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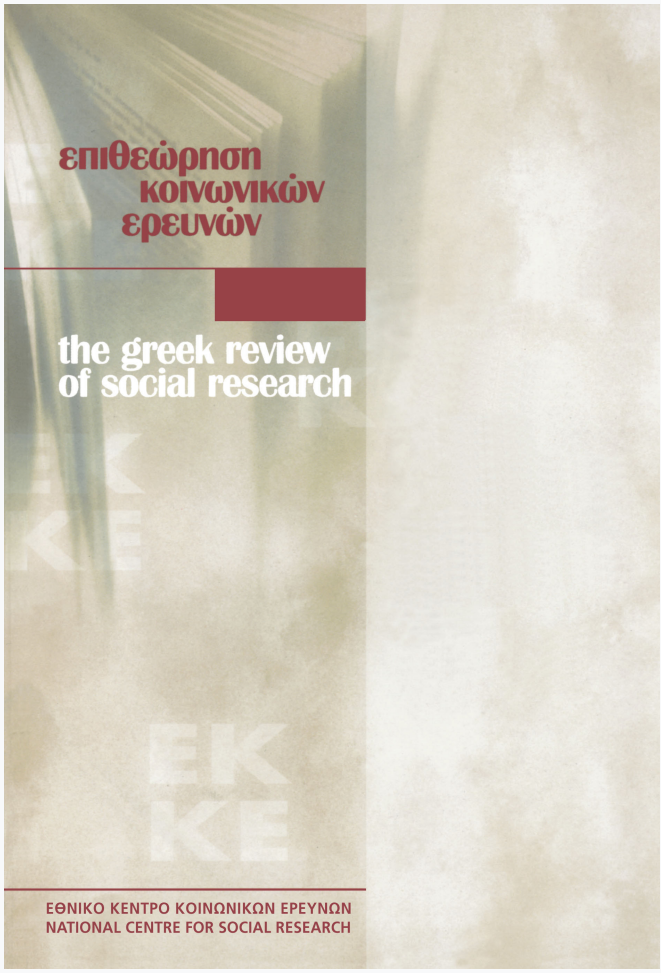

Hidden homelessness and poverty trajectories in rural areas: stories of crisis counterurbanization in Greece

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Hidden homelessness and poverty trajectories in rural areas: stories of crisis counterurbanization in Greece

ABSTRACT

The article examines invisible deprivation and housing precariousness in the countryside through the phenomenon of counterurbanization as a vehicle for overcoming poverty phenomena of urban households in Greece during the economic crisis. We argue that, despite the idealized picture for living in a village, as shown in the predominantly public discourse; rural life is governed by equally unfavorable living conditions for households at the risk of poverty. Through the theoretical framework of hidden homelessness in the rural, fundamental dimensions of housing problems and inadequate living conditions in the countryside are presented. Through the analysis of the different life pathways of people returning from the city to the village, the housing and social living conditions, during the crisis, in the Greek countryside are empirically examined. In the conclusions we find that returning back to rural areas, without accompanying established social support policies, only leads to the reproduction of a situation of proletarianization of households and to the transformation of urban poverty to rural poverty.

Keywords: *housing precarity, crisis, coping strategies, informal solidarity, back-to-village*

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Θεοδοσία Ανθοπούλου, Μαρία Παρταλίδου, Νίκος Κουραχάνης

Διαδρομές κρυμμένης αστεγίας και φτώχειας στην ύπαιθρο:

ιστορίες επιστροφής στο χωριό στην Ελλάδα της κρίσης

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο αυτό επιχειρεί να εξετάσει αθέατες όψεις αποστέρησης και στεγαστικής επισφάλειας στην ύπαιθρο με αφορμή τον κυρίαρχο λόγο περί επιστροφής στον αγροτικό χώρο ως ένα όχημα υπέρβασης των φαινομένων φτώχειας που μαστίζουν τα νοικοκυριά στον ελληνικό αστικό ιστό την περίοδο της κρίσης. Υποστηρίζουμε ότι, παρά τον εξιδανικευμένο λόγο για τη ζωή στο χωριό, όπως προβάλλεται στον δημόσιο λόγο, η ζωή στην ύπαιθρο διέπεται από εξίσου δυσμενείς συνθήκες διαβίωσης για τα φτωχά νοικοκυριά. Μέσα από τη θεωρητική επεξεργασία για τα φαινόμενα κρυμμένης αστεγίας στον αγροτικό χώρο παρουσιάζονται θεμελιώδεις διαστάσεις των στεγαστικών προβλημάτων και των ανεπαρκών συνθηκών διαβίωσης στην ύπαιθρο. Στη συνέχεια, με την ανάλυση της πορείας ζωής ανθρώπων που επέστρεψαν από την πόλη στο χωριό, εξετάζονται εμπειρικά οι συνθήκες στεγαστικής και κοινωνικής διαβίωσης στην ελληνική ύπαιθρο την περίοδο της κρίσης. Στα συμπεράσματα διαπιστώνουμε ότι η επιστροφή στον αγροτικό χώρο, δίχως τη συνοδεία συγκροτημένων πολιτικών κοινωνικής υποστήριξης, οδηγεί απλώς στην αναπαραγωγή μιας κατάστασης προλεταριοποίησης των νοικοκυριών μετατρέποντας την αστική φτώχεια σε αγροτική.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *στεγαστική επισφάλεια, κρίση, στρατηγικές επιβίωσης, άτυπη αλληλεγγύη, επιστροφή στο χωριό*

1. INTRODUCTION

Unemployment and the drastic decline of living standards in urban centers during the past few years of severe crisis in Greece have triggered a debate on going "back to the village", where emerging creative opportunities in agriculture are portrayed. In this rural resilience narrative, aspects of an idealized countryside are highlighted and the rural family as well as the overall rural setting is perceived as a safety net for counter-urbanites affected by the crisis (Anthopoulou and Petrou, 2015; Anthopoulou et al., 2013; Gkartzios, 2013). In Greece, as in many other Southern European countries, family and the extended network of relatives and next of kin have long provided for their own in terms of an informal network of welfare support and solidarity that substituted the insufficiency or failures of the social state (Ferrera, 1996; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2013). In fact these practices of the family are mirrored not only in physical and moral support but also in practical arrangements such as housing provision. As documented by Allen et al. (2004), Southern European countries have residual housing support systems while the family provides housing security for many of its offspring.

Nowadays, amidst the crisis, not only young people but also older ones more frequently live under the same roof with their family or/and relatives as a result of the unaffordable rents and the overall higher cost of living. This practice of the Greek family is the main reason why young unemployed people appear to have a better socio-economic status and do not significantly experience feelings of social exclusion, in comparison with other EU member states (Petmesidou et al., 2016; Papadakis, 2013). The strategy of "taking care of one's own" (Knopf-Amelung, 2013) is even more evident in rural areas, as it falls within the framework of the cultural values and the need and strategy of the rural family for social reproduction.

Natural resources in rural areas, social capital and kinship networks are creating a place of solidarity and social resilience, a safe base for adaptive and innovative processes to address volatile changes rooted not only in ecological but also in socioeconomic crisis (Adger, 2000; Folke, 2006; Magis, 2010; Scott, 2013). Popular discourses and policy recommendations have created a myth of returning to

the land however empirical data – albeit sporadic – suggest that only a handful of those who have attempted to return to rural areas are actually "living their myth". Those forced by circumstances to go back to the family home and live in rural areas face obstacles in terms of job security and life satisfaction while their integration into the local society has generally failed. A number of critical issues have been identified, mainly relating to underemployment, a lack of skills in agriculture in combination with inadequate rural extension services, unpaid work on the family farm or rural enterprise; loss of professional and social identity; lack of healthcare and other social services, etc.

It is therefore questionable as to whether their return falls within the rural idyll debate or creates a social trap in terms of a vicious circle of poverty, shifting from a state of urban to a state of rural proletarianization (Anthopoulou et al., 2015; Anthopoulou et al., 2017). This argument becomes even more crucial if we consider two more issues: firstly, recent data have shown increased rural poverty and food insecurity in rural areas due to the austerity measures. It was estimated that almost 39% of rural residents (during 2017) were at risk of poverty. Moreover, the rural unemployment rate has increased to 25% while incomes have dropped by 23% since 2008 (Backes et al., 2018). A second issue is related to the lack of any governmental policy on the reception of ex-urban newcomers in rural areas or a support framework at the regional level for those who opt to make a fresh start in rural areas.

In this study, we pose a series of questions starting with the most important, which asks whether this resilience narrative of returning to one's rural home and under the safety net of the family in fact creates a new type of deprivation and leads to hidden forms of poverty. Our aim is not to give a quantitative overview of the phenomenon of counterurbanization in the country but mainly to reveal the different and rather meaningful aspects of hidden homelessness for which there is no official statistical documentation. Our argument stems from the hypothesis that precarious housing conditions in the rural are created by this counterurbanization movement, such as the sharing of a dwelling with relatives or friends. This hypothesis leads to a discussion of different aspects of the lived experience of returning to the countryside and of the myth of the rural area as providing a shelter for the urban neo-poor who face precarious dwelling conditions in the city. Nonetheless, we do not argue that these living arrangements fall under the major categories of homelessness

(FEANTSA, 2005) but refer more to overcrowding and lack of private space and/or the use inadequate housing (sub-standard living conditions) and are described as hidden forms of homelessness.

Our overall aim at this point is to initiate a discussion and highlight different trajectories of people going back to rural areas by drawing on research material gathered from on-site investigation in a rural area of western Thessaly (central Greece). The paper discusses localized experiences of precarious housing and deprivation, revealing hidden homelessness and poverty from the perspective of people who returned to their village of origin in search of a safe roof and affordable living. Despite all the methodological drawbacks and lack of a commonly accepted terminology of poverty and homelessness (especially in the rural context), we start with people and their perceptions. In doing so, we focus on life paths and lived experiences within rural communities as a research tool and shed light on restless life stories. These pathways offer an in-depth analysis of the perplexity of the phenomenon of poverty and hidden homelessness (for example Anderson and Tulloch, 2000) and seek to provide some answers not only to what is happening but also why it is happening and, more importantly, for a way out of the situation (Papadopoulou and Kourachanis, 2017, p. 70).

2. EXPLORING HOMELESSNESS AND HIDDEN POVERTY ASPECTS IN RURAL AREAS

At the political and institutional level, several types of homelessness and housing exclusion have been identified by ETHOS typology.[1] Starting from a basic and generally accepted legal definition of homelessness in western countries, the state of homelessness encompasses at least some of the following substantive elements

[1] The ETHOS conceptual model was developed by the scholars Bill Edgar, Joe Doherty, and Hank Meert. It was first published in the Second Review of Statistics on Homelessness in Europe (Edgar et al., 2003), was further refined in the following year's review, and has not changed since then, as per the most recent European Review of Statistics on Homelessness (Edgar, 2009). The model focuses on living situations and calls an adequate living situation "a home". Three domains are identified as constituting a home, while living situations that are deficient in one or more of these domains are taken to represent homelessness and housing exclusion. These three domains of home are described as: "having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (social domain); and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (legal domain)" (Edgar, 2009, p. 15).

(FEANTSA, 2005): i) lack of tenancy right/tenure; ii) insufficient income to sustain housing; iii) an inadequate living situation in terms of topological conditions ("rough sleeping" on the street); institutional issues (accessibility to health facilities and social services); physical housing structures and safety risks; absence of personal living space, privacy and legal rights; iv) the risk of becoming a person without housing (e.g. potential eviction or no home to return to); and v) administratively defined homelessness (lack of a registered concrete address).

Hidden forms of homelessness have been less researched. In a widely used definition, "hidden homelessness" refers to people who are experiencing homelessness in places other than on the street or in homeless shelters, which is also known as "homeless at home". It generally describes "a state of lacking a dedicated physical living space (your own bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living area), lacking the privacy of your own home and having no legal rights to occupancy, i.e. no protection from eviction" (Pleace, 2017, p. 2). Hidden homelessness includes cases of people living in inadequate housing that lacks basic amenities (electricity, hot water, heating, a bathroom, etc.), sufficient living space and privacy (housing designed for one household but that doubles up for more than one, living in a room in housing owned by family or friends as there is no alternative), physical security (abandoned and dilapidated houses, no protection against the rain, cold and natural hazards more generally, etc.), and so on. This also includes people who are unable to pay their rent or mortgage and are at risk of eviction or home auctioning (Pleace, op.cit., pp. 3-4). The housing location may also undermine the Right to Adequate Housing in accordance with UNHCHR and UN Habitat standards, when employment opportunities, school, healthcare and other social facilities are lacking (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Habitat, 2009).

The problems of homelessness and poverty are much more difficult to detect in rural areas because of both physical and cultural factors (see for example Cloke et al., 2002). Rural homelessness in the developed world has received little attention from academics and policy makers mainly due to the diffuse and complex nature of the phenomenon, bound up as it is with poverty and particular localized structural processes. These include degradation and the poor quality of the rural housing stock in remote and declining localities or the gentrification of rural housing markets in attractive and recreational countryside (Woods, 2005, pp. 87-89). In contrast to the

visual concentration of urban poverty in inner city pockets and in degraded suburbs, poor rural households are geographically scattered in different dispersed rural settlements, remaining physically hidden (Milbourne, 1997, p. 94). Moreover, social constructions of idealized rural lifestyles related to aesthetic landscapes and a frugal and peaceful rural life mask the potential existence of poverty (Woodward, 1996). Other researchers record the concealment of poverty in rural areas either by the subjects themselves, from a sense of shame and the fear of social stigmatization in a small rural society, or by local authorities who fear that the attractiveness of their rural localities will be lost. In any case, complex circumstances of housing supply and localized cultural and political processes impact on the experiences of rural precariousness. Hiddenness and spatial unevenness are hence typical of homelessness and deprivation in rural areas (Cloke et al., 2001a).

Various interwoven factors create deprivation and hidden housing pathways, both in the city and in the countryside: i) economic factors such as dismissal, long-term unemployment; a low income that is insufficient for covering housing costs, and crisis austerity measures as part of neoliberal fiscal policies as recently experienced in Southern Europe; ii) social factors and personal circumstances such as parents and relatives not being willing to accommodate any more family members who are in housing difficulty, relationship breakdown and divorce, loss of a spouse, illness and accidents that can lead to social isolation and deprivation; and iii) housing factors such as the lack of housing standards or access to basic services. In rural areas, however, the housing hardship of vulnerable social groups may be exacerbated by the wider context of rural restructuring (economic diversification, middle-class in-migration, social recomposition, changing rural lifestyles, etc.), which has a particular impact on shaping housing dynamics (Halfacree, 2012; Woods, 2005).

That being said, it is obviously difficult to accurately define hidden homelessness so as to reconcile a constellation of conceptualizations and experiences across countries. Another difficult endeavor is also the actual mapping of populations that may be in a state of precarious, unsafe or inadequate accommodation and thus not registered in the official administrative data. Nevertheless, it is important to bring to light invisible and hidden aspects of homelessness through localized experiences and personal poverty trajectories, as they are inextricably linked with or lead to social exclusion and pathogenic phenomena. Chronic situations of deprivation and poverty

have the potential to multiply into spiraling dynamics of ill-health, alcoholism, abuse, family breakup and even rough homelessness (Woods, 2005, p. 242).

With respect to rural areas themselves, its dwellers have to cope with various housing problems related to a limited housing stock for rent or sell, largely due to relatively high ownership rates in rural (as compared to urban) areas. Weak housing quality in less favored areas is related to: age, abandonment or poor maintenance because of high repair costs; remoteness and the significant travel costs involved in accessing basic services; and, inflated rental and property prices due to gentrification effects, especially in tourist localities and places of high esthetic value. Problems arising from rural gentrification processes are particularly stressed in the literature on rural homelessness, and especially that on hidden homelessness (Milbourne and Cloke, 2006). Counterurbanization mobility, pursued thanks to idealized rurality, has fueled the demand for farmland and rural housing thus inflating property prices beyond the reach of low-income rural households. Such unequal competition in the increasingly expensive property market tends to displace poorer locals towards sub-standard housing, creating new forms of homelessness. This type of competition may also exclude crisis-driven return migrants with expectations of a low-cost home and affordable living in a "resilient and safe countryside", thanks to family property and parental networks.

Research in rural Greece has highlighted the controversy over the existence that dwelling in the village is a valuable asset in the process of counterurbanization. Either in rural areas where people are still fully involved in agriculture (Anthopoulou et al., 2017) or in the prosperous mountain regions, whose economic development is based on tourism (Anthopoulou and Petrou, 2015), family housing in the countryside has been a pull factor for the urbanite, but at this point it may also play a role in undermining a new type of proletarization and hidden homelessness, as will shall see below.

3. MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

The paper draws on ethnographic material from an on-site investigation in a rural area of Western Thessaly. It is a relatively remote area characterized by depopulation and an aging agricultural population, low-intensity farming (fragmented agricultural land,

mainly dry cereal crops and a few small family sheep/goat farms) and a declining forest economy, including the wood industry (connected to small furniture factories).

Pathways into poverty and hidden homelessness were explored using the methodological tool of "narratives" and "lived experiences" of five people from the case study area, in order to meet two main objectives: i) shed light on personal poverty trajectories that lead to invisible aspects of homelessness and deprivation in the countryside and challenge dominant assumptions of idealized rurality associated with "problem-free" rural living; ii) discuss the role of family networks and family-owned property in terms of rural resilience performance through more affordable paths for crisis-hit urbanites to relocate to the countryside against a background of economic turmoil.

Research into "pathways" of housing exclusion has gained interest in the relevant literature in the past decades (for instance see Anderson and Tulloch, 2000). In fact, pathways offer an in-depth analysis of lived experiences and contribute to a better understanding of the perplexity of the different stories and different roads that people take before they end up homeless. Through their narratives, we may not only understand how they ended up in such a socially vulnerable condition (what has happened) but also how they might get out of it by addressing the reasons behind their current condition (why did this happen) (Papadopoulou and Kourachanis, 2017, p. 70). The theoretical concept of "critical moments" (see for example Kwan, 2017) was also embedded in our research. People were asked to recall moments of their life paths that were very important and had critical consequences in their lives or identity.

Our questionnaire for the semi-structured interviews was built along several axes: i) the life story of each participant (place of birth, studies, first jobs, lifespan, mobility between village and city and vice versa); ii) lived experiences of the crisis (starting point, causes, emotions, identity in the new place; iii) the role of family (material and moral, expectations for the safety net, ex-post evaluation); iv) housing, coping strategies including social benefits and employment opportunities in agriculture; (v) expectations for the future.

Despite all the methodological drawbacks and lack of a commonly accepted terminology of poverty and homelessness (especially in rural areas) we selected five people who have returned to their village of origin under the pressure of the economic

crisis (loss of a job, eviction). This condition was aggravated by personal misfortunes (divorce, serious accident) or family emergencies (illness, death of a family member, etc.), without, however, excluding personal choices for a better life in the countryside. For some of them, returning from the big city (usually the Athens metropolitan area) to the village was not done at once but gradually, by making a first stop to the nearby small town, until the sovereign debt crisis (2009) encouraged them to return definitely to the home village. In any case, these people are now at risk of experiencing poverty and precarious housing conditions.

With the help of a local key informant, we identified five stories (Table 1). Our local key informant, the Director of the Municipal Public Benefit Company provided the first insights on the matter and came up with a possible list of people to approach. We had certain selection criteria from the pool of Social Solidarity Income (KEA)[2] beneficiaries, namely: gender balance, different educational levels, people only from the economically active population (not pensioners), and, of course, the interviewee should have returned to the village in the past 10 years or so, after a spending quite some time in a big city. Interviews were conducted in spring 2018 and lasted between one to one and a half hours. All, except one, were audio recorded and all ethical guidelines were followed, anonymity of the participants was achieved by the use of aliases and informed consent was given prior to the interview.

The first important step after the conclusion of the interview was the transcription, which was manually done and involved careful listening and reading of the field notes. Using a grounded theory and narrative analysis approach, we wanted to understand the different dynamics at a local level and to contribute to expanding knowledge on the nature of invisible but existing and growing aspects of homelessness, embedded in the current social, political and cultural context of rural Greece.

[2] The Greek Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme, broadly known as KEA (i.e. SSI) combines three pillars: monetary support, social integration services, and social activation services. For example, the maximum amount of monetary support is €200 for a single adult, with access to free medical and pharmaceutical care, as with the former types of services (in the case of beneficiaries who, for whatever reason, may have no access to health provisions). Social activation services include actions targeted at the labor market integration or re-integration of the participants, as exemplified by participation in vocational training programs. Qualifying individuals have to meet criteria for residence, an income ceiling and asset limits (see Sakellaropoulos et al., 2019)

Table 1

Key features of the five participants in the field research

**** The names used are aliases***	**Male, 53 years old *(Stefanos)***	**Female, 50 years old *(Maria)***	**Male, 55 years old *(Kostas)***	**Male, 48 years old *(Dimitris)***	**Female, 37 years old *(Sofia)***
Family status	Married, 2 married adult children	Never married / no children	Divorced with 2 children, minors	Divorced with 2 children, minors	Married with 2 children. minors
Education/ training	Elementary school, Self-taught car mechanic	Nursing Studies (higher education)	Elementary school, Self-taught car mechanic & traineeship in shipyards (abroad)	High School, Technical vocational training in computer systems, traineeships (abroad)	Studies in tourism (abroad)
Employment	Unemployed since 2009. Small farmer since 2017 and performs occasional chores	Unemployed since 2015 (underemployed 2010-2015)	Unemployed since 2010	Unemployed since 2012	Unemployed since 2015
Social benefits	"Housing & social inclusion" State programme	Social & Solidarity Income (SSI/ KEA)	Social & Solidarity Income (SSI/ KEA)	Social & Solidarity Income (SSI/ KEA)	Social & Solidarity Income (SSI/ KEA)
Steps back to local rural community/ motives	2017: social housing programme - nearby small town	2004-2010: nearby small town (resigned from work in Athens) 2010: economic crisis/village	2010: economic crisis	2004: small town (father's death) 2009: economic crisis/village	2012: seeking a better quality of life & crisis effects /village
Housing conditions	Rented comfortable apartment in nearby town (social housing) but lives in his mother's dilapidated village house (more convenient)	Family house, good standard quality accommodation	Dilapidated family village house (co-ownership with cousins/ undivided) Inadequate accommodation	Family house- good standard quality accommodation	Family housing, modern but very small for family needs
Living with	his wife	alone (with her parents until their death 2011 and 2016)	his mother (passed away in 2017), now alone	his new family and his mother	her husband and children

4. HIDDEN POVERTY TRAJECTORIES AND HOUSING PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE SHIFT FROM URBAN TO RURAL. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM WESTERN THESSALY (GREECE)

4.1. *Personal pathways of deprivation moving from the city to the village*

All respondents, regardless of their educational level, had a remarkable social and vocational life path. In particular, those born and raised in the village migrated to the city at an early age either to study or to seek a job, as the countryside did not provide the necessary resources to make a living. In the city they managed to organize their own households and complete a good vocational course, achieving a more-or-less comfortable standard of living. For some, the reason they returned to the village was because of personal misfortunes or family circumstances (e.g. serious illness, divorce) coupled with crisis effects and austerity measures (dismissals, wage cuts, family business closures, household over-indebtedness). For others, the decision to move to their village of origin was purely the quest for a more peaceful life, as living conditions in the big city had become intolerable due to the widespread anguish caused by the crisis, misery and social alienation.

Stefanos (53 years old) a "self-taught vehicle mechanic", as he said, having just graduated from primary school, he started his working life at the age of 12. He was involved, firstly in a car repair shop, and then at the age of 18, he worked on boats, to return to the village after 8 years (during 1990), when he opened a makeshift tractor repair shop. He subsequently migrated to Germany (1996) to work in a tavern. Most of the time, he worked uninsured. He returned to his birthplace in 1998 due to his brother's severe illness. Unfortunately, a serious traffic accident left him out of the labor market for 2 years. Thanks to his social and technical skills, as he mentioned, he found a job in a used car company in the nearby town (that was during 2001), traveling occasionally to Germany to procure merchandise. However, the financial crisis (in 2009) and the collapse of the car market resulted in his unemployment, indebtedness (due to the car accident and legal costs), absolute poverty and a situation of housing precariousness. He moved in the village in an old brick house that his

mother had given to him in a miserable state as it had suffered serious damage from an earlier flood (1994).

In 2017 the municipality's welfare service included him in the "Housing Reintegration" program, renting him an apartment in the nearby town while also subsidizing the setting up of a sheep farm in the village. Yet Stefanos still barely makes a living. He is a typical case of a vulnerable person whose accumulated personal debts within the restrictive financial crisis environment do not allow him to escape the poverty trap. As he pointed out:

> *"I feel well skilled to survive, although I'm only a primary school graduate, I can communicate in 3 languages, I surf the internet looking for business ideas while I correspond with a Japanese company to import used bikes to Greece... but where to find the funding for all that? This is the question".*

Maria (50 years old) was born and raised in the village until the age of 18, when she left to study nursing. She worked in a hospital in Piraeus, from which she resigned for personal reasons and returned to the village to live with her parents (during 2004). For 5-6 years she managed to make a living through subsidized training seminars and placements at public health institutions in the nearby small town. At the same time, she worked on the family farm to help her parents. The economic crisis found her practically unemployed and socially isolated, while also experiencing the stigma of the unmarried spinster. Between 2011 and 2016 her parents – who provided her emotional and economic support – passed away. Since 2015, as a formally unemployed person, she has benefitted from the Social Solidarity Allowance.

> *"In the village everyone watches you and gossips. I have some girlfriends, we can go out for a coffee, I can go on an excursion with the Women's Association, but I'm careful, I don't talk about my personal matters, because the people in the village aren't at the same level as those in the town, they are less refined… I don't want to give anyone any excuses, for example I won't buy from the grocer on credit as they will take me for granted, they will always be asking me for something…".*

Maria's case is a reminder of the gender dimensions of poverty and social deprivation, especially in rural areas. More specifically, women seem to be more

exposed to the impacts of the crisis, not only because of their already poor labor market attachment and opportunities compared to men but also because of their weak social participation. It also highlights how poverty is much more severely experienced by single adult households, as the sharing of resources can help to circumvent material deprivation (Bennett and Daly, 2014).

Kostas (55 years old) was born in the village but left for Athens at a very young age with his mother. He started working at the age of 16 year as a vehicle craftsman, and then in a large shipyard, while specializing through internships in the Netherlands and Sweden. In the mid-1980s, he was forced to return to his birthplace because his child had health problems. He worked as an employee at a car dealership in the nearby small town, although he was fired (1990), after which he opened his own garage (not legally licensed) in the same town. Due to the financial crisis, he was forced to close his workshop and transport all the machinery to the yard of the village house, where it was exposed to natural erosion and was gradually damaged. Since then, he has experienced major financial hardship due to long-term unemployment and social exclusion from living alone, without family or close friends. He is divorced; his children have left the family home in search of opportunities in Athens, while he recently lost his mother (2017), with whom he lived under the same roof; she was the one supporting him by her low retirement.

> *"I live completely alone… in the village there's nothing for you to pass the time, just a coffee house where the same people gather and say the same boring things. Here they think you're strange if you don't do the same things as everyone else… and if you want to go to the neighbouring town you still need money for petrol. But there's still nothing happening there… I prefer a walk in the woods, in nature…".*

Kostas, being long-term unemployed and living below the poverty line with only the Social Solidarity Allowance as income (180 euros/month) is trapped in an emotional and psychological dead-end that does not allow him to make any life plans. His path towards poverty and housing deprivation reflects another typical case of people with professional and social skills, but whose unfortunate personal circumstances (divorce, illness, etc.), against a backdrop of severe crisis, trap them in extreme poverty.

Dimitris (48 years old) was born in the village and after completing high school and his military service, he undertook technical vocational training in computer systems in Athens, working at various jobs at the same time. Being a creative spirit, he benefited from a *European* traineeship in computerized systems and the automation of ship engines in the Netherlands as well as from a placement with IBM in Berlin in programming languages. In Athens he was "well connected", as he said, for 10 years and made a lot of money. In 2004, when he was in his thirties and living independently, he decided to return to his place of origin by choice, as the only son and protector of the family, after the death of his father. He opened two small businesses in the nearby small town, a cheese pie shop and a store selling jewelry. Here he also married and had a child. His businesses were doing well, but when the crisis broke out (2009), he decided to close one and sell the other because tax and insurance contributions for small enterprises had increased. Between 2009 and 2012 he found work as a truck driver for a large dairy farm because, as he underlines, *"the countryside could still absorb the shocks of the crisis. Farm subsidies, domestic tourism in the region sustained revenues... the crisis began to arrive later"*. Since 2012 he has been unemployed and also separated from his wife, living in the village where he settled in his mother's home. In 2014 he met his second wife and had another child. Dimitris is pleased with his decision to return to his family home, because although this was a mandatory choice as a result of the crisis, he believes that the village offers a better environment for a family with young children (nature, healthy eating, friends). In other words, it is a typical case of "aspirational counterurbanization" in which preconceptions of rural life, fueled by notions of community, nature and safety, especially for children, motivate urban dwellers to move to rural areas (Anthopoulou et al., 2017).

Sofia (37 years old) was born in Athens and studied tourism in the UK, after which she returned to Athens (2006) and did various jobs to survive, although not in her subject area. In 2012 at the beginning of the economic crisis, just married, she and her architect husband (39 years old) decided to settle in his small mountainous home town, which is a well-known domestic tourism destination. The idea of living in the countryside had always intrigued them, albeit their initial plans to settle in a coastal region, due to their love for the sea and their professional dreams (in tourism and architecture). The economic crisis hastened the collapse of the construction industry

and, as a safe step, they relocated to his village of origin, as *"there was the house, a base to start from, and if we failed we could pack our suitcases and go back, we weren't risking anything ... then the children came and we put roots".* In the small town that they moved to, they opened a bathroom-tile shop with the help of a European grant (NSRF programme for young professionals) but due to the crisis, it closed within three years (2015, compulsory stay in the programme). Her husband finally found a job (during 2016) as a designer in a nearby community furniture business (8km), while she is still unemployed and is in receipt of the Social Solidarity Income. With two young children (6 and 4 years of age) and despite their financial difficulties, she does not regret moving back to the village, considering the better living environment for raising their children.

> *"Here I can survive. I would not go back to Athens for anything; I cannot stand the crazy pace, the misery, the criminality, the homeless people on the street... We see and hear cases of people, even acquaintances, being stabbed, a friend committed suicide ... Here in a small community the locals would be ashamed to see poverty and hardship. They will bring you a dish of food. There is still humanity".*

Sofia is struggling from economic distress, but she feels that in rural areas there is still a safety net based on humanitarian values. Her narrative reveals that in the rural phenomena of extreme poverty would not be accepted. Physically visible poverty in their community would contradict moral values, which are firmly rooted in rural life and the rural idyll, to such a degree it is as though poverty is "screened out culturally" (Cloke et al., 1995, p. 354).

4.2 *The myth of employment opportunities in rural areas. The poverty trap*

Rural areas are deemed to provide employment opportunities in farming and in rural entrepreneurship, notably for young people inclined to innovation and a business-oriented career. However, it is not usually taken into account that the crisis has also affected the countryside, agricultural incomes have been dramatically reduced (increased production costs, over-taxation), and farmers are experiencing market failure (global market oligopoly), while living conditions for rural households have deteriorated considerably due to the squeezing of the welfare state (Anthopoulou et al., 2017). Stereotyped perceptions that many city dwellers have of agricultural

employment and the *"easy money"*farmers supposedly make are contradicted during our field research.

> *"People are left with the impression that farmers receive thousands of euros of subsidies and indemnities without doing anything. This applies to a very small portion of farmers. Most of them struggle and end up selling at the street market and they do not even make enough for their everyday life. It's not an easy job, a flood, hail can easily ruin them. The occupations here in the village are not as lucrative as people in the city think". [Sofia]*

Access to transport also seems to further aggravate the problem of limited employment opportunities and the structural disadvantages of the rural labour market. The use of a private car is a key factor in finding a better qualified and paid job outside the place of residence, since public transport is in decline in rural areas (Woods, 2005). Nevertheless, local people may be unable to cope with the cost of running a car in order to find a suitable job or even to commute daily to work – once it has been found – in neighboring areas, since the additional income of a more highly-skilled job would have been offset by transport costs. Transport becomes a serious concern that can further entrap the already poor local population into a condition of wider deprivation, not only in terms of working alternatives but also of the need for distractions, especially within the context of the psychological stress caused by a crisis.

"My husband fortunately found work in the area. It's not far, 10 minutes by car. We're really scared, however, that the car might break down, where we will find the money to get it fixed" Sofia says, pointing to the dependency on cars in rural areas. Whereas Dimitris says characteristically: "*I can't go to the close city for a beer. I worry about the petrol. It's not the fact that I live in the village that's not to blame, poverty is to blame"*.

Going "back to the land" and farming new dynamic crops or becoming involved in an "innovative food craft enterprise" is another promising professional perspective. Filtered through the rural idyll, it is deemed as inspiring city dwellers, especially those affected by the crisis, to move to rural areas. Nevertheless, attempting to establish themselves in agriculture would be meaningless if returnees do not possess fertile farmland, sizable enough to ensure an economically viable farm

holding, as well as machinery, and technical and marketing knowledge. Stefanos, was established as a sheep farmer through the subsidized social programme, has been struggling to stand on his own two feet for almost two years.

> *"I cultivate 1ha vetch hay for the sheep. I don't have machinery so I hire a farmer. How am I going to pay him? They [the people from the programme] didn't think of that! I repair his machines and he does the plowing for me. Mutual help. Anyway, I have no money to give them".*

Some of the participants in the research would very much like to work in agriculture, but for a business to flourish amidst the productivist agriculture system stumbles in many constraints. Capital and extension services in training and consulting are seriously lacking.

> *"With 0.8-1.0 ha of abandoned land you do not get a serious living. I only replanted an old single vine of 0.2 ha, just to make my own wine. I tried to get involved in novel crops.., so I contacted export companies involved in the snail business, I met some interest but they wanted special cultivation standards .... The farmer is not well informed, especially about promotion of the product". [Dimitris]*

> *"We have no agricultural land, but I would be interested in working for an agricultural enterprise. But these are all just fashionable. They tell you to grow mushrooms, snail farming, truffles... But if you get into the process of looking for all this you will see that the procedures to finally produce this truffle, you will find it difficult, too difficult and uncertain. It takes years, you have difficulties, it must be your life's goal. And, finally, the help [from the programs] is not that great". [Sofia]*

Obviously the experience of finding work or setting up a business for individuals living in rural areas is still difficult, obstructed by a series of barriers including under-employment and labour market disadvantages with regard to appropriate skilled jobs and earnings, the lack of a targeted policy to support newcomers to agriculture and rural crafts, the decline in the provision of social services (childcare, health, public transport); all this further erodes rural incomes and entraps individuals in poverty and deprivation.

4.3 *Housing conditions: "homeless at home"*

Idealistic images of the countryside as the idyllic myth of "the rose-covered cottage", to quote Woods (2005, p. 231), and social stereotypes about a frugal rural life conceal more often the existence of poor housing conditions. This results from a number of factors, including the age of existing housing stock, property abandonment by out-migrants and its deterioration over time, the relatively high cost of house maintenance and repairs, and inadequate electricity or water supply facilities. Besides physical factors, social factors and living conditions may also be conducive to what is identified as "homeless at home" in order to stress the inadequate housing conditions.

From the in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of counterurbanites in the area, the lack of a standard quality of housing related to age is a prominent feature. Basic amenities such as mains electricity or running hot water, a bathroom, and heating may be missing due to the severe economic hardship of rural households, notably in mountainous and remote areas. When Kostas returned to the village years ago, he settled in the family house along with his – then still living – mother. He owned an "undivided" house with his cousins, who live in Athens and do not visit the village, and he decided to fully occupy the house according to the legacy percentage to which he was entitled. He thus repaired one room as well as the kitchen and toilet, covering a total surface area of 30 square meters. The rest of the house, which remains uninhabited, has deteriorated over the years and is now dilapidated. Physical security related to age is consequently another quite common feature of hidden homelessness in rural areas: the risk of a falling roof and lack of protection against cold and natural hazards may jeopardize the security and health of the residents.

> *"I am pleased to have a tile to put over my head. The space in which I live is enough for me... I have a wooden stove and I do my job. I gather logs from here and from there, I do not buy them. The house is of course falling apart, the whole upper floor is a ruin, the roof half fallen in".*

The lack of sufficient living space is also presented as a facet of homelessness at home. Since in-migrants take advantage of existing rural houses that usually do not have the facilities of urban houses or they convert seasonal holiday homes into permanent places of residence, they find themselves limited to uncomfortable living conditions that did do not offer sufficient vital space, functionality, and privacy. Sofia

has settled in her mother-in-law's house, which was used as a holiday home. In fact, this is the legacy share of a larger family home on a large plot of land with lush vegetation and a view, which is shared by 5 households (cousins) and used occasionally as a holiday home. The house in which she lives with her family (2 children aged 6 and 4) is only 45 square meters: two rooms, a kitchenette and a bathroom, renovated by her architect husband, to make it as functional as possible.

> *"The house is small but serves our basic needs. A room is reserved for the children and they even have a bunkbed to sleep in... Thankfully they are still small, so do not need space to read. In the other room, my husband and I sleep on a sofa bed and this same room is also used as the living room, where we eat and watch TV. It is also the children's playroom. Of course, when they play and throw down their toys, I have to take the dishes from the table, there is no room to walk around .... Summer does not matter. We have this lovely courtyard ... all our life is outdoors. We have almost exclusive use of it, because our relatives do not come here often... maximum for just one month. In the winter, however, we cannot have friends visit us at home... Having a little house can be a good thing when you do not have enough money, it gets hot quickly, you do not need much heating, and the ENFIA [house tax imported since the crisis] is low".*

The question of adequate living space and privacy becomes more significant when returning people have to live in the same home with their parents or other relatives. This is something that is also considered hidden homelessness. As they said cohabitation with elderly parents means interference. Dimitris who returned to his father's home and lived there with his family (him, his wife and their 6-year-old child), highlights the conflicts arising from the so-called "generation gap", as he attempts to capture the different everyday cultures of rural life between generations, but also between natives and returnees.

> *"My mother behaved strangely due to her age. She would argue with her daughter-in-law all the time over how clean things were, my wife is a maniac… my mother doesn't wash things properly, it's also because she can't see well… And I, when we came to live here, I told her to round the hens up, they can't roam around in the yard and poop everywhere. It's a matter of hygiene, how could we do it… Another thing that bothers me is the way*

people talk… I don't want my child to talk with the thick, with the heavy local accent, to be stigmatised as a provincial".

In any case, the "family home in the village" remains the first guarantee for low-income "crisis counter-urbanites", which would potentially encourage them to return. Maria believes that it is thanks to her parents' home that she was able to return to the village. She is lucky because *"they had renovated it before the crisis, and it has all the comforts, 2 bedrooms, an indoor bathroom, radiators ... of course I only put it on in the room where I sit... for electricity I am entitled to a social electricity bill because I am unemployed".* Yet, if the family house offers sub-standard housing conditions, renting a house to better meet the household's needs is not really an alternative for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a very poor supply of houses for rent in rural areas, as housing stock is dominated by owner-occupied properties. Secondly, although rents are not high when compared to those in towns, the burden is still too great for the tenant's budget given that they are all dependent on welfare payments (Social Solidarity Income). As Sofia says: *"There are no houses to rent, and whatever you find will be like what you have already. But again, there is no money to rent a larger home".*

Despite the fact that he has a rented house for 2 years in the nearby small town (Housing & Reintegration Programme), Stefanos continues to live in the village house that his mother had given him so as to be near his sheep. He highlights something very relevant to the literature, that sloppy village houses are rented by tenants who are unable to afford to live in the larger towns (Woods, 2005, p. 275), including poor locals below the poverty line and foreign migrant workers. In addition, the absence of locally provided social rental housing also impacts on rural hidden homelessness (Cloke et al., 2001b).

"The house was damaged by the floods, I repaired it myself ... for warm water and heating I have a boiler that I made myself, my own patent, burning wood that I collect wherever I can, where to find money to buy it? ... The house has a living room, 2 rooms, kitchen, bathroom... the available space is more than enough! [laughing sarcastically], but forget any comforts. There are no houses for rent in the village. In all the villages the houses have been rented by the Albanian economic immigrants. And do not think that are of some quality ... it's like mine".

4.4 *Residual public housing interventions*

The phenomenon of inadequate housing conditions is inherent in the Southern European welfare states through the residual intervention of public housing policy (Ferrera, 1996; Allen et al., 2004). When this takes place in the years of a crisis, it leads to a double negative consequence. While housing problems are being exacerbated, housing support measures, which are poor in any case, are being reduced even further (Kourachanis, 2019). This fact has been discussed in previous studies, which take the urban environment as their starting point (for example, Arapoglou and Gounis, 2017; Papadopoulou and Kourachanis, 2017). The findings of the field research in a rural area in Western Thessaly Greece also confirm the aforementioned.

In other words, the family remains the main institution of housing provision in rural areas, housing is provided in old village houses that their families gave to the interviewees. Despite the poor housing conditions, this appeared to be the only housing option available to those returning to their place of origin in response to a crisis. It is remarkable that even in the limited cases where housing has been provided by the state, it has not been adapted to the particular needs of rural reality. The Housing and Reintegration programme, structured on two pillars: Housing and Reintegration has specific objectives a) in the direct transition to autonomous forms of living through the provision of housing and social care services and b) in the return to the community by providing services for reintegration into employment (Kourachanis, 2017). However, the implementation of the programme does not appear to have taken into account the specific conditions of its operation in rural areas. Stefanos who was one of the beneficiaries of the Housing and Reintegration programme, says that although the package of housing and social benefits that he received was good, the fact that appropriate adjustments were not made so as to make it applicable to rural areas undermined its effectiveness. As he points out what is required "is better-targeted, case-specific assistance" indicating for his case not rental payments but help for productivity.

This paradoxical fact is, according to Stefanos, evidence that those responsible for implementing these types of programmes are not really interested in their social effectiveness: *"Those who work in social services are ignorant. They do not know people's real needs, they do not examine the problem, they leave it and go somewhere else, they do not care. All they care about is to close pending disputes"*. Stefanos

comments about the indifference of social services employees towards the real impact of social interventions recall the relevant literature that underlines the necessity of both policy planners and those implementing the policies to be aware of the real circumstances of the problem. This can only happen through continuous interaction with the recipients of the social benefits and through participatory social policy planning (see, for example, Corwall and Gaventa, 2001).

Despite the comfortable rented apartment in town, thanks to the programme, Stefanos, chose to reside in the house at the village because of his farm work: he must permanently be near his flock while his wife works in the family orchard and rears poultry to achieve self-consumption. Although he is a beneficiary and he acknowledges this, Stefanos is again outraged with the politicians because the benefit for the purchase of ewes was delayed due to bureaucracy while expenses were piling up. Consequently, it was not possible to get round to selling lambs at the Christmas market to get his money back. As he said he was ruined and he still owes to suppliers and banks. As he quoted the programme has a lot of flaws. It is well intended but *"the people who run the program are ignorant. They sit in their offices on the phone and go around looking for votes. They don't come up here to find out about the problems from up close",* and making an evaluation of the whole programme, he says:

> *"What should I do with the rented apartment? I go and look at it and leave. The farm work is such that you can't stay in the town, you go to the farm in the morning, you go at midday, you go in the evening and the ewes give birth and you are there all night. And I say to them: listen guys, don't rent me a house. Turn the rents into animal feed. Let the enterprise stand on its own two feet now, from the start. Or at least repair my own house in the village. 'No', they say to me, 'it must [be used for the apartment rent], that's what the Program says'. This is one of the mistakes with the programme…".*

Stefanos' case shows that normative definitions of homelessness within a top-down and "one size fits all policy" do not resolve the housing problems of deprived people, especially in rural areas. In a similar way, policies that only focus on housing provision as a solution to poverty and homelessness are not sustainable, when localized community-based and culturally informed understandings of home, living in a house, and homelessness are not taken into account through more participatory policy-making processes (Zufferey and Chung, 2015).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The crisis has obviously contributed significantly to the intensification of the country's social problems, which has been especially evident within the urban environment. In this context, the rural structures of the Greek productive model and the extensive, albeit informal, solidarity networks that center on family protection have favored the emergence of the argument that returning to the village and the countryside is a resilient solution to the multiple effects of the crisis. The purpose of this paper has been to examine empirically whether this scenario is a viable solution, or whether it is a standard reproduction of media discourse. The scholarly literature has articulated such stereotypical portrayals that idealize life in rural areas. However, living in the countryside is accompanied by equally unfavorable housing and living conditions in general.

Hidden forms of homelessness are emerging emphasizing the inadequacy of living conditions in rural areas. Various housing problems such as the lack of a large housing stock, the high rates of improvised and inadequate housing, rising prices due to touristification and the lack of direct access to basic services are some of the causes of the emergence of housing exclusion. In the Greek case, there are additional reasons that reinforce these assumptions. Substituting family solidarity for residual housing does not always provide adequate housing conditions. Forced cohabitation, where all family members are under the same roof, the high number of arbitrary and improvised buildings that are tolerated by the state, and the deterioration of household purchasing power due to the economic crisis appear to have led to deterioration in housing and living conditions.

From our field research, we can observe that extensive phenomena of housing precariousness and hidden homelessness in rural areas have emerged, sometimes hidden and other times overt. Our interviewees were people with advanced technical and hands-on skills and a rich professional experience. The impact of the economic crisis led them to return to the village in order to secure more favorable living conditions. However, returning to the village triggers a new process of social marginalization. Poor conditions in the family home, the inability to find decent employment and the limited support afforded by the family, due to the great cuts in

income as a result of austerity, have resulted in trapping them in poverty and the risk of social exclusion.

These cases confirm the reservations that have been voiced about the viability of a return to the village as a solution to overcoming the economic crisis and its adverse impact on the income of vulnerable citizens. These reservations are even greater when we consider that the return to the countryside is not accompanied by a coherent set of supportive housing and employment policies in the relocation areas. Greater exploration of these issues, in conjunction with the collection and exploitation of quantitative data, can provide more documented responses to such concerns.

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