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Dimitrios Kritas, Stylianos - Ioannis Tzagkarakis, Zoi Atsipoulouliaki, Symeon Sidiropoulos

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The contribution of CSR during the covid-19 period in Greece: A step forward¹

Dimitrios Kritas², Stylianos - Ioannis Tzagkarakis³, Zoi Atsipoulouli⁴, Symeon Sidiropoulos⁵

Abstract

The spread of the Covid-19 brought global institutions, societies, states and economies in a critical position as they encounter a new worldwide multilevel crisis. At the same time, states have had to handle this crisis acquiring an interventionist role, protecting the social and economic cohesion, providing better health care services for their citizens and investing in scientific research, as a means to restrict this new pandemic. In order to handle that situation and its consequences, the use of all the available resources became necessary as well as the improvement of the cooperation between the private and the public sector. In Greece private sector has shown an unprecedented willingness for Greece's CSR tradition, to contribute government's efforts.

Introduction

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a concept has been developed both theoretically and practically in different countries and periods. Nevertheless, it has been further developed and analyzed during the last 60 years of the 20th century (Carroll, 1999). Despite the fact that there are many definitions for CSR and in several occasions scholars do not offer a clear definition for it, McWilliams and Siegel define CSR as these “*actions that appears to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law*” (McWilliams & Spiegel, 2001: 117). Theoretically, CSR can take place in different ways and for different reasons and aims. But the recent unexpected and multifaceted coronavirus crisis has shown up a different perspective in CSR; and many brands all around the world offered money, production lines, capabilities and material

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² Dimitrios Kritas is PhD candidate, University of Crete. He is also Vice president of the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists, Field Manager of the Public Policy and Administration Research Laboratory, University of Crete, Scientific Associate of the Laboratory of Health Economics and Management (LabHEM) of the University of Piraeus and Researcher of the Center for Political Research and Documentation (KEPET) of the University of Crete. (correspondent author)

³ Dr. Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis is Teaching Fellow on Comparative Public Policy and Postdoctoral Researcher (with scholarship from the State Scholarships Foundation-IKY) at the Department of Political Science of the University of Crete, Greece. He is Field Manager of the Centre for Human Rights (KEADIK) of the University of Crete, Deputy Director of the Scientific Council of the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists (HAPSc) and Member of the Steering Committee of the ECPR Political Culture Research Network.

⁴ Zoi Atsipoulouli is Political Scientist - Supervisor of Crete's Delegation of the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists (HAPSc).

⁵ Symeon Sidiropoulos is Political Scientist, President of the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists (HAPSc), Scientific Associate at Laboratory of Health Economics and Management (LabHEM) of the University of Piraeus and Associate Researcher of the Center for Human Rights (KEADIK) of the University of Crete, Greece.

resources to produce assemble items which are needed in order to treat and contain the new coronavirus pandemic (Marom & Lussier, 2020: 257).

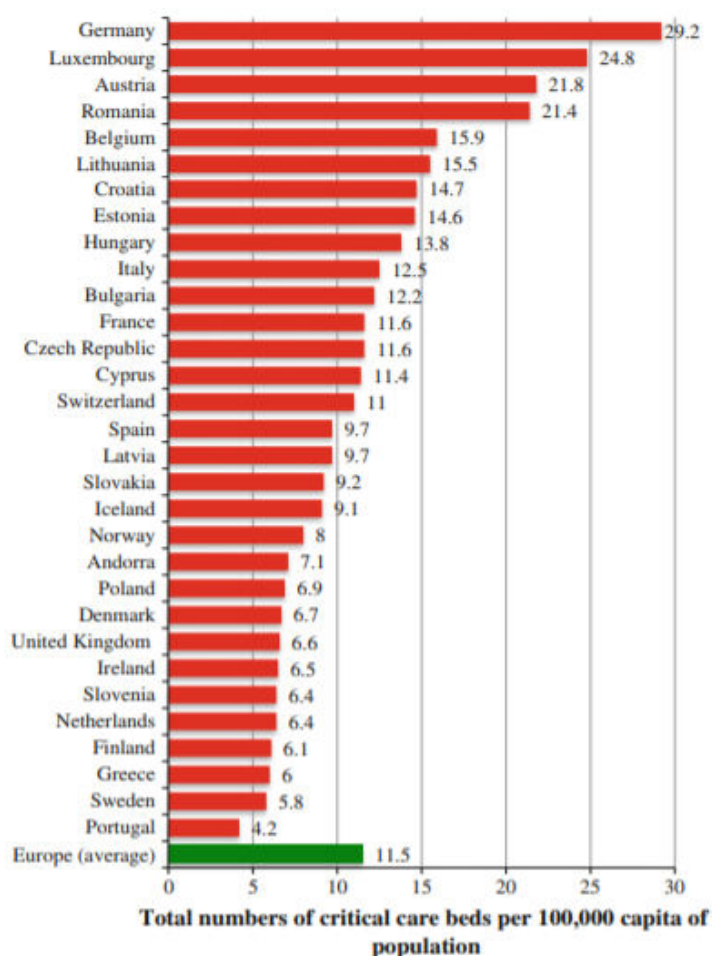
Background of the situation and CSR in Greece

In order to understand the crucial meaning of CSR in the Greek case during the coronavirus crisis, it is important to mention that a) in 2019 Greece had just started to recover from a 10 year economic, financial and debt crisis, which means that the expenditure on social policy and healthcare had been reduced since 2009, and b) the Corporate Social Responsibility tradition and culture is generally weak in Greece.

Several scholars had claimed that “*while CSR in Greece appears to be developing, there is still scope for improvement and further diffusion of relevant practices*” (Skouloudis, Evangelinos et al, 2011: 205). Furthermore, CSR in Greece seems to be at a low assimilation level by society, businesses and the state. However, these three pillars have to work hard in order to reach the EU level of CSR (Metaxas & Tsavdaridou, 2010: 41). In other words, it is widely supported that Greece belongs to the countries with late CSR development in an organized way (Stampoulis & Dimitriou, 2015).

CSR during coronavirus in Greece

While the coronavirus crisis was spreading, the Greek government started an attempt to increase the available intensive care units (ICU), the number of which was far below the European average, and to provide all the necessary means to healthcare personnel. According to the Greek Prime Minister's, Kyriakos Mitsotakis statement (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 2020), in January 2020 there was 5,5 intensive care units (ICU) for every 100.000 inhabitants, while in July 2020 there was 7 ICU for every 100.000 inhabitants and the aim is until December 2020 to achieve the European average of 12 ICU for every 100.000 inhabitants. The available formal data from 2012 seems to agree with this Prime Minister's statement and place Germany in the top of EU ICU per citizen, with 29.2 per 100.000 inhabitants, Greece 6 ICU per 100.000 inhabitants and Portugal at the bottom of the list with 4.2 ICU, while the average of EU was at 11.5 per 100.000 inhabitants.

Table 1: Intensive Care Units in EU per 100.000 inhabitants

Source: Rhodes, A., Ferdinande, P., Flaatten, H. et al. (2012: 1647–1653).

From the early beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek Government asked for voluntary assist from private sector in order to support the national healthcare system and provide all the necessary materials to healthcare personnel, as a way to strengthen CSR during the COVID-19 era. A few months later, at the presentation of donations to the National Health System from private sector, which was organized by the Ministry of Health, as a recognition of contribution, at May 7, 2020, it was announced that 865 companies, organizations and institutions had already provided funding to the National Health System. The total amount was calculated at 89.1 million euro (Greek Ministry of Health, 2020a), providing funding about critical medical equipment, means of personnel protection as well as ICU beds. Furthermore, several private companies announced the full redefinition of their CSR program in order to fully respond to the new pandemic challenges.

Table 2: Funding to Greek NHS during COVID-19 from private sector until May 2020

Medical equipment	40.1 million in €
Means of personal protection	26.2 million in €
Deposits	12.5 million in €
Other categories and species	5.8 million in million in €
Building renovation	6.5 million in €
Total	89.1 million in €

Source: Greek Ministry of Health (2020b).

This process was very important both for the improvement of CSR culture in Greece and practically will help the Greek government to handle successfully the crisis. The improvement of CSR culture in Greece at this period is a basic finding of a recent research from Global Link (2020) which mention that 58% of big and foreign companies have CSR and the 79% of them has a CSR plan and they enrich it.

In order to understand why these donations were practically important in order to handle the pandemic there is nothing more than to study the formal data of the donations. According to the Greek Health Ministry's data of May 7, 2020, the contribution of private sector to the public was 1,228 monitors for ICU, 1,051 respirators, 595 beds for ICU, 177 patient stretcher, 172 portable respirators of patients, 20,252,348 masks, 330,199 surgical uniforms, 160,397 full body protective clothing etc. Thus, through these donations government prepared the system during the general lockdown and reinforced the NHS.

Table 3: Indicative examples of private's sector contribution to Greek NHS

monitors for ICU	1.228
respirators	1.051
beds for ICU	595
patient stretcher	177
Other	Yes
Total in million (€)	40.1
different types of masks	20.252.348
surgical uniforms	330.199
full body protective clothing	160.397
Other	Yes
Total in million (€)	24.2

Source: Greek Ministry of Health (2020b).

Conclusion

The cooperation of public and private sector is very important, because it could reinforce social cohesion and especially, offer solutions during an emergency situation. The companies' social responsibility and their participation to a common plan to handle a crisis can be determinant. Although the "Greek success story" of the first phase of the pandemic is based different reasons such as management of the crisis, organization and information, CSR was also a positive response to the crisis. However, it is important to highlight that it is necessary to make a step forward from the context of understanding CSR as a philanthropy action, but to turn it into an organized, continuous policy that can lead to a more sustainable and equal society.

Implications and Recommendations

The Greek case of successful management of COVID-19 pandemic can give some conclusions for best practices also about CSR and the recognition of its contribution to the society. From that case, we can conclude that it is important the government to provide motivations to private sector in order to develop corporate social responsibility policies (CSR). Also, transparency and public accountability both for the governmental and the private sector CSR programs is necessary. Especially in times of crisis, government should conduct needs assessment initiatives in order to collect empirically grounded data and based on that, give periodical directions to stake holders about the real social needs of CSR, where it can be developed, how it should complement state's actions and policies, thus setting up some crucial aims and directives. That means practically the introduction of a general plan with which private and public sector and social partners as well will be able to flexibly cooperate and offer positive outcomes to the society.

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