

Economic and humanitarian crisis in urban neighbourhoods

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SUMMARY

The Greek Ombudsman investigated in 2015 social exclusion and multiple deprivation problems which have arisen due to the economic and humanitarian crisis in Greece. The case study areas were hot-spots of multiple deprivation in Athens. The main issues investigated included quality of life problems and in particular housing conditions, housing loss, access to public spaces and services as well as availability of information regarding social policies aimed at vulnerable groups.

The aim of the project was to examine the impact of urban and social planning policy and measures in ameliorating the social exclusion of vulnerable groups. More specifically, the aim of the research was the identification of the area – based social exclusion/ segregation problems and the role of existing social support networks (local authority and other local initiatives). A special emphasis was placed on the role of mediation by the Ombudsman and of NGOs. The survey included collection of complaints to the Ombudsman as well specially designed questionnaires.

The presentation will focus on the results of the spatial analysis of the survey and a comparison to the data of total Ombudsman complaints in those areas.

This article is based on the field research launched by the senior investigators of Greek Ombudsman (GO) and analyzes its results concerning matters of quality of life. This research under the title “Economic and humanitarian crisis in urban neighbourhoods” is presented in the GO site <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/160121-apotelesmata.pdf>

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Greek Ombudsman (GO) seeks to strengthen human rights and anti-discriminatory policy measures for groups vulnerable to social and economic exclusion. Moreover, the GO is an established antidiscrimination mechanism with particular emphasis on the promotion of *activities and measures for groups vulnerable to social and economic exclusion* in Greece and promotes the development of its role and strategy in the implementation of field activities and communication actions, focusing particularly on xenophobia and hate crime. Furthermore, the GO aims to address the rights of the socially and economically excluded individuals and groups of people from various viewpoints and to mediate for the improvement of social and civil protection mechanisms of the Greek State.

The planning of these activities, is based on the data and the GO's past experience in relation to the implementation of the Principle of Equal Treatment, on international research data as well as on the findings of previous national and European campaigns against discrimination.

After the implementation of these activities, a systematic evaluation of effectiveness has been held by recording the data related to the beneficiaries of each action (number of involved administrators, citizens/users of the services provided and members of the vulnerable groups serviced), the publicity attracted through the Mass Media, the number of visits to web pages, the number of complaints submitted etc. Gender as well as the physical disability dimension has been taken into account in all the activities.

2. RESEARCH ON VULNERABLE SOCIAL GROUPS¹ IN SPECIFIC REGIONS OF ATHENS, CONCERNING THE MULTIPLE URBAN AND SOCIAL DEPRIVATION, DURING THE ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The GO has participated in the Program “GR08 Solidarity and Social Inclusion in Greece”, which has been financed by the EEA Grants (Norway).

2.1 Scope

This project focused on deprived urban areas and vulnerable social groups (eg unemployed, homeless, economically weak persons, immigrants etc) and investigated the effects of the crisis on social exclusion and multiple deprivation conditions.

¹The GO has published a “Guide for vulnerable social groups” in December 2015, <http://www.synigoros-solidarity.gr>.

2.2 Description of the action

In hot-spots of multiple deprivation in Athens and specific municipalities in western Athens, GO has investigated social exclusion and multiple deprivation problems which have arisen during the last years of crisis, including low quality of life, bad housing conditions, housing loss, inadequate access to public services and to information received by vulnerable groups.

The aim was to examine the impact of urban and social planning policy and measures in ameliorating the social exclusion of vulnerable groups. More specifically, we have investigated the area conditions – based social exclusion/ segregation problems and the role of existing social support networks (local authority and other local initiatives). A special emphasis was placed on the role of mediation by the Ombudsman and by NGOs.

A case study survey was carried out in selected neighborhoods/municipalities of Athens, and included a number of complaints addressed to the Ombudsman as well specially targeted questionnaires.

More specifically, an *in situ* research was conducted through contact with citizens, by distributing the questionnaire through which they had the opportunity to submit their complaints, at the Municipalities of Nikaia – Agios Ioannis Rentis, Perama and in specific neighborhoods (Kypseli - Agios Panteleimoinas - Ano Patisia) of Athens Municipality. In order to conduct its research, GO has cooperated closely with the municipal authorities, for the selection of the appropriate locations for the survey interviews. The *in situ* research was conducted, from February until April 2015 by approximately 50 senior investigators of GO².

The interviews took place mainly at the spots of municipal services of the study areas. In addition, interviews were also conducted with passing by citizens at the open area of the public market of Kypseli.

In total, 651 questionnaires have been collected, which are distributed as follows:

Municipality of Agios Ioannis Rentis: **14**

Municipality of Nikaia: **134**

Municipality of Perama: **34**

Municipality of Athens: - Area of Agios Panteleimoinas **15**

- Area Ano Patisia **77**

- Area of Kypseli **377**

Finally, the results of data and spatial analysis were compared to the data on total Ombudsman complaints in those areas.

2.3 Survey preparation, implementation, and dissemination of findings

The main stages of the research project were:

- Design of a questionnaire related to complaints and issues investigated by the Ombudsman.

² Annual Report of GO 2015, page 18, published at the site of GO <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2015-00-stp.pdf> and 45th Newsletter December 2015- January 2016, <http://www.synigoros.gr/pop?i=kdet.el.newsletter45>

- Conducting field research by Ombudsman staff based on the questionnaire.
- Analysis of the complaints and questionnaires as well as submission of conclusions by the Ombudsman staff and statistics specialists.
- Presentation of the particular project and its findings at a conference with active participation of NGOs (approximately 60 participants): central and local urban planning offices, social policy departments of local authorities, NGOs active around housing and social policy issues, local initiatives. The conference took place on Wednesday 20th of January 2016 at the Cultural Centre of the Municipality of Athens.
- Finally, a radio spot addressing vulnerable groups and their related problems was created and aired by public and private radio stations in all regions of the country in July 2017.

2.3.1 Structure of the questionnaire³

The methodology applied for the structure and length of the questionnaire, as well as for the type, form, content and order of questions has as follows:

- questions were arranged in axes related to the scope of the research.
- questions recorded demographic characteristics and opinions on the specific issues as well as wider “conjuncture” themes.
- more closed-ended questions (YES/NO) were used, which can more easily be processed both at the field and at the stage of analysis.
- questions concerning the subject of research and questions of knowledge and opinion precede demographic questions.
- the duration of each interview did not exceed 15-20 minutes.

As far as the collection of data from the field is concerned, our aim was to fill out all questions. In cases in which there were difficulties or lack of time, demographic questions and specific questions related to quality of life problems that concern the area of residence and illegal constructions (axes i, ii, iii and iv) received priority.

The questionnaire was organised in the following axes:

- i. Problems concerning the region of residence.
- ii. Safety in the region.
- iii. Illegal constructions.
- iv. Incorporation in social policy measures – conditions of living.
- v. Demographic characteristics.
- vi. Questions of knowledge and opinion.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

3.1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

In the questionnaire men as well as women were represented, roughly at same percentage. Women constitute 50.7% of the total sample, while men 49.3%.

³ Κωστής Κουτσόπουλος, *Ανάλυση χώρου: Θεωρία, μεθοδολογία και τεχνικές*, Τόμος I: Μεθοδολογία, Βασικές Μέθοδοι, Εκδόσεις Δημηκεές, 2006, σελ. 115, επ.

The age-related distribution of the sample is as follows:

Age	Percentage
16-19	2.16%
20-29	8.32%
30-39	13.71%
40-49	18.03%
50-59	23.42%
60-69	18.34%
70+	16.02%

As far as their educational level is concerned, the participants were mainly high school graduates (30.4%). The percentage of college graduates was 22.9%, primary school graduates were 12.2%, junior high school graduates 11.5%, higher technical education graduates 7.6%, high school graduates 6.9% and graduates of Master's degree 6%. The percentage of those who acquired a doctoral degree was as low as 0.5%. Finally, a very small percentage admitted that they have only followed several classes of primary school (1.5%) or they have never gone to school (0.2%).

A 57.6% of the respondents are married, whereas only 23.7 % are unmarried. 65.6% of the sample did not have children under 18 years old, while the rest 34.4% did.

The majority (45.6%) of the families with children answered that have only one child under 18, 43% have two children under 18, 8.8% have three children and finally, 2.6% have four children. 27.3% of the respondents have children between 0-5 years of age, 34.5% have children from 6-12 years old and 34.5% have children from 13-18 years old.

The vast majority of the participants answered that they do not receive any financial benefit at a percentage of 84.9%, while only 15.1% of the respondents received some form of benefit. The majority of households, 44.6%, are extended families (couple with children and other relatives). Childless couples follow at a percentage of 17.9%, and singles follow at a percentage 15%. The special type of extended family (couple without children and other relatives) reached a percentage of 9.1% while single parent families accounted for 8.5% of the sample.

The vast majority of the participants (88%) were Greek citizens. 5.3% had Albanian citizenship whereas 4.2% were citizens of other countries of the European Union, while a very small percentage of 1.5% were citizens of African countries.

The respondents are salaried workers at a percentage of 39.5%, unemployed at a percentage of 29.8% and pensioners 26.5%. The total sum of unemployed and pensioners overpasses 50% of the sample (56.3%).

Out of those in employment a percentage of 56.9% are salaried in full employment 26.1% are self-employed and 13.7 % in part time employment. A very small proportion declared that they are employers (2.6%) or that they work in a family business with no remuneration (0.7%).

The majority 64.8% of salaried workers are employed in the private sector while 35.2% work in the public sector.

Regarding the insurance status, 83.8% of the participants have social insurance, while 16.2% does not.

The vast majority of the sample (75.3%) are owner-occupiers.⁴

3.2. Problems concerning the area of residence

3.2.1. Urban environment-Housing stock

Regarding their area of residence, the majority of the sample replied that they face problems related to the following issues:

- 55.2% replied that they consider the condition of public spaces (pavements, squares etc) and their maintenance as a problem,
- 53.4% answered that they consider the empty-abandoned buildings as a problem and
- 52.2% answered that they consider the availability of free public spaces (squares, parks, children's play grounds) as a problem.

3.2.2. Entrepreneurship and residence

As for the operation of enterprises, stores in the area of their residence (for example food and leisure establishments, car and motorcycle repair and service shops, small manufacturing firms etc), the majority of citizens answered that they do not face any problem, while 20.6% answered that they do⁵. These problems refer mainly to the operation of food and leisure (50%), and more specifically the occupation of public space, noise pollution⁶, while 14.6% of the participants answered that they do face problems with the operation of car and motorcycle repair and service shops.

⁴ Property issues constitute a considerable percentage of the citizens' complaints to GO since the beginning of its function until today. The Department of Quality of Life of GO has issued a Special report under the title: "Expropriation, compulsory deprivation of property rights, restriction of use and compensation. Problems of administrative actions" (April 2005). <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/apalotriosi.pdf>

⁵ The Department of Quality of Life of GO has recently issued (July 2016) a Special report regarding Entrepreneurship and the protection of the environment. See <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/eidikh-ek8esh--2.pdf>

⁶ The Department of Quality of Life of GO regularly investigates complaints concerning the function of establishments subject to sanitary control. The main problem of citizens is noise pollution. See indicatively the *PORISMA* regarding noise pollution caused by establishments subject to sanitary control (July 2013). <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/pporisma.pdf>

3.2.3 Road and transport Infrastructures

As for the road network and urban transport planning, the majority of citizens answered that they do not face any problem, while 45,6% answered that they do. The problems are, for the 40,9% of the sample, the damaged pavements and the defective maintenance of road surface, while 28,2% considers a major problem the poorly maintained road network.

3.2.4. Homeless – immigrants – ethnic minorities

To the question regarding the presence of homeless persons in their neighbourhood, the individuals of our sample answered, as follows:

- 8.7% answered that a large presence is observed,
- 11.9% answered that a relatively large presence is observed,
- 31.9% answered that a small presence is observed and
- 47.5% answered that there are no homeless people present.

To the question regarding the presence of immigrants in their neighbourhood, the citizens answered, as follows:

- 47.8% answered that a large presence is observed,
- 17.6% answered that a relatively large presence is observed,
- 25.1% answered that a small presence is observed and
- 10.7% answered that that there are no immigrants present.

Finally, to the question regarding the presence of Roma in their neighbourhood, the citizens answered, as follows:

- 14.3% answered that a large presence is observed,
- 11.6% answered a relatively large presence is observed,
- 26.6% answered that a small presence is observed and
- 48.1% answered that there are no Roma present.

3.2.5. Aggregate Ranking of problems regarding the area of residence

Respondents were asked to rank the problems of the problems in the area in order of importance. The results were as follows:

- Public spaces (availability/access-condition): 24.2%
- Roma, immigrants, homeless: 23.1%
- Road and Transport Infrastructures: 18.9%
- Traffic conditions: 9.2%
- Noise pollution: 7.0%
- People with disabilities: 5.3%
- Closed shops/abandoned buildings: 5.0%
- Waste management: 3.1%

From the above findings we observe that the citizens consider as the most serious problems for their area issues related to urban planning, particularly the issue of availability/access of

free public spaces (squares, parks, children's play grounds) and also the conditions and maintenance of these spaces.

To sum up the results from the research reveal that issues of urban environment and its infrastructures constitute the main problem in the neighbourhoods of Athens and Western Attica.

3.2.6. Problems in the areas of residence and economic crisis

Furthermore, the citizens were asked to relate the above mentioned problems with the ongoing economic crisis. In particular they were asked to assess whether these problems worsened.

The replies show the following as being mostly affected by economic crisis:

- Presence of Immigrants: 17.7%
- Public spaces (availability-condition): 16.3%
- Homelessness: 14.7%
- None: 14.7%
- Infrastructures (networks of water supply, road network, parking): 8.3%
- Closed shops/abandoned buildings: 6.7%
- Other: 6.7%
- Roma presence: 5.3%
- Transport/circulatory regulations: 4.0%
- Establishments subject to sanitary control (KYE): 2.0%
- People with disabilities (AMEA): 1.7%
- Thefts/safety: 1.7%
- Unemployment/financial problems: 0.3%

We observe that the citizens consider that due to the last five-year period of the economic crisis, issues such as the presence of immigrants and homeless people, the availability and the cleanness of public spaces have worsened.

3.3. Living conditions in the areas of residence

The distribution of answers to the question "how satisfied you are from the conditions of living in your area?", was the following:

- 27.2% answered that they are very pleased,
- 55.6% answered that they are little pleased and
- 17.2% answered that they are not pleased at all.

3.4. Access to social policy programmes - living conditions of households - financial situation

An important percentage of the sample (27.8%) was not aware of the possibility of access to the special discount rates that are applied for specific categories of vulnerable customers of NATIONAL ELECTRICAL COMPANY. The remaining (72.2%), who were aware of this

particular policy, answered at a percentage of 17% that they have already been beneficiaries of the above mentioned discount rate.

48.5% of the respondents faced problems, during the preceding five-year period, related to the payment of debts, that mainly concerned bank loans and credit cards (50.6%), taxes (10.2%), rents and maintenance charges of tenement buildings (6.3%) and tuition fees for schools and private tutorial centres (2.8%).

17% of the participants lack land telephone connection. Also, a significant percentage does not have personal computers, nor access to the internet (23.2% and 27.7% respectively).

3.4.1 Energy poverty

A considerable percentage of the sample (29.2%) answered that their needs to heating/cooling, cooking, hot water, refrigerator and electricity are not sufficiently covered. 80.2% of the above mentioned percentage reported that they cannot meet their basic needs of heating/cooling due, primarily, to financial reasons (75%).

17% of the participants answered that the electrification or the water supply of their residence has been interrupted due to unpaid bills. The highest percentage (45.5%) of the above mentioned respondents reported that the services were interrupted at least once or twice. Moreover, a large percentage (24%) of the respondents made a settlement of their due debts with the NATIONAL ELECTRICAL COMPANY or the WATER COMPANY OF ATHENS AND PIRAEUS.

Part of the sample (12%) who live tenement buildings reported that there was no central heating due to the old age of the buildings. From the rest who live in buildings with central heating, 23.4% answered that it was not operation since 2010, mostly due to financial reasons (58.6%).

The respondents who live in tenement buildings, where no central heating exists or is operating, use, as a means of heating, stoves (liquid gas, hails, halogen, kerosene) at a percentage of 33.14%, air-condition at a percentage of 29.14%, and thermal accumulators at a percentage of 21.71%. It is worth noting 4.57% of the sample does not use any means of heating.

17% of the participants reported that they receive a heating benefit.

To sum up, one of the most important problems in the areas where this research was conducted is that of energy poverty. Also, quite important is the finding that a considerable percentage (17%) is deprived of land telephone connection, while a significant percentage does not have a computer, nor access to the internet (23.2% and 27.7% respectively). This last fact may reveal, not only some kind of financial poverty, but also low interest due to lack or low education.

3.5. Access-to social services provided by solidarity networks

3.5.1 Public social welfare

10.14% of the sample members mentioned that they have never approached networks of health care of their area for medical reasons. Also 10.14% declared that they have not used social security services, which exist in their locality. A possible reason is that people in poor neighborhoods are not aware of the above mentioned institutions, so as to apply to them for help or they feel rather inconvenient with communicating their financial problems to other people.

Furthermore, 13.33% of people who were interviewed mentioned that they have not applied to the responsible local institutions for social welfare (benefits, benefits of non insured people, people with some sort of disability etc.). It is worth mentioning, however, that a percentage of 74.20% did not answer this question at all. This high percentage may be equally explained by unawareness, which has its roots in the lack of information or due to their aversion to publicly present personal issues.

Finally, regarding the question related to the creation of annexes/offices of public services in the areas of their residence, 18% of the participants answered that they would welcome the establishment of such offices of health care and social welfare, 16.3% of social insurance, 14.2% of public utility companies and finally 12.5% of public tax offices.

3.5.2 Alternative solidarity networks

The majority of the respondents (78.87%) answered that they have never approached any kind of NGO for social issues. The rest of them (21.13%) used these networks, either on a daily basis (33%), or on a regular basis, that is 2-3 times a week (14.8%), or monthly (33.3%). The networks used where:

- Food allowance schemes for the poor by churches (25.53%)
- Social groceries (19.15%)
- Social medical centres (6.78%)
- The Doctors of the World (6.78%)
- Social pharmacy stores (4.26%)

Moreover, the majority of the sample (63.4%) mentioned that in their neighborhood several initiatives of solidarity were active (exchange of goods, supply of goods of first need by neighbors etc.), which, according to the opinion of most of them (65.8%) were efficient. It is noteworthy that only one quarter of the citizens in the neighborhoods that GO investigated has visited, most of them regularly, some sort of solidarity network of social benefit. This is indicative of the efforts of most inhabitants to overcome difficulties they face on their own, without seeking help from social solidarity organizations. It is encouraging nevertheless that such initiatives of solidarity have been developed by several institutions, some of them being founded during the period of economic crisis.

3.6. More general attitudes-Opinions

3.6.1 Citizens-Institutions-Public Administration

Most of the participants in this research place their confidence to the institution of Citizens' Service Centres (KEP) at a percentage of 83.43%, then follows GO at a percentage of 77.29%, the Armed Forces at a percentage of 70.81%, Municipalities at a percentage of 54.26%, the Manpower Employment Organization (OAED) at a percentage of 53.76%, Security Forces at a percentage of 57.72%, Church at a percentage of 51.31% and other independent monitoring authorities at a percentage of 49.02%.

In addition, 47.51% of those interviewed expressed confidence to the Government, 46.81% to the Social Security Organizations, while Health Services come next at a percentage of 45.1%, Courts of Justice at a percentage of 44.21%, NGOs at a percentage of 42.08%, Football and Basketball teams at a percentage of 41.71%, public tax offices at 41.10% and the services of Ministries at 36.71%. In terms of confidence Banks scored a percentage of 34.32%, European Union follows at a percentage of 32.41%, Greek Parliament at a percentage of 29.75%. The last positions are filled by the Mass Media at a percentage of 25.19% and by political parties at a percentage of 18.02%.

It is also worth noting that the citizens who participated in this particular research express their confidence mainly to institutions designed for their help, such as Citizens' Service Centres or GO. At a relatively good level stands the status, for the inhabitants of the areas examined, of the public health and security providers, of the Courts of Justice and of the NGOs, playing an important role to the refugee problem that has arisen in the past year. It should also be stressed that the people sampled feel a very low confidence for the Mass Media and for political parties, since they believe that neither of the two institutions can help them resolve their problems.

As the most important problem in their contact with public services the respondents indicated the unreasonable bureaucracy and red tape they encounter at a percentage of 36.7%. Serious problems also constitute the long queues at a percentage of 29.7% and insufficient information and poor service at a percentage of 24.7%. Moreover, 9% of the respondents mentioned other problems, such as non-professional behavior (impoliteness and lack of credibility) at a percentage of 52.2%, corruption and understaffing at a percentage of 6.5% each. Finally, a high percentage of 23.9% answered that they do not face any problem, arguing that positive change has taken place in several public services, with the improvement of the behavior of personnel towards citizens. Unfortunately, though, some of the problems observed in the past in Public Administration institutions seem to prevail, such as clientelism, insufficient information, corruption. To sum up, citizens still have the feeling that they are not fully and adequately served, dealing with a bureaucratic system of administration and facing dismissive behavior on the part of civil servants.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Greek Ombudsman has for the first time in its history conducted this type of field research which included the design of a survey related to complaints and issues that GO is investigating, in specific hot-spots of multiple deprivation in Athens and specific municipalities in western Athens, where citizens were invited to respond to a questionnaire.

The GO has observed that the problems described in the complaints filed by citizens are similar to those found through the field research. More specifically, the citizens consider as the most serious problem that their areas face issues of urban planning, particularly the issue of availability of well-maintained free public spaces. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, according to the survey participants, such issues as the presence of immigrants and homeless people, as well as the availability, access to and condition of public spaces have worsened the last five-year period due to the economic crisis. Besides, an important percentage of the participants stressed that they are unable to cover their basic needs of heating/cooling due to economic hardship. Overall, the vast majority of citizens are little or not satisfied at all from their quality of life conditions

In conclusion, it is encouraging that initiatives of solidarity have been developed by several institutions (both public and NGO) with the creation or use of specific networks, although unfortunately the majority of citizens do not make use of their services.

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