

3. Community Resilience through the Influence of Grassroots Initiatives

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Abstract

The paper shows that the importance of German and Greek initiatives has risen significantly in the last years. The German movements are mostly reflected in the harsh criticism of political undertakings; many focusing on pro-environment action, as well as a fight for human equality and the inclusiveness of the society in need. Conversely, the Greek solidarity movements often act to diminish post-crisis austerity symptoms and battle against the ubiquitous failure of politicians in Greece to respect and provide fundamental human rights and needs. It becomes clear that German initiatives are prone to criticise socio-political governances, as well as environmentally-related actions to succeed and achieve their goals, whereas Greek initiatives are bowed to tackle the occurrence of socio-economic and political difficulties themselves directly.

**Community
resilience and
grassroots initiatives**

In the last decade, the number and the importance of grassroots initiatives raised significantly all around Europe, and especially in Southern European countries (KOUSIS 2017: p. 121). These self-organised and community-managed networks are based on active citizen participation and social interactions and present new types of crisis resilience initiatives within the private and civic sector, churches, and local authorities. This finds its expression in the term 'community resilience' which is defined as the process of communities to prepare for, adapt to and recover from various disasters or crises (THORNLEY et al. 2015: p. 23).

These grassroots initiatives are characterised by 'the adaptive and learning capacity of individuals, groups and institutions to self-organise in a way that maintains system function in the face of change or response to a disturbance' (MACLEAN et al. 2014: p. 145, see also BERGSTRAND et al. 2014: p. 393). This also means that social or community resilience is basically 'influenced by [...] institutions [...] and networks that enable people to access resources, learn from experiences and develop constructive ways of dealing with common problems' (GLAVOVIC et al. 2003: p. 290). Consequently, the grassroots initiatives thus have in common that they pursue common societal aims by addressing principles such as self-organisation, voluntary participation, mutual benefit, learning and adaptation (DRAKAKI & TZIONAS 2017: p. 204, KECK & SAKDAPOLRAK 2013: p. 7). Consequently, the actors – or the grassroots initiatives – have not only the capacity 'to cope with and adjust to adverse conditions (that is, reactive capacity) – but also search for and create options (that is, proactive capacity) and thus develop increased competence (that is, positive outcomes) in dealing with a threat' (OBRIST et al. 2010: p. 289, see also KECK & SAKDAPOLRAK 2013: p. 9).

The most significant influence and value on helping people in need, and therefore as well influencing urban and community resilience, is represented by the so-called solidarity movements (GIUGNI & PASSY 2001: p. 220). Those initiatives show a wide variety of solidarity practices, including local market cooperatives, cooperatives for the supply of social services, alternative forms of production, local currencies, etc. (KOUSIS & PASHOU

2017: p. 138). But how and to what extent do the undertaken activities contribute to strengthening urban and in particular community resilience (in times of the crisis)? What are the priorities of those initiatives? How do these initiatives differ in various contexts? What role do movements play in the political-administrative system and what influence do they have? Therefore, the paper reviews and examines the impacts of grassroots initiatives – more specifically solidarity movements – on forming resilience within urban communities in cities in Germany and Greece, respectively in Hanover and Thessaloniki. The primary objective of the paper is thus to identify and to analyse the influences of various grassroots initiatives on community resilience in different socio-economic and political-administrative contexts.

Greece has been selected as it is one of the European countries that have severely suffered from the economic crisis that hit Europe in 2008. The negative impacts of the crisis have appeared in economic and social spheres within the whole country, including the supposedly economically-strongest cities like Athens or Thessaloniki, which resulted in continuously growing debts, an increase of unemployment and homelessness, as well as the rise of people living below the poverty rate (ARMPATZI 2016: p. 2158). These outcomes of the crisis and the implementation of austerity measures by the Greek government were the driving force for forming many initiatives, whose main aim has been either selfless help to citizens in need and provision of essential components needed for decent living, or the radical, in many cases rioted, opposition to governmental actions (ibid.).

In the case of Germany, where the crisis has not been as powerful and affecting as in Southern Europe, the role of grassroots initiatives has a different focus. The general actions that are usually undertaken by the solidarity movements concern the current environmental issues related to climate change, such as a promotion of a vegan lifestyle, opposition to coal-based energy production or widespread tree cutting (THE GUARDIAN 2018). Moreover, worth mentioning are numerous initiatives on the German scene that deal with social inequalities within society, e.g. help with integration for migrants and refugees, as well

as supporters of politically-oriented doctrines - like Pro-Europe Movements (DEUTSCHE WELLE 2017).

Grassroots initiatives in Greece and Germany

With the help of qualitative methods, such as detailed literature research and conduction of interviews with local academics, founders of grassroots initiatives, as well as with local authority representatives, including resilience officers in the selected German and Greek case study cities, the influence of urban communities and grassroots initiatives on community resilience is analysed. Because of a high density of grassroots initiatives, Hanover in Germany and Thessaloniki in Greece were chosen in order to be compared. The cities are selected because of the similar spatial structure with a central core city and suburban environs as well as the nearly identical dimensions in size and population of their cities and their regions. Moreover, even though their role in the country - being second-tier cities, not the capital regions - is of lower significance, the occurrence of numerous active communities allows conduction of a detailed analysis.

In the interviews with local scientists and resilient officers, it became clear that the economic crisis in Greece from 2008 onwards was the main trigger and amplifier for the mobilisation of citizens (ARAMPATZI 2016: p. 2157). During this period, in particular, initiatives were launched to intercept existential benefits, which appeared to be decreased by the frequent implementation of austerity measures by the Greek Government. These significantly contributed to the further growth of the unemployment rate in the country and resulted in lower average income of the Greek citizens. Additionally, many essential services could no longer be obtained or paid for, and therefore, in order to meet this challenge and improve the situation, the initiatives had to step in. Since then, the number of initiatives in Greece has been steadily increasing, not only to fight back already-occurred economic and social outcomes of the crisis, but also because of, as claimed, too big dependency from the European Union (EU) and growing disappointment and mistrust towards the politicians of both - the Greek Government and the EU. It is one of the main reasons for their current status and relation, generally to politicians; therefore many of the Greek

movements stand up on their own, take care and govern themselves, and do not show willingness for any cooperation with officials. Nevertheless, some municipalities all over Greece, including Thessaloniki, have tried to reach out - in many cases with not necessarily satisfying results - to initiatives and movements that are based in their areas, to regain their trust and start a tight cooperation on various projects, which eventually might have aimed to increase not only community resilience but overall aspects of urban resilience.

In Thessaloniki, the cases of Perka Garden Initiative and Kinisi 136 Initiative are chosen to obtain a closer look on the local scene of grassroots initiatives, supplemented by interviews with public resilience officers and researchers. These two deserve attention due to their 'popularity' amongst local society, as well as the range of actions these two have so far done to bring people together and strengthen community resilience.



Fig. 1. Density in the city of Thessaloniki. Source: Śnieg

The Kinisi 136 is a citizens' initiative that opposes the privatisation of the water supply in Thessaloniki and instead aims to organise the water supply cooperatively with all municipalities of the Greater Metropolitan Area of Thessaloniki. As a driving force for protests against the actions of a central government in Athens, the movement was one reason why many citizens marched through the streets of the city and organised a referendum (STEINFORT 2014). The initiative played a major role in delaying the privatisation process. Founded in the summer of 2011, the movement has since focused on successful water

management in the Thessaloniki region. It also aims to protect the environment and natural resources and to enable rational use under public, non-profit, democratic and social control (KINISI 136 2018).

As a non-profit urban garden project for refugees, low-income families and the homeless, the Perka Garden Initiative enables people in need to grow their vegetables and fruits (PERKA 2018). One goal is to cultivate the products naturally and without chemical additives. With the help of urban gardening, the initiative aims to combat the crises mentioned above and thus strengthen the community resilience to the increasing poverty, prices and unemployment in the region. Although its legal status has not yet been fully clarified at the beginning and to some extent also today, the municipality of Thessaloniki began to support the Perka Initiative on a small scale, e.g. by supplying it with water. However, users are still in a legal grey zone because they are building their gardens on a currently unused military site for which they do not have an official permit. Nevertheless, Thessaloniki, being a densely-built city (see Fig. 1), has not many potential places, where urban gardening projects could be located entirely legally; therefore the initiatives are left with no alternatives, but to 'occupy' private areas.

Summing up, generally, the grassroots movements in Thessaloniki that emerged as a result of crisis-related hardship are usually anchored in legal grey zones or illegally. First of all, the initiatives are focusing on the delivery of urgent needs that have lately been harder to obtain, due to last decades' economic problem which negatively affected every single aspect of livability. Moreover, a try of resistance to political actions is further characteristic of initiatives in the city, especially opposing the 'buy-out' of public infrastructures as a consequence of neoliberal austerity measures.

The areas that they use for their actions are not officially permitted for such use, and in some cases not tolerated by the city officials. Furthermore, single examples of municipality-initiative cooperation, that focus on the increase of widely-understood resilience, can be found in the Thessaloniki. The resilience officers are the responsible ones for strengthening the bond to

initiatives as it follows one of the objectives of the newly introduced Resilience Strategy, by subsidising them with necessary knowledge and tools, e.g. allowing initiative-undertaken actions on a small green space in the central part of the city.

Nevertheless, in most cases, they are not supported by the government and politicians but mainly try to oppose their actions due to a high mistrust towards politicians. As an aim to boost citizens' trust, the national government has only recently passed new regulation for the support of solidarity movement. It is the sign showing the increased importance of these movements from a political perspective, but also a proof towards these actors that they have been highly neglected in the latest decades.

In Germany, the solidarity movements have been developed due to other crucial factors than in Greece. German initiatives (besides the support of migrants) are not focusing that much on life-threatening or basic needs while in Greece the focus is on these topics. Nevertheless, in both countries, the initiatives have somehow similar basis, and the same goal - namely a growing dissatisfaction of surrounding reality and an eventuality of better future, e.g. fight for rights to the city, affordable housing etc. These debates are firmly anchored in neoliberal discourses. Nevertheless, besides the similarities, the crucial difference is the level of institutionalisation of initiatives. Particularly, German movements and their actors often have a connection to political activities in the city and therefore are usually able to cooperate with local or regional authorities successfully.

The most significant focus is paid to healthier lifestyles, more conscious eating habits, concerns for the environment and future, as well as new considerations for aspects of livability are only a few reasons for the increasing mobilisation of citizens. Additionally, as known, they did not develop as consequences of powerful crises, but rather through societal and mindset changes that occurred over the last decades.

In Hanover, numerous initiatives mainly follow and focus on the trends as mentioned earlier that tend to exist all over Germany. As the examples for movements in Hanover, the "Internationale StadtteilGärten Hannover e.V." and the "Wissenschafts-

laden Hannover e.V.” were chosen to be analysed, due to their increased activity in building community resilience.

The Initiative Wissenschaftsladen Hannover e.V. is ecologically oriented and is committed to raising awareness and knowledge about the topic of sustainability. The initiative organises various events and activities in the city of Hanover in order to broaden the horizons of its citizens. In doing so, they not only want to impart knowledge but also fundamentally show people a more sustainable way of life (WISSENSCHAFTSLADEN HANNOVER 2018).

The Internationale StadtteilGärten Hannover e.V. would like to create a safe and protected place for migrants and locals in need. They do this by organising various activities in different community gardens in districts with a high proportion of migrants in Hanover. The association contributes to the formation of a community through events and contact during gardening. In addition, they supplement the possibility of cultivation with educational offers in the areas of foreign languages, nutrition, cooking and music (ISG HANNOVER 2018) (see Fig. 2).

Institutionally, both initiatives are supported by the city of Hanover. The support is the reason why both of them are seen as partnerships on the political and administrative levels. Consequently, they both receive human and financial resources to form successfully operating networks. These resources contribute directly to the formation of resilience since they support communities and strengthen bonds between and within them, which eventually might lead to more sustainable and resilient development of the city.



Fig. 2. Internationale StadtteilGärten in the city of Hanover. Source: Greinke

The examined initiatives have managed to build a well-functioning community that expands continually. The interest in them does not stop, which shows that there is a need in both cities to develop and promote resilient communities. The potential of these initiatives makes sense, both for the population and for the administration, because they help to bond society with authorities, as well as manage crises. They partly take care of providing the food of the gardeners and thus give them security. In addition, the people in the protected areas come into contact, can exchange ideas and build a community.

A significant challenge of the initiatives, however, is the (legal) continuity of the communities. In almost all initiatives, the members are fluctuating, and only a few remain permanently in the community. Those who stay are solidly anchored in the community and form an active core group that can well absorb the fluctuations. However, changing members is problematic for growing communities, especially in times of uncertainty and crises, they can cause further instability.

Overall, there are no significant differences in content between the initiatives in Hanover and Thessaloniki. They often pursue similar goals and similarly organise their movements. Usually, they decide to take care of themselves and other people in a sharing- or self-support system. Besides, it is noticeable that there are many different forms of cooperatives in both Greece and Germany that deal with various topics. Many initiatives have a leader or core group, which is well networked to local communities – and therefore knows their crucial needs – and in some case to city representatives, which allows them to develop and maintain their projects independently. Often solidarity movements succeed in raising new questions and answering sustainability issues (3S 2018).

Conclusion

Nevertheless, it is noticeable that initiatives in Greece tend to emerge out of necessity and therefore act more robustly than in Germany. It is resulting mainly from the fact that movements in German cities instead tend to criticise socio-political and ecological grievances whereas initiatives in Greece are inclined to an active struggle to reduce the occurrence of socio-economic

and political difficulties to gain some fundamental aspects of humanity. The context of the economic crisis has prepared the ground for alternative organizations and groups 'related mainly to urgent needs', on the one hand, but also to 'carve out a new type of politics through the creation of bottom-up participatory initiatives promoting a solidarity economy' on the other hand (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 141) The Greek solidarity movements thus aim to diminish post-crisis austerity symptoms and combat the ubiquitous non-respect of the human rights of Greek citizens by politicians.

It is noticeable that social initiatives have positive effects on local communities. They can increase robustness and adaptability to various crises. Nevertheless, it is important to point out, that the impacts are often only locally limited. Solidarity movements give hope to the people and contribute to community resilience in times of crises - they are an excellent way to reduce occurring impacts and minimise their effects, which might eventually lead to getting out of crises - even if only on a very small (individual) scale. In the future, practice and science should focus even more on the contribution that initiatives can make to community resilience and sustainability on different scales in cities.

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