

The Social Impact of the ‘Social Solidarity Income’ in Greece: A Qualitative Interpretation

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Outline

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Introduction-1

- Focus on the ‘social impact’ of the so-called ‘Social Solidarity Income’ in Greece (hereafter SSI) and, more specifically, on two inter-related themes:
 - The social situation of the beneficiaries and the survival strategies used by them both before and after becoming recipients of the SSI;
 - Aspects of the SSI that should be improved at the implementation stage.
- The SSI as an example of a ‘guaranteed minimum income’ and part of the so-called ‘minimum income protection’
- The role of the recent crisis and austerity programmes in triggering the relevant debate

Introduction-2

- The establishment of ‘last resort’ institutions as a major component in the emergence of a ‘new’ welfare state
- Greece, the only southern European country (and one of the few European countries) not to have experimented with a GMI up until the 2010s, decided (in 2012) to institute a pilot GMI.
- Two phases of GMI implementation eventually took place, in 2014–2015 and 2016 (in 13 and 30 municipalities respectively), followed by nationwide implementation in 2017.
- The Greek GMI, broadly known as KEA (i.e. SSI), combines three pillars: monetary support, social insertion services and social activation services.

Introduction-3

- This paper seeks to add to the literature on the evaluation of minimum income protection and, more specifically, on that on the Greek GMI.
- The main research question that the paper intends to answer concerns the ‘social impact’ of the SSI, as reflected in the social situation of beneficiaries, their survival strategies and the ‘effectiveness’ of SSI components.
- It is argued that the ‘social impact’ of the SSI is relatively weak, an outcome that is linked to severe inadequacies, such as the low amount of the monetary allowance, or the fact that key SSI pillars are essentially non-functioning.

A Brief Overview of the Literature-1

- The literature on the evaluation of minimum income provisions, and, more specifically, on their impact, relatively underdeveloped, but fast-growing
- Part of the broader bibliography on ‘social minima’ and should therefore be viewed in conjunction with three wider and largely overlapping trends in the social policy bibliography:
 - The literature on the ‘effectiveness’ of anti-poverty programmes;
 - The literature on the effect of means-tested provisions;
 - The literature on the social integration of participants.

A Brief Overview of the Literature-2

- The literature on the evaluation of minimum income provisions addresses various subjects, which, in a broad sense, all relate to ‘impact’ (e.g. the coverage and take-up of minimum income provisions, the effect of the assessed provisions on income and mainly poverty-related indicators, their ‘adequacy’, etc).
- Over-dominance of quantitative approaches (largely based on the use of micro-simulation methods, such as the EUROMOD micro-simulation model), as opposed to qualitative approaches (based on the use of ‘traditional’ qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups)
- Overall, mixed results that often question the ‘success’ of the foregoing programmes and provisions.

A Brief Overview of the Literature-3

- E.g. existence of variation in the development of pillars other than the monetary allowance pillar, such as the ‘activation component’ of minimum income protection in different countries; also variation in the impact of minimum income provisions on the social integration of beneficiaries
- Only a few efforts have been made to assess the implementation of the GMI in Greece.
- Furthermore, evaluations of the implementation of the GMI have been carried out solely by two organizations: the National Institute for Labour and Human Resources and the World Bank (twice).

A Brief Overview of the Literature-4

- These evaluation efforts largely focused on the administrative dimensions of the GMI, highlighting, for instance, problems in the cross-checking and verification of the data of participants. No particular attention was paid to the so-called ‘social’ impact of the GMI.
- Only the second World Bank evaluation (this time quantitative and based on data collected through a nationally representative survey, carried out by KAPA Research, a survey firm based in Greece) indicated, inter alia, that the SSI is a significant source of income for households in the bottom decile and that it reduces the poverty gap and inequality.

Research Methodology-1

- The paper draws on the findings of an ongoing mixed-methods research project, which started in May 2018 and aimed at assessing aspects of the SSI in Greece. Expected end date: January 2020.
- The social impact of the SSI is one of the three main thematic areas covered by the project (the other two being the characteristics of the beneficiaries and the implementation of the SSI).
- Field research was conducted at the ‘Community Centres’ in five municipalities/case studies: the Municipality of Keratsini-Drapetsona (Attica), the Municipality of Rethymno (Crete), the Municipality of Arta (Epirus), the Municipality of Kavala (Macedonia) and the Municipality of Leros (Dodecanese).

Research Methodology-2

- The selected municipalities all participated in the 2016 phase of the SSI: between 14 July and 31 December.
- The selection of the five aforementioned municipalities reflects the effort made by the research team to ensure the greatest possible geographical representation of the municipalities participating in the 2016 SSI phase (given also the limited funds and timeframe of the research project).
- 40 semi-structured interviews with administrative staff (i.e. local community centre staff) and SSI beneficiaries between August and December 2018 [15 with community centre staff and 25 with beneficiaries (12 men and 13 women)]

Research Methodology-3

- In terms of the community centre staff, the researchers interviewed the coordinator of the centre and other social scientists and members involved in the implementation of the SSI at the community centre level.
- Effort to include representatives from major SSI target groups. The selected beneficiaries were hence individuals of productive age with characteristics of vulnerability: the homeless, single-parent families, immigrants, single-person households, and people close to retirement age.
- Two separate interview guides, one for the community centre staff and one for beneficiaries.

Research Methodology-4

- The former included questions, among other things: on the characteristics of vulnerable social groups in the local community; the means used for social intervention by the state and local actors before implementing the SSI; the importance of different SSI pillars; and the role of the SSI in strengthening the social integration of participants.
- The interview guide for beneficiaries included a short narrative concerning the pathway of participants towards extreme poverty, followed by questions on the coping strategies beneficiaries developed and the means of material support they received before joining the SSI, the influence of the SSI on their daily life, etc.

Research Methodology-5

- Research limitations:
 - E.g. quite often beneficiaries who had agreed to be interviewed in the end cancelled. For this reason, the research team had ensured in advance cases of beneficiaries with similar social characteristics as substitutes;
 - Or difficulty in determining the relative effect of factors other than the crisis (e.g. the decline in tourism or the reform of EU agricultural policy) on the social situation of SSI beneficiaries (mostly meaning their poverty experience).

Research Data-1

- *Social Situation of Beneficiaries and Survival Strategies Before and After the SSI*
- Long-term unemployment as the most important reason that led beneficiaries to fall into a poverty trap.
- Although in all five case studies the combination of crisis and austerity measures had a negative impact on the lives of beneficiaries, the research reveals the existence of differences, which are in line with the particular characteristics of each case study. For example, in the Municipality of Arta, the decline in the quality of life of the population has been exacerbated by a blow to agricultural activities due to the economic crisis and the negative impact of the EU common agricultural policy.

Research Data-2

- ❑ Prior to joining the SSI, beneficiaries did not receive any ‘solid’ social support from the state or municipal authorities. The few social benefits received by the beneficiaries were offered on a fragmentary basis and without any substantial effect in improving their living conditions.
- ❑ The beneficiaries developed survival strategies that made use of and benefited from informal forms of solidarity, especially those of family members and kin networks.
- ❑ A large number of beneficiaries continued to use the same survival strategies, i.e. mostly to depend on family support, even after receiving the SSI.

Research Data-3

- ❑ The SSI does not essentially help beneficiaries escape poverty, but it is important for their daily survival: it is a means of ensuring their everyday food and other essential necessities (e.g. the payment of electricity bills); broadly speaking, it ‘stabilizes’ their living conditions.
- ❑ Although the SSI concerns an extended and heterogeneous population of beneficiaries (the homeless, single mothers, etc.), the research findings do not reveal a differentiated effect on the representatives of different groups of beneficiaries.
- ❑ Overall, the monetary allowance, which forms part of the SSI, is so low that it does not leave space for variation in its social impact.

Research Data-4

- ❑ An additional point of major concern is that the vast majority of beneficiaries continue to participate in the SSI during its nationwide implementation.
- ❑ Beneficiaries do not perceive access to the SSI as synonymous with social stigmatization. On the contrary, beneficiaries view the SSI as a quasi-right and as a minimal ‘compensation’/response from the state for the rise of social inequalities and extreme poverty, due to the severe implications of the crisis and austerity policies.
- ❑ The SSI the first ‘structured’ intervention utilized by the Greek state to combat what has been dubbed the phenomenon of ‘extreme poverty’. However, it does not seem to have a wider impact on the lives of beneficiaries.

Research Data-5

- *Aspects of the SSI to be Improved at the Implementation Stage*
- ❑ General consensus amongst the interviewees on the positive effect of the social services that are linked to the SSI. These include, inter alia, access to benefits in kind, offered by the ‘Food and/or Basic Material Assistance’ Operational Programme, as well as access to public health services and hospitals.
- ❑ Both the community centre staff and the beneficiaries interviewed agree that, in its current form, the SSI appears to discourage participation in the formal labour market. Many beneficiaries choose to receive the SSI and, at the same time, work in the black economy to boost their income.

Research Data-6

- ❑ The most important aspect of the ‘social impact’ of the SSI is the unbalanced development of its three pillars, namely monetary support, social insertion and social activation services. Although the SSI had not been designed as a one-off form of cash assistance, it functions mainly as a financial aid.
- ❑ Social insertion services are unequivocally promoted by municipalities, whilst social activation services are essentially absent.
- ❑ Beneficiaries suffer from the severe implications emanating from the unbalanced development of the foregoing pillars and hope for improvements in the design and implementation of the SSI, as exemplified by the inclusion of beneficiaries in education and training actions.

Conclusions-1

- Positive aspects of the SSI: e.g. the monetary allowance, which, in practice, forms at this point the main component of the SSI, helps beneficiaries to organize their daily lives and manage their basic needs; access to social insertion services, i.e. the second SSI pillar, such as the social household electricity bill, as well as to benefits in kind and the public health services, is also deemed to be significant.
- Severe shortcomings overshadow these strengths: above all, the unbalanced development of the three main SSI pillars and the essential absence of social activation services, namely the third SSI pillar.

Conclusions-2

- These findings should be viewed in conjunction with the inability of municipal authorities to monitor the involvement of participants in the black economy and the tendency of beneficiaries to opt for employment outside the formal economy.
- The ‘social impact’ of the SSI is hence significantly lessened and a large share of beneficiaries continue to rely on the same survival strategies they used before receiving the SSI (especially family support).
- Future research on ways in which to improve the social impact of the SSI: e.g. by ‘strengthening’ its complementarity with other welfare provisions or the monitoring capacity of authorities.