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INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: UNDERMINING OR REINFORCING SOCIAL POLICY?

ABSTRACT

Inequality is an interdisciplinary issue shaped at supranational, national and regional or local level. Public policies in tackling inequality are regulated under pressures produced by global conjuncture and the way that these are affecting national welfare arrangements. Local authorities increasingly implement social protection interventions across Europe, as local distributors of state's policies. In Greece, in the field of local government have taken place major reforms the last three decades. Responsibilities of local authorities have widened, especially in the field of social protection, based mainly on EU's Structural Funds. In the current conjuncture of fiscal austerity and deregulation of the -weak anyway- welfare state in general social policy seems to be squashed in between the supra national factor on one side and subnational on the other.

Keywords: *social policy, inequality, local government, decentralization*

INTRODUCTION

Combating inequality and developing the mechanisms that will tackle both inequality and the conditions that reproduce it, are linked to the issue of the level of planning, organizing and implementing social policy. This issue pertains to the more general debate concerning the role of local *social development* as part of a broader policy aimed at combating inequalities at the sub-national level. In addition, it raises a further issue of the re-

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gionalization of social policy and the broader spatial architecture of social protection, especially nowadays when the need for mechanisms of social protection is pressing. Moreover, in the above context welfare arrangements at national level appear to be increasingly confined to a managerial role while for the strategic decisions a significant role is played by supranational factors. Therefore the question arises as to whether policies and practices at local level can contribute to the goal of social protection and the elimination of social inequalities.

Income inequalities dominate the general issue of inequality. However inequality also pertains to the access to employment, health services, education and social care, while it feeds into the multidimensional process of social marginalization. Inequality is the result of complex social and economic interactions which are defined beyond the local level. It therefore becomes apparent that welfare strategies at local level do not address the real causes of social problems, but are instead confined to the partial implementation of broader policies. Yet, the local level is perceived as a significant factor when analysing the targets of social policy and its implementation.

Combating inequality is not limited to improving the effectiveness of income redistribution since inequality, as already mentioned, is not based solely on income or wealth. In addition, traditional redistributive mechanisms have not reduced inequalities drastically, neither have they responded adequately to the needs of the weakest groups of the population that in theory should be protected first (Townsend, 1979). Social groups and individuals were not equally protected by welfare state mechanisms, neither did the social services meet their differential needs. Access to welfare provisions was –and still is– not equal thus giving rise to advantaged groups among which the members of the middle class seem to have earned the most (*Matthew effect*[1]). Those groups with access to information, and who already have a wide range of knowledge and skills, manage to take advantage of the available benefits of social protection (Le Grand, 1982). The social protection mechanisms and services that are ultimately available to potential "users" seem to reflect power relations as outlined in social stratification and especially in the field of work (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2009). Inequalities are not based only on differences in income but rather affect people's participation in the community and their relationships to

1. Is an alternative term to describe *accumulated advantage* in social protection provision by middle classes across all welfare regimes.

each other (Marshal, 1981). Furthermore, even if inequality decreases in the long term in Europe (Morrison, 2000) this does not correspond by any means to the rate of growth of European economy (OECD, 2011). By contrast, the extent of inequality insists within the different countries and their corresponding social protection mechanisms (Pestieau, 2006).

Combating inequalities requires the adoption of broader rather than local measures, that will address the root causes. In this context, despite the fact that local institutions do not specify the nature of the interventions, as argued here, they do contribute decisively to the implementation and distribution of the relevant policies and also respond to a micro-approach to social policy. *Local development* is the term that encompasses all measures which aim at improving the living conditions of the entire community while at the same time setting the conditions for the elimination of inequalities as well as of the factors that reproduce them. Local authorities can play a decisive role in development with a focus on social protection, although this role is often related to the withdrawal of the state guarantee and the deregulation of social protection. In the case of Greece, weak welfare arrangements on the one hand and weak local authorities due to a centralized state on the other, have allowed little room for local initiatives to develop and flourish. The expansion of local authorities in recent years has proved weak and fragile.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

Modern states generally organize their strategies and actions in a common environment. OECD countries, by virtue of sharing a common political space, seem to operate in a common framework which does not strictly define, yet influences, the available tools and general targets (Deacon, 2007). In this context social policy gradually, without being abandoned as a field of public policies, is no longer an organic part of the dominant development model and gradually becomes dissociated from economic development strategies (Mishra, 1999). The cost of social protection has come under strong criticism as it is considered a burden of which the states have to be relieved, in order to respond to increasing economic competition, as supported by dominant neo-liberal ideas (Gough, 1996). Furthermore, traditional social protection systems are unable to meet the expanding and novel social needs, and have difficulty providing adequate answers to the needs arising from the new organization of production and society (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

In the contemporary environment it is undeniable that the increasing importance of supranational regulations is underpinned by the existence of supranational organisations. Their interventions support policy coordination at global level while promoting the compatibility of national strategies and decisions. Organisations such as the World Bank, OECD, ILO, IMF, approach the issue of social protection from different perspectives and with different targets. The importance of their interventions and their status are different. Overall, the above mentioned organisations do not appear to support a redistributive approach to social policy, and with the exception of the ILO, are closer to residual versions. Although during the last decade there has been a significant shift in their views and proposals concerning the role of social protection in the development of national economies, these changes were not significant enough to alter their character (Deacon, 2007).

A considerable parameter of social protection is that of private providers, especially in health care and insurance, by transnational private companies that operate across national borders and arrangements (Holden, 2009). The growing significance of individual arrangements with private providers, constitutes an additional component that contributes to the ultimate configuration of the level of social protection under conditions that go beyond national regulations.

REGIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy has not been abandoned as part of public policies. Official state-supported agencies continue to play a pivotal role since they regulate the levels of social protection. The states remain the powerful poles which define both the transnational web of relations and their internal policy (Castles, 2007). It remains, however, their choice to adapt to current conditions while the impact on social policy will depend on how they choose to adapt, that is, according to standards and social protection mechanisms that they themselves have developed (Sykes, 2001). *Path dependency*[2] obviously affects the choice and implementation of policies, since it draws on the strengths of institutions and mechanisms that have been in operation for

2. The term describes the tension new institutional forms and policies to be dependent from decisions and circumstances have took place at the past, for detailed description see: Pierson, Paul (2000). "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics." *American Political Science Review*, June. also, Page, S.E. (2006) "Essay: Path Dependence," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 1: 87-115

a long time in european countries. The welfare state is part of a european legacy while overall deregulation of social protection across the European Region has occurred gradually without any violent change in the levels of social protection or in the broader role of the state.

Admittedly, the state continues to provide the regulatory framework for the conditions and arrangements of social protection. The critical choices in the field of social protection are taken by national governments (Atkinson, 2002; Ferrera, 2003; Williams, 2005). Although various issues at the heart of social policy have a supranational (such as immigration), the nature of social policy is regulated separately by each individual state. Certainly nowadays the wider context impinges on social protection arrangements, however this is not a new phenomenon but rather it is part of the historical formation of European welfare states (Room, 2008).

A series of decisions and choices that is made at the supra-national level of the European Union, exercises considerable pressure on the particular settings of social protection. This pressure does not necessarily lead to the integration of the various systems, and certainly it does not form a common area of social protection (Sakellaropoulos-Oikonomou, 2006: Whelan and Maître, 2009). Even though the EU affirms its lead role in establishing common targets for its Member States in the field of social protection, these targets are not capable of generating equally common outcomes (Mailand, 2008). The development of common principles and practices in Europe is certainly not negligible. A number of key choices establishes a joint action framework. Although separate arrangements are in line with national policies, fundamental parameters of public policy, such as EMU, determine the framework for social protection (Kvist, 2007).

At the same time a number of funding instruments, such as the resources of the Structural Funds, or institutions -notably the Committee of Regions- appeared to reinforce regional or local arrangements, essentially bypassing the national authorities (Bartolini, 2005; Loughlin, 2005). Although there is a dense network of local authorities in the EU, this has not managed so far to overcome national boundaries and to arrange horizontal interconnections beyond national boundaries. Also, because the governments retain control of the financial tools, this entails that the content and scope of all regional and local interventions which are organized with the support of Community funds, shall be determined by the decisions of national governments. Apart from the state, a wide range of regional and local institutions has obtained common procedures and practices (Piattoni, 2007) without this entailing the coordination of interventions and the pro-

motion of common policies. Of course, various practices such as the OMC facilitate, through osmosis, the exchange of practices, and strengthen the compatibility of separate policies in the systems of social protection in EU countries (Heidenrich and Zeiltin, 2009).

EU policies seem to be restricted to the *minimun level of intervention,* which is already part of the social protection mechanisms of the European states (Skamnakis, 2011). Especially in the case of Greece, *Europeanization* does not reflect a genuine influence from the EU, since current policies are conditioned by domestic factors (Feronas, 2011; Petmesidou, 2006). It is nonetheless clear that reference to individual settings and to the performance of social protection mechanisms, reflects the influence of the wider environment of the Union.

In the context of the European Union, national policies are shaped in the light of an additional parameter that progressively becomes more important. National policies are increasingly influenced by a factor outside the national level, and attend to the strategic choices of the broader framework set by the EU (Leibfried, 1996). However, the mediation of the national environment -whether by means of the institutional framework or the political and social linkages- is what ultimately determines the impact of supranational over national policies and obviously over welfare arrangements. As pointed out in the report on social policy prepared for the Portuguese EU Presidency, the objectives of the Member States are to act jointly and to pursue common goals in the field of social protection, while agreeing to support each other both in terms of resources and of expertise in order to achieve these goals. It is noted that common "external" pressures are incorporated differently by the different systems of social protection. In fact in the above mentioned report the local level is considered as one pillar of the implementation of the common targets of the EU (Ferrera et al., 2000). The lead role of the subnational level in the implementation of social protection policies is further affirmed in Strategy 2020 for the European Union (Marlier and Natali, 2010).

As already noted, the impact of external pressures is always mediated by national factors, different organizational structures, distinct social and economic facts. The attempt to benchmark jointly "Social Europe" involves complex considerations, which render the attempt extremely complex, if not impossible (Bailey, 2008). The specific policies of the Member States and the circumstances that prevail, lead to different types of interaction rather than imposition (Venieris, 2009). The order of inequality between European countries is not of the same type, and is not addressed

with the same efficiency. The differences between the European north and south are extremely significant and jeopardize the establishment of a single European area of social protection. The European north is clearly in a superior position both in terms of income and of social protection in relation to the countries of the South with their weak social protection systems (Atkinson et al., 2002). The wide disparity of social protection systems within the EU has been exacerbated due to the participation of the enlargement countries.

The concept of "regional" inequality has two dimensions. The first dimension is transnational and involves broad areas that might share common historical characteristics, developmental strengths and weaknesses etc., while the second focuses on national states, within which large disparities are observed between advantaged and disadvantaged areas. The second type of regional inequalities falls within the scope of influence of the national social protection systems, and of the specific arrangements that are made in each country. These local arrangements may refer either to regional or to more spatially localized interventions in a number of areas such as health and welfare, education and work etc.

Initiatives in the field of social protection at the local level are not new. Significant interventions have taken place under local authorities. However, inequalities are still identified within countries and significant regional disparities persist within welfare states (Stewart, 2003). The theoretical background of local initiatives has not been sufficiently studied, and various attempts to develop interventions at a local level were thought to be rooted in neo-liberal beliefs according to which this was part of the state's strategic withdrawal from social protection. The traditional range of Keynesian approaches has declined in favor of free markets that take significant decisions concerning social and political issues (George, 1999). During the growth of the welfare state, the State played the key role, and in most cases it operated with a high degree of centralised decision making the practice of individual local arrangements occasional. In fact, the very functioning of social protection as public policy was determined centrally in order to serve the goals of the state. Both in the past, during the development of welfare states in Europe and today, these policies and the level of social security provided should be evaluated as part of the wider political, social and economic objectives.

The *Regionalisation* of social protection is a common phenomenon in Europe. Besides, the transfer of a series of functions to sub-national level is at the top of the agenda of European countries. Social protection is a

field of great importance in which significant results are expected from the transfer of decision-making powers to the regional level (Loughlin, 2009). However, strengthening the role of the sub-national level puts into question the role and power of central regulation. The state provides a general framework which permits or encourages subnational arrangements. Obviously the state retains the central role in decision-making regarding the goals of the social protection mechanisms. Therefore, the state provides the general framework in the way it responds to supranational pressures, while a substantial part of the implementation and the practices adopted can be organized locally under the responsibility of local authority institutions (Ferrera, 2005; Morreno and McEwen, 2005).

The contribution of subnational institutions in social protection is part of an enduring *"principal-agent"* relation, with the central government holding the role of *principal* and the local government institutions being restricted to the role of *local agents* of central policies (Skamnakis, 2006; Gaufield, 2000). However, even as such, local institutions are able to organize an effective range of interventions to combat inequality.

The role of local authority institutions is obviously central in the effort to fight inequality and poverty. Linking inequality –whether it relates to income, or to the prospects for and possibilities of social development– to specific areas/regions, has been the focus of policies which thus suppress the wider issue of inequality into a comparative and potentially problematic framework. Treating inequality as a spatial issue, may undermine an overall strategy to combat inequalities as a whole. The focus of interventions of this nature are the local communities, while in most cases the causes of the problem are not addressed. This framework enhances the active involvement of local communities primarily by encouraging individualized approaches to support members of the community (OECD, 2009; World Bank, 2006a, 2006b; Vranken et al., 2002). Spatially localised interventions treat poverty as a deprivation problem of localities caused by underdevelopment. International organization programs fit into a liberal approach to tackling inequality (Armigeor and Beyeler, 2004) without this constituting an inherent feature neither covering all spatially localised interventions. Therefore, although spatially localised approaches to inequality cannot be rejected altogether, they do obscure the root causes of the problem by attributing them to the symptoms (Tissot, 2008) and do not support efficient solutions that will eliminate the conditions breeding inequality.

A number of policies tailored to local conditions has yielded significant results, and has rendered local authorities and especially local govern-

ments key role institutions in the success of ventures in the field of social protection (Manson, 1999; OECD, 1998). Local authorities undertake a progressively expanding role in the implementation of social policy, and participate in organizing the network of social protection in the spatial unit under their responsibility. The pressure exerted on the systems of social protection across the European area is associated with the increasing responsibility of subnational governments in planning, organizing and implementing social protection interventions, especially while invoking the principle of *subsidiarity* (Kazepov, 2008). Apparently, this trend neither accounts for nor coincides with the deregulation of social protection during the same period. In all European countries interventions occur at regional / local level in order to deal with specific problems which have a common reference point, namely inequality. These interventions cover almost the entire range of social protection programs such as housing, health and care, even supplementary insurance. It is noted that all local authority policies are in agreement with the coordinates and the main goals reflected in the distinct social protection systems. Arrangements at local level cannot produce results which would reverse arrangements at central level. The set of measures, provisions and services that are implemented at local level cannot reverse the main features of social protection mechanisms which reflect the overall strategy of the central government. Local interventions are in line with national choices as reflected in all public policies. (Lupton and Power, 2005), and are tailored to the particular social and economic factors at the local level. Spatially localised interventions deconstruct the complex relationship between an area and the components of inequality, and address through targeted policies the individual characteristics that compose a deprived environment, and that serve as mechanisms of its reproduction.

Local policies do not fall entirely and exclusively under the spectrum of liberal attitudes, neither do they work only in the context of deregulating social policy. The nature of the interventions is conditioned by the available resources, the material support provided to the programs and the ultimate targets, set by the broader social policy which in turn, is defined centrally by the state. The different axes of social policy such as employment, education, crime prevention or even health and care, can have local applications to respond to individual problems thus removing the conditions of reproduction of spatially localized problems. Inequalities identified at the local level fuel tensions resulting from a polarization which is not only spatial, but has repercussions for wider society (Dorling et al., 2007; Griggs et al., 2008; North, 2007).

Addressing various elements of inequality at the local level requires the participation of all social actors, whose role is expressed institutionally both through the institutions of local government, and through the informal expression of the needs of community members. In this respect, a micro-approach would be particularly useful in defining the needs and objectives of social planning aimed at social development, insofar as it would highlight the gray yet critical features of the social environment and of the interventions implemented (Murtagh, 1999; Shrirlow, 2004). In addition, a micro-approach would highlight different types of social solidarity which develop at local level, and which could support national-level policies to tackle local inequalities (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

THE CASE OF GREECE

The contribution of local authorities in the field of social protection is determined by two key parameters that define the scope and range of interventions implemented at the local level. The first parameter pertains to the structure of local authority institutions which in turn relates to the effect of subsidiarity. The second parameter pertains to their role in social protection. The study of these two parameters in the case of Greece starts with two fundamental findings.

The first finding concerns the traditional organization of the state according to a centralized model whereby the local government has no significant range of authorities that would enable it to play a key role in regulating the conditions of life (Loughlin and Peters, 1997). Consequently, in the case of Greece, the issue of inequality and the prospect of social development do not seem to be determined by local government interventions. The Greek state operated on the basis of a centralized structure whereby the centre defined, controlled and regulated virtually all public policies (Sotiropoulos, 2007). This traditional arrangement has been gradually reversed over the last thirty years while the powers of local government have systematically expanded. This was accompanied by concurrent changes in local government structure, so that it could respond more effectively to its new responsibilities (Law 3852/2010).

The second finding concerns the set of mechanisms and institutional arrangements for social protection in contemporary Greece. Hysteresis and the residual character of social policy in Greece define the key features of the functioning of social protection at local level as well. Weak welfare arrangements in the case of Greece set a weak starting point for social policy at the local level (Skamnakis, 2012).

THE EXPANSION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES - THE ANAEMIC DECENTRALIZATION

The institutional strengthening of local governments is a common trend across European countries. The state transfers a range of responsibilities from the center to lower administrative and political units. This process takes place through the transfer of decision-making at the regional level either to institutions connected with the state, or to institutions that operate independently of the state, and that allow the participation of local communities in local governance. Local authorities in Greece have been in an ongoing reform process for three decades. The most recent development has been the implementation of the *Kallikrates* project whereby significant changes were introduced in the field of local government (Law 3852/2010). In this project there is a clear tendency to strengthen the institutions of local government, and to expand their role in the field of social development. The institutional framework clearly favours the first level of government while for the second level, that is, the regional, it assigns to it a rather minor role in the field of social protection.

Since the mid-1980s, local authorities have had a widening involvement and have become partners in the management of urban space and its uses, of culture and gradually of elderly care and pre-school services (Hlepas, 2010), thus becoming instrumental in local social development. However, the funds remain under state control and local government intervention remains dependent on central policies.

A decade later a wave of amalgamation of units of local government was a necessary precondition for the enhancement of their role at local level, while a second level of local government was also introduced to replace the state's involvement in the wider local level. Control remains under the supervision of the state and central government (Goldsmith, 2002).

The second wave of amalgamations under the Kallikratis project creates the conditions to improve the managerial capabilities of local government. The contemporary structure of local government enables it to handle the issue of local development and to make a significant contribution to that objective. The issue of inequality belongs to the competences of local government since even the legislator acknowledges the important contribution of local government in social protection (Kallikratis project introductory report, 2010).

Local authorities now have the appropriate institutional environment to develop a broad range of interventions in their spatial unit of responsibility.

However, the context of economic austerity poses major obstacles in this respect. Moreover it is essential to note that the trend of the last three decades runs counter the institutional tradition of state organization in Greece, which has been centralized with weak local government institutions (Hlepas, 2010), and which thus accounts for the slow progress of decentralization.

THE *WEAK* WELFARE STATE

Interventions in the field of social protection have been historically a weak point of public policies in Greece. The Greek state did not succeed in planning and organizing an effective range of welfare services. Therefore, informal local networks and especially the family, traditionally covered major welfare state deficiencies (Matsaganis et al., 2003). Various sectors that support social development were never at the center of modern Greek state policies. Furthermore, within the weak and insufficient welfare state major inequalities were detected between groups of users. The sum of benefits and services is not distributed evenly among users and does not correspond to their actual needs. Social policy fails to tackle inequalities; instead, it integrates elements of polarization and discrimination (Petmesidou and Mosialos, 2006). The fragmentary development of welfare arrangements supported by a system of clientelistic relations between state and citizens, results in a heterogeneous set of services provided unevenly to groups of privileged and disadvantaged users. Thus, the welfare state proves itself to be generous to powerful groups, that is to groups that can exert pressure on the government, while it ignores vital needs of groups that lack this power. In addition, the general weakness of the welfare state renders it too cumbersome and inflexible to meet the needs of the contemporary socio-economic environment.

The failure to combat income inequalities (Dafermos and Papatheodorou, 2011) is further reflected in other aspects of the welfare state such as in health services, care etc. where welfare marginalization is detected (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008). The above observations further complicate the already complex character of welfare arrangements which so far, instead of tackling inequality, have perpetuated and increased it.

The regionalization of social protection is a common trend across Europe (Yeates and Deacon, 2006). This trend is also observed in Greece where part of the social services is transferred from the center to a local regional level. Indicative of this trend is the delegation of significant social protection competencies to local government over the last three decades (Skamnakis,

2011). However, this move is considered weak and uncertain since it clashes on the one hand against a strong centralized government, and on the other, against weak institutions in the region. Local authorities remain dependent on central regulation and are limited to the role of local distributor of general welfare state arrangements. The organization of pluralistic schemes in the provision of social services with the coordinating role of local authorities, did not yield significant results, thus undermining the prospect of success of local solutions as a response to the deregulation of social policy.

The implementation of a range of social protection schemes under the responsibility of local authorities, was taken as proof of the europeanization of social policy and the modernization of local government. This new role emerged in an attempt first, to follow the trend of strengthened local governments in Europe, and second to modernize the operation of the Greek state. However the monitoring of trends in the European area was aimed primarily at serving internal needs and at absorbing EU funds rather than at a broader modernization plan imposed by the EU on the state (Petmesidou, 2006; Sakellaropoulos and Oikonomou, 2006).

The spatial arrangement of social protection has been made haphazardly and irrespective of actual needs when local governments plan independently the services available to citizens. This raises the issue of the fragmentation of services and the degradation of their quality since the availability of different choices across the different units of local government jeopardizes the minimum levels of social protection, and feeds the polarization of benefits this time in space. Moreover, until recently (Law 3463/2006 & 3852/2010) there was no process whereby social protection mechanisms at local level could be coordinated and interconnected. This problem arises even within the same local government unit where services are provided by different legal entities (Skamnakis, 2006).

A micro-analysis of the implementation of local government interventions in the field of social protection, reveals considerable flexibility in the regulatory framework of the relevant mechanisms (Loughlin, 2009). This characteristic, while contributing to the immediacy of response to social needs - mainly by overcoming bureaucracy- constitutes a hazard against the general objective. That is, in a system where clientelism is central, such flexibility may exert pressure on formal arrangements thus resulting in greater dysfunction and eventually deviation from the objectives of the intervention. Informal practices and thus discriminations between service users weaken the social protection system and reduce its efficacy (Rummery and Glendinning, 2000).

The broad weaknesses of central mechanisms such as the clientelistic networks (Kontiadis, 2002; Petmezidou, 1996; Zaimakis, 2005) are passed on to the local government, and reproduce informal relations of privileges and exclusions, which maintain the polarization of the system.

The rise and fall of social services developed gradually in municipalities in the last fifteen years with support from Structural Funds and the State, determined the role of local government in the protection of the elderly and children. A network of services was developed, which despite its significant weaknesses, covered a range of contemporary social needs (Skamnakis, 2011). Therefore, shutting down a significant number of social services cancels the benefits that were provided to vulnerable groups, and consequently nurtures inequality. The lack of protection for the elderly is indicative of the lack of solidarity within the social protection system. Also the collapse of childcare programs on the one hand affects the job opportunities of parents, especially of mothers, and on the other, it restores the residual intervention of official bodies (local and central) in childcare services, setting the foundations for the reproduction of inequality in the future (Esping Andersen et al., 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The causes of the complex range of social inequalities can be traced not only in the general environment of world politics and economy but also in the narrow local level, which is affected both by global and by specific local factors. This multilayered phenomenon is the subject of super-national, national and regional level policies respectively. The interaction between these policies produces both general and specific results. The facts of contemporary life attest to the resilience of the phenomenon and highlight the difficulties of effective planning policies.

The study of inequality at the local level is determined by two key parameters: on the one hand, the degree of autonomy of local authorities to meet local needs, and on the other, the ability of local authorities to plan and implement interventions of social protection and to promote the overall goal of social development.

Local interventions are determined by the wider context of social policy as designed at national level. Also, national-level policies are obviously not designed independently of the broader pro-national environment. Local policies are defined in terms of the above mentioned interaction. In the case of Greece, a centralized state is combined with a weak social policy.

Therefore the contribution of local authorities in combating inequalities is weak and vulnerable to pressures such as those caused by the inherent deficiencies of social protection mechanisms. Local social protection policies do not by definition affect the unity of state social policies neither do they threaten their character. Still less do they define the strategies and targets of social policy. Rather, local government interventions can contribute to the consolidation of a multi-level social policy, thus providing a more coherent network of social protection.

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