 *The economic crisis and a shift of trajectory: the post-2010 trajectory*

The characteristics of the Greek welfare system resulted in an anaemic system of social protection that was highly at odds with the economic and social consequences of the 2010 economic crisis (Chardas and Skamnakis, 2017). The crisis caused the country's GDP to tumble by 25% between 2008 and 2013 (Eurostat, 2020a), with a chain reaction to the unemployment and poverty rates. In particular, as Figure 1 shows, there was an exponential increase in unemployment, especially for the young population.

Figure 1: Unemployment (in % of active population) in Greece 2008-2018.



Source: Eurostat (2020b).

In addition, using the 2007 poverty threshold, Adam and Papatheodorou (2016) found that in 2011 more than a third of the population was below the poverty threshold. At the same period, there was a noticeable increase in income inequality and material deprivation, with two of out five people being unable to respond to unexpected expenses (Papatheodorou, 2015).

These developments came hand-in-hand with the retreat of the central government from the provision of social services and the beginning of a new trajectory in social policy in Greece (Feronas, 2019). In this, local government, assuming new responsibilities emerging from the administrative reform of Kallikratis, emerged as key-player in the provision of social services, compensating for state's inefficiencies. This shift in trajectory found local government (municipalities) under bilateral pressures. On the one hand, their budgets were drastically decreased (Skamnakis and Pantazopoulos, 2015). On the other hand, the demand for social protection services was increased (Hlepas, 2018). In this context, municipalities had to leverage funds from multiple stakeholders (such as civil society, business, EU funds) as any state expenditure on social protection had to be compatible with the conditionalities of the Memoranda and the middle-term fiscal strategy of the country (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2014:109). This made EU Structural Funds particularly important, as they provided municipalities with the financial means to develop a nexus of social policy projects to respond to the mounting social needs (Chardas and Skamnakis, 2016).

2.3 The new trajectory of social policy in Greece: current debates

These policy developments have received critical attention from several authors and have become part of a debate regarding the nature and scope of the new trajectory of social policy in Greece.

One strand of criticism considers the institutional dimension of the trajectory (Chardas, 2014; Hlepas 2016, 2018). This strand notes the failure of the administrative reform of Kallikratis to reshuffle the cards of authority in favour of local government due to the crisis. It argues that policies are still a subject-matter of central government and that municipalities act simply as local distribution agencies (Skamnakis, 2011; Chardas and Skamnakis, 2017). This comes in contrast with the principles of decentralization embedded in the regulatory framework of the EU Cohesion Policy (Chardas, 2014). Also, and importantly, it attests to the fact that the traditional central governance patterns in the country remain at the expense of the development of local government autonomy (Psycharis, Zoi and Iliopoulou, 2015).

Another strand considers the implications of the new trajectory in the field of social protection and care. Within this strand, Chardas and Skamnakis (2017) note that the nature of the new social policy projects was initially shaped by the consequences of the economic crisis. As a result, these projects focused almost exclusively on addressing essential needs that were exacerbated at the time, such as housing, medicine, and food. However, as these projects continued to receive funding, they have gradually crystallized in the field of social policy in the country, deteriorating it into a fragmentary net for those worst-off. Skamnakis (2016) investigating local childcare policies in Greece found that they have a residual character and fail systematically to meet demand. A similar observation was made by Kourachanis (2016) in relation to homelessness policies, begging the question if these are actually having a positive impact or simply recycling an extreme social problem. Finally, the persistent reliance of these projects in EU Funds and donations raises several concerns about their sustainability and employment conditions (Petmesidou, 2013).

This paper is embedded within and aims to contribute to the second strand of critique, putting the nature of social policy into scrutiny. To this end, it examines the capacity of the project “structures for the provision of essential goods: social grocery, common meals, social pharmacy” to support its beneficiaries out of AROPE through a case study in Pavlos Melas. The project is relevant for the debate on the nature of social policy, as it forms a pillar of the nexus of social policy projects that have been developed during the crisis, with the vast majority of municipalities in the country operating at least one element of the project in the period 2014 – 2020.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Data collection

The paper used in-depth semi structured interviews to collect the data. The method is appropriately geared towards the research question, as the latter aimed to elicit personal narratives that would have made a focus group less appropriate because of the potential for social desirability bias (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 113). Furthermore, in-depth interviews in comparison with fixed methods such as self-administered surveys, allow participants to elaborate on their views and can thus generate insights that go beyond the researcher's knowledge or what is known through the literature review (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). Data collection took place between July and August 2019.

3.2 Sampling

The paper used purposive (non-probability) sampling, including 10 in-depth interviews with beneficiaries of the project in the municipality of Pavlos Melas. The participants of the study were drawn from different age groups, sex, education levels and some of them were using multiple elements of the project. The number of interviews sought to maximise the opportunity to understand the range of opinions, i.e. capture the different representations of the issue within the timeframe of the paper (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000: 41). In this respect, the paper claims an acceptable degree of theoretical saturation, as the ten interviews allowed the typification of common patterns across the data and no new major themes appeared to emerge from the interviews (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000: 41; Robson and McCartan, 2016: 166-168). Given the time constraints, generating more data could lead to what Bauer and Gaskell (2000: 34) cite as “data dungeon”, i.e. the collection of more data that can be sufficiently analysed within the timeframe of a project. Nonetheless, the sampling is not representative and the transferability of the findings and recommendations beyond the municipality of Pavlos Melas must be treated with a degree of circumspection.

3.3 Data analysis

The paper used thematic analysis to analyse the data. In particular, using the model developed by Attride – Stirling (2001) the basic (lower order) themes of the paper were clustered into organising (medium order) themes, which in turn were clustered into global (higher order) themes. These are represented in the findings section as web-like maps that illustrate the salient themes of each of the three levels, as well as the relationship between them (Attride – Stirling, 2001: 388).

Thematic analysis sets explicit criteria to the research process and in doing so, increases the legitimacy of the qualitative research process, the latter often accused of being obscure and esoteric (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000: 336). In particular, thematic networks, by making explicit the procedures employed in going from text to interpretation increase the internal and external validity of the research (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). In addition, thematic analysis is independent from epistemological or theoretical prepositions and thus offers flexibility in examining the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). Finally, the method is less complex and time-consuming than other methods of textual analysis such as Foucauldian discourse or ethnographic analysis and therefore offers more fruitful grounds for replication.

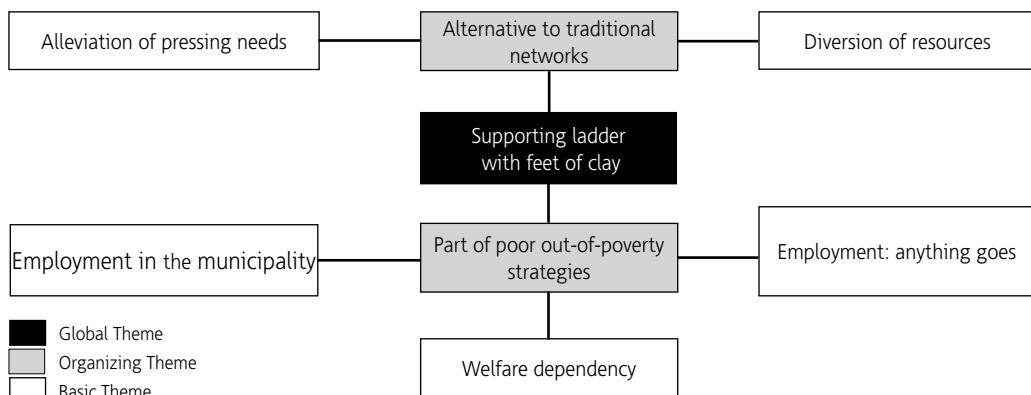
Data analysis followed Frith's and Gleeson's (2004) inductive, data-driven approach to allow room for the inclusion of data that may not tidily correspond to the research question and to mitigate the researcher's bias. Finally, to enhance the robustness of the data, the paper following Bryman's (2016: 385) recommendation used respondent validation.

4. Findings

The findings of the paper are presented in thematic networks that have been developed starting from basic themes and working inwards towards a global theme. Basic themes are the lowest order of themes. They include accounts of the interviewees' experiences and their interpretation of these experiences. Organising themes cluster these accounts and summarise the principal assumption of a group of basic themes. They show in a more abstract and revealing way the predominant narrative in the textual data, i.e. what is going on in the beneficiaries' everyday lives. Finally, global themes are super-ordinate, macro-themes, that encompass both organising and basic themes and illustrate the main conclusions of the paper.

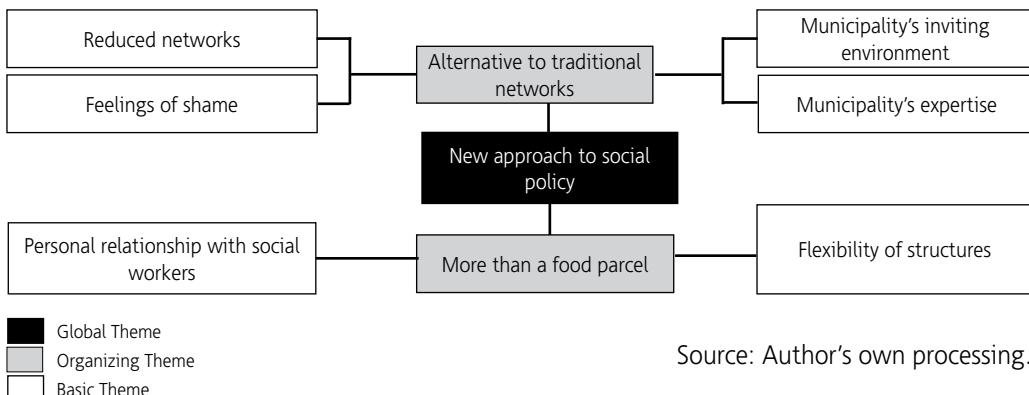
Through the thematic networks, the paper explores how beneficiaries experience the project and assesses its capacity to help support them out of AROPE. The results of this exercise are presented in the Figures 2 & 3 below and discussed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

Figure 2. Can the project help support its beneficiaries out of AROPE?



Source: Author's own processing.

Figure 3. How do beneficiaries experience the project?



Source: Author's own processing.

4.1 How do beneficiaries experience the project?

Global Theme I: A novel approach to social protection

The findings suggest that the project offers a novel, positive approach to social protection. Beneficiaries found in the project an alternative option to their traditional support networks. This option went beyond their initial expectations and contrasted with their previous experience in state services. In particular, beneficiaries were not only able to meet pressing material needs but also form resourceful relationships with staff of the project in an inviting environment that attenuated feelings of shame and fostered social inclusion.

Organising theme I: Alternative to traditional networks

Traditional networks such as family, kinship or friends were found to maintain their supporting role as shock absorbers for the beneficiaries' financial difficulties. Nonetheless, the resources of these networks were reported to have reduced during the crisis. Next to feelings of shame, this constituted for beneficiaries a push factor away from such networks. On the other hand, the municipality's inviting environment and its capacity to manage complex issues were reported as important pull-factors that attenuated feelings of shame and created an atmosphere of trust.

Reduced networks

Many beneficiaries reported receiving financial or in-kind support from their networks either prior to, or simultaneously to the use of the project. Nonetheless, the capacity of these networks has been increasingly attenuating, making beneficiaries reluctant to approach them.

For example, Anastasia (41) said:

"My relatives have their own troubles, who can help you with the crisis? Everyone struggles for himself."

Feelings of shame

Next to reduced networks, feelings of shame and embarrassment were also reported as an important push-factor to the project.

For example, Nick (64) said:

"I will tell you what is going on. All my relatives are rich; educated, and rich. Let's assume that I would pay them a visit. The first thing that would come into their minds would be that I was in need of money. Man, I got hurt. Do you know what animals do when they get hurt? They go into a bush to lick their wounds until they recover. I did not want to explain what happened or receive criticism, even from my close friends and relatives; I did not want to lose my dignity for something that I did not want to come across as, that is, a beggar. But that's how they would think of me."

David (46) said:

"I had nowhere to live. I have a mother. But my mother has learned to live alone; I also have sisters, but they were staying with their families, I did not want to be a burden. Thus, I stayed for a couple of months in some friends, then in some other places I found, and so on."

Municipality's expertise

Some participants explained their choice for turning to the municipality for assistance on the grounds that the latter was in the position to respond to complex needs.

Sonia (47) said:

"I always sought help from these structures, because I think that they are more helpful than talking to a friend. A friend is okay to have a chat, but he cannot support or guide you as to what you should or should not do. This is my personal experience: he cannot support you in the same way as these structures do, either if you are seeking psychological or economic advice [...] frankly, for any aspect."

Municipality's inviting environment

Finally, the inviting environment of the municipality was also cited as an important element of the project. While some beneficiaries reported feelings of shame, these appeared to be context-dependent and not associated with the behaviour of the social workers. On the contrary, the atmosphere in the three structures attenuated feelings of shame and led the foundations for a more personal approach between initially hesitant participants and the staff of the municipality.

Kostas (52) said:

"I was aware that structures such as social groceries, pharmacies and similar ones existed. However, when you do not know how these structures work, you are a bit hesitant. Personally, I could not imagine that there would be such a welcoming environment; coming here feels like visiting a friend [...] this has nothing to do with the behaviour I experience in state services."

Organising theme II: More than a food parcel

At the time of the interviews, all ten participants were experiencing severe material deprivation. Therefore, their main driver for participating in the project was access to essential goods, such as food parcels, household products, common meals and medication. Nonetheless, the project was not reported simply as an outlet for dispensing food, but rather as a portal to manage manifold needs, including social and psychological. Beneficiaries reported having frequent short-term, informal talks with social workers and to a lesser extent, long-term counselling sessions. Through those, beneficiaries filled in critical information such as available welfare services, benefits and vacancies. In addition, through their daily communication with social workers, beneficiaries re-

ceived emotional and psychological support, that was often cited as equally important to the in-kind support of the project. In conclusion, the project was not experienced as unidimensional and there were elements suggesting that it sometimes went beyond confronting the material symptoms of poverty to addressing more complex needs.

Relationship with social workers

Investing in a relationship with social workers was not the case for every beneficiary, with some beneficiaries only seeking access to the in-kind benefits of the project.

For example, Maria (64) quoted:

"I am a very distant person. I do not talk about my personal problems; I prefer keeping them to myself. I just go there, pick up my food-parcel and that's all; no conversations."

However, Sonia (42) said:

[...] "I want to tell you that it is not only about the food. When my child was in surgery, the social workers called me; I answered the phone and asked what did they want me for, as I had already told them that I would not be able to pick up my food-parcel. It turned out that they had called me to find out how the surgery worked-out. Even now, it makes me shudder. I didn't receive calls from close friends; yet the guys called me to support me emotionally. It's not only the food that supports you. You get emotional support. They also tell you about other available services in which you can go."

Finally, social workers often directed participants to other services which they could use for their benefit. For instance, Anastasia (41) said:

"I am having an excellent relationship with him [the social worker]. He helps me to gather the requested documents regarding job openings and advices me on how to proceed."

Flexibility

Contrary to statutory welfare schemes, the social grocery had some flexibility in the delivery of its services. For instance, social workers could accommodate food parcels for families facing exceptional circumstances. In addition, they had flexibility in the delivery time of the food-parcels or medication and appeared to have an open ear for requests or complaints.

Sonia (42) said:

"The doctor suggested that my child should have infant's formulas to gain some weight, if he was to avoid medical prescription. These formulas, I just can't (emphasis) [...] They cost around three, four, even five or six euros. I explained to the social workers my problem, and they provided me with these formulas, albeit I was not entitled to them, as I do not have a baby. Do you know how much this has helped me? I would have otherwise needed 15 to 20 euros in order to get them."

Kostas (52) said:

"They have listened to us. The previous catering was horrible; it was like catering for animals. I would throw it immediately in the garbage; I was sad about this, as people are hungry out there, but I would throw it and cook something else. Social workers referred the complains and now the catering has changed. Now, it feels like eating at a restaurant, there's a huge difference."

However, David (46) said:

"As regards the common-meal, what I would like is having little more. Because you are only given a meal once a day, and it is like a kid meal. Have you seen it? Have you been to the social grocery?"

4.2 Can the project navigate its beneficiaries out of AROPE?

Global Theme II: supporting ladder with feet of clay

The findings suggest that the project constitutes an important safety net that allows its beneficiaries to address essential and otherwise insurmountable needs. Nonetheless, the project is limited in scope and appears to offer to its beneficiaries merely the means to manage poverty, rather than lift themselves out of it. In addition, the project can promote ambiguous out-of-poverty strategies on behalf of the beneficiaries as well as in some instances, lead to welfare dependency. Therefore, while the project is arguably a supporting ladder, it appears that its feet are made of clay.

Organising Theme I: Necessary patch

All ten beneficiaries and especially lone parents with dependent members were struggling to make ends meet. In this respect, beneficiaries described the project as a vital patch to either alleviate current hardship or save income for other essential needs. However, this patch was often not enough and was combined with statutory welfare services, projects run by municipalities or other entities and occasional work in the informal sector.

Alleviation of immediate needs

Whist almost 10 years have passed since the outbreak of the financial crisis, some participants reported their experience in the current period as the most difficult, with many of them struggling to respond to essential, everyday expenses.

Rebecca (42) said:

"Today she got paid (her mother) and a week from now we will run out of money. It is the same story, time and again."

Sonia (47) said:

"Fifteen days ago, so to speak, I literally had nothing to cook (emphasis). I had my common meals as usual and my kids were not hungry. But what about the weekend? Fortunately, the food-parcel was given to me just in time [...] I had nothing to cook and the parcel happened to have eggs, bread [...] This was literally a ray of light. I had been disappointed at the time, and this was a ray of light."

Diversion of resources

In some cases, participants were using the services of the project to free some of their disposable income for other needs. These needs most often included paying rent, electricity, water bills or other needs of similar nature. In other cases, participants were using services to make time for other activities, such as seeking employment, working in occasional jobs or child-rearing. Finally, in some cases participants were able to make short savings with the view to improve their future prospects.

Kostas (52) said:

"My finances are better this period that I don't have to pay for food and medication. My medication costs around 80 euros per month. This money will be used for other necessities, especially on rent."

David (46) said:

"I have opted for the common meals instead for the social grocery in order to free some of my time; It is the time that matters the most to me, rather than the money. I would need time to cook and do all this stuff, because I am living alone."

Sonia (42) said:

"My husband is now trying to get another driving license, in order to find a job with a higher salary. That's the only way we can move forward. By ourselves. Neither the state is going to help you, nor somebody else. It's just us. That's what I am telling you, these structures help us save some money, so we can eventually stop using them."

Organising Theme II: Part of poor out-of-poverty strategies

While most often participants were using the project to address essential needs, the project was also seen as part of wider out-of-poverty strategies for beneficiaries. However, the project did not appear to provide the beneficiaries the means to navigate out-of-poverty. Beneficiaries were often on a constant pendulum above and below the poverty threshold. The project may have provided beneficiaries with a sense of security. This, however, was often temporary, as beneficiaries did not feel confident in their capacity to recover financially in the short or on the long term. Perhaps surprisingly, given the small sample size, the beneficiaries' plans for the future can be clustered into three categories.

Employment in the municipality

Amongst the beneficiaries seeking employment, some were particularly, and sometimes exclusively looking to get short-term or permanent contracts in the municipalities.

Katherine (22) said:

"All I want is to get a job in the municipality, even if this has to do with the cleaning sector or garbage collection. All I want is to get a job. I have recently applied in the municipality of Oreokastro. They didn't get me on-board. Now I am waiting for similar calls from other municipalities."

Anastasia (41) said:

"I am waiting for calls from municipalities; I would like an 8-month contract; I have applied many times, but I have been unsuccessful [...] I have already worked three times with an 8-month contract; if I am successful in getting such a contract one more time, I will get a permanent position, since I am a lone parent with many dependent children."

Employment: anything goes

On the other hand, other beneficiaries showed no particular preference as to whether they would like to work in the public or the private sector.

For example, Rebecca (42) was actively seeking employment in both sectors. She said:

"I am actively looking for a job. I have literally applied everywhere, you cannot imagine. In coffee shops, everywhere [...] I am of course registered at the unemployment base of OAED, I am also looking on the internet."

Rebecca (42) also added

"What are the prerequisites to get a job in the municipality? It feels like you need to have 5 kids and an 80-months unemployment record. It has not been long since I have applied, and I was a runner-up, having 30 months of unemployment. The next time, I am sure that I am going to be successful."

Welfare dependency

Welfare dependency refers to beneficiaries who were either not job-ready or incapable of working. The dependency of these beneficiaries on the structures was increased as their situation did not allow them to recover financially in the short term. In addition, welfare dependency is sustained where beneficiaries did not have an out-of-poverty strategy.

Samantha (33) said:

"I have to confess that I haven't thought of that; I have not thought that, argh, it's going to stop, what I am going to do; because I believe that even in the case the project stops, something else will probably substitute it; they are not going to leave people helpless."

Nick (64) said:

[...] "Apart from that, I am very happy, I have no plans at all. I am having a job for the next 8-months. I have everything that I need in my house. I can survive, I am healthy. Everybody loves me [...] After these 8-months, only God knows. My dear friend, there's always a before and an after in life. If you always consider what happened before and what's going to happen next, all you manage to do, is ruin your life."

5. Discussion

This paper sought to explore the views of the beneficiaries of the social policy project 'structures for essential goods: social grocery, common meals, social pharmacy' in the municipality of Pavlos Melas. Through the case study, the paper sought to assess the potential of the project to navigate its beneficiaries out of AROPE and contribute to the existing debates on the nature of the new trajectory of social policy in the country.

The findings of the paper suggest that the project constitutes an important safety net, as it supports beneficiaries who would otherwise go hungry or experience persistent material deprivation. Nevertheless, it appears that the project is not simply an outlet for dispensing food and medication. Rather, it supports its beneficiaries in manifold ways, including social and psychological. More concretely, through short, informal discussions with social workers, beneficiaries received additional support and found out about available training programs, vacancies, and other services they could use to navigate themselves out of poverty. At the same time, they could benefit from counselling sessions, albeit this appeared to take place less frequently.

The project forms an alternative option for those lacking support from their traditional networks, the resources of which have been reported to reduce significantly during the crisis, an observation predicted by earlier studies (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2009, 2013). In addition, the project fosters an environment attenuating feeling of shame, creating an atmosphere of trust and promoting a personal approach to social inclusion. These elements exist despite the project's regulation by provisions set in the upper tiers of government and were reported to contrast with the beneficiaries' experiences with other state services.

These findings signal that a local approach to social protection can be an effective way to address AROPE. To this end, moving towards decentralisation and enabling municipalities to assume a more central role in the design and delivery of policies should receive careful consideration from policymakers in the upper tiers of government.

Be all that as it may, the case study is illustrative of critical flaws in the design of the project and more importantly, in the country's approach in managing poverty and social exclusion. These flaws come down to the fact that the country does not appear to have a coherent strategy to combat the root causes breeding poverty and social exclusion and instead resorts in addressing the symptoms of these phenomena.

In particular, beneficiaries of the project were found to experience long-term financial hardship, rather than short-term crises. This hardship was often rooted in the consequences of the economic crisis in the labour market and especially in the blue-collar sector. More concretely, following their job losses during the crisis, beneficiaries were found unable to live in a stable state in which they were routinely capable of managing their expenses. On the contrary, they were found to live in a situation trying to avoid poverty and social exclusion through pooling resources from multiple networks (including governmental and non-governmental associations, the Greek church, statutory welfare services, family networks and others). Beneficiaries often reported to combine those resources either with cash-in-hand or short-term contracts in the public sector (municipalities), funded by EU appropriations.

The targeting of such contracts on behalf of the beneficiaries attests to the fact that as the blue-collar private employment sector has reduced, their none or few qualifications cannot allow them to pursue sustainable employment elsewhere. This can drive beneficiaries in welfare dependency or ill-defined out of poverty strategies. In particular, as the hiring process in the public sector often takes into consideration the unemployment record of a candidate, beneficiaries may intentionally use assistance from various networks alongside cash-in-hand jobs, as doing so may increase their chances of securing future employment in the local government. While this constitutes a perverse way to navigate poverty, in light of no sustainable alternatives for people experiencing AROPE, it is expected to become the norm.

The project in question, albeit developed during the crisis to alleviate people AROPE, appears to rather reinforce than form an exception to the country's approach in relation to poverty and social exclusion. In particular, the case study found that the project rarely addresses the root causes of poverty and suffers from critical flaws that appear to neglect the very dynamics of poverty and social exclusion.

First, through its annual, means-tested selection of applications, the project privileges candidates with zero balance financial statements to candidates with small financial statements. While this seems righteous, it neglects that beneficiaries with small financial statements due to their temporary contracts will be denied access for to the project for a consecutive year, by when their contracts will most likely have expired. This creates a pendulum of poverty, in which beneficiaries are found on a precarious continuum, above and below the poverty threshold. In this context, the project and the role of social policy is appearing to demote into a mechanism of rotating, rather than addressing poverty, a sort of a pre-modern philanthropy (Kourachanis, Laliati, Skamnakis, 2019).

Second, the project is limited both in terms of nature, time and scope. Beneficiaries, despite using the project, were still struggling in making ends meet, and often had to combine it with occasional cash-in-hand jobs or assistance from traditional or other types of networks. In addition, the time-span of the project did not allow them to experience a stable feeling of security, as none of them felt confident in their capacity to achieve a sustainable way of income neither in the short nor in the long term. Further to that, the scope of the project was often limited to informal and less frequently, to formal counselling sessions, but did not integrate active labour market policies.

Finally, the project only covers a limited number of AROPE applicants in the country. This was also confirmed in Pavlos Melas, as the project was unable to meet demand, with applications consistently exceeding the available places. In this respect, it should be noted that the number of applications may underestimate potential demand, as poor dissemination strategies, feelings of stigma, embarrassment, and others may hinder beneficiaries from applying (for example, see Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2015).

These findings echo the concerns of several authors who point out that social policy in Greece is descending into a social safety net for the worst-off (Skamnakis and Pantazopoulos, 2015; Skamnakis, 2016; Chardas and Skamnakis, 2017) and suggest that the new trajectory of social policy in the country appears to rotate than address poverty. In this poverty-rotation, people are on a precarious continuum in which they are often referred to projects where they can temporarily fill water (benefit-schemes) to an otherwise leaky bucket (root-causes of poverty remain intact).

To reverse this situation, a major re-orientation of the direction of social policy is necessary. This direction should have at its heart re-skilling and active labour market policies that can offer participants stable employment beyond temporary contracts in the local government. In addition, such a direction should leverage local governments, encourage the use of data to tailor policies and include appropriate longitudinal evaluation frameworks that can benchmark targets and ensure the accountability of resources. Finally, such a direction could also harness a closer cooperation between local government, the manpower employment organisation and industry stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

After the onset of the crisis, the Greek government's drive for fiscal consolidation led to the development of a nexus of social policy projects in response to the increasing social needs. These projects, albeit implemented by municipalities, did not shift the power ratio from the central towards local government while they raised critical questions regarding the nature and direction of social policy in the country. This paper, linking its case study findings with those of existing studies, argues that social policy in country appears to descend into an ambulance service, rather than form a sustainable pathway to economic and welfare improvement. The paper calls for a reorientation of this direction and puts forward suggestions that could be used in order to combat AROPE and avoid its adverse impacts on the social fabric such as intergenerational poverty or immobility.

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