

Dignifying Life Beyond the Streets

Laura Chocontá

Leibniz University Hannover

<https://doi.org/10.15488/5580>

Introduction

Home, and therefore *homelessness*, can have different meanings according to one's background but it mandates a sensitive response. An adequate approach to it should be insightful of its implications, and so, a common understanding of the term was formulated. Through brainstorming (see Fig. 1) the team in charge of the topic defined *homelessness* as the lack of physical shelter and social relations that support the dignity of life. At the same time, the relation with *dignity of life* included: a good quality of physical shelter (by keeping up with hygiene standards, providing adequate protection from environment, and having access to all essential services); the possibility to access health facilities; the existence of economic opportunities; and access to and positive participation in a social network (for a feeling of belonging and good relations with others). It was also noticed that a homelessness situation could happen during different periods and because of many reasons, but it becomes especially concerning when such case strikes suddenly and persists for long.

In Athens, after the lengthened economic crisis of 2013, about 9,100 people experienced some form of visible homelessness in the wider metropolitan area (ANDRIOPOULOU et al. 2017: p. 2). Despite the significant deterioration in the problem, no changes in the policy have been made — the current range of policies working in the issue focus on the management of its most extreme and publicly visible manifestations (KOURACHANIS 2015: p. 123), leaving a need for new responses to the issue.

New strategies should have a more conscious approach of the matter and, furthermore, they need to be a milestone in building social resilience so that future crisis can be overcome faster.

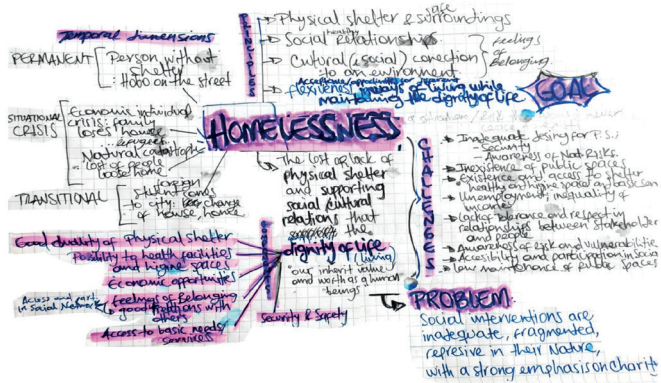


Fig. 1. Resulting mind map of brainstorming group exercise. Source: Own Creation

**Methodology:
Recognizing
Exarcheia and
Homelessness
policies**

With these previous considerations in mind, the topic of homelessness was developed through three operations: the analysis of the study area (to recognize the local situation), an overview of the existing policies and their challenges (to learn how the problem was being approached), and an online research of related initiatives and projects (to induce positive initiatives with a permanent performance).

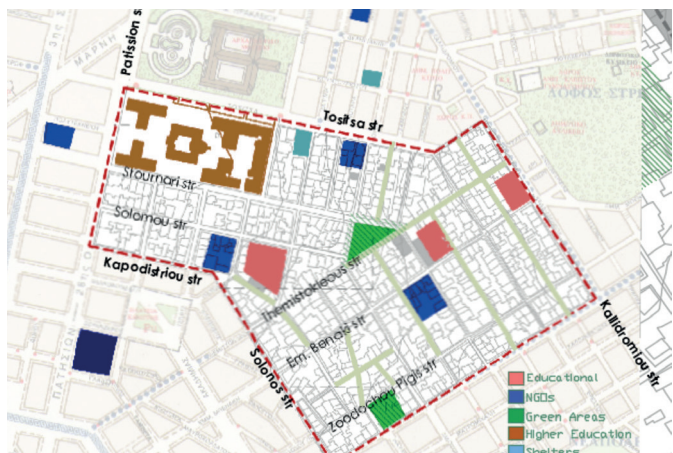


Fig. 2. Mapping of existing actors and potentials of the study area. Source: Own creation based on LUH & NTUA 2018

As a result of exploring Exarcheia neighborhood, the given study area, an inventory of the actors and other potentials were identified (see Fig. 2). At the same time, the policies that tackle the homelessness phenomenon were reviewed, and their services and challenges identified. Also, the online research of initiatives and projects that have been socially organized to support people in homelessness situation provided a bank of ideas for the group to unite efforts. This information and group discussions led to seven strategies to deal with the problem of homelessness in Exarcheia.

Starting with the mapping carried out by the team, it revealed that in Exarcheia exist: three basic education institutions, three NGOs, two public green spaces of great importance to the neighborhood, one high education institution (for law school and architecture studies) and two shelters (for immigrants). The same analysis allowed two potentials to be recognized in the neighborhood: some pedestrian paths and an „open school“ initiative taking place in one of the high schools. The pedestrian paths offer communal spaces that allow residents to interact closely with each other without worrying about traffic on the streets. As for the „Open School“, it is an initiative from citizens that consists of giving charge-free courses (organized by experienced volunteers) for anyone.

As for the review of existing policies, it included the four lines in the homelessness policy in Greece: prevention, emergency services, transitional sheltering, and housing and social inclusion. Taking as a base the document *“Confronting homelessness in Greece during a time of crisis”* from the Pantheon University, the description of each policy line, the services it provides and the challenges it faces were organized (see Table 1). In general, the literature criticizes the social interventions because they are: inadequate as they do not sufficiently respond to the different stages of the homelessness problem; fragmented as the undertaken actions do not relate to one another, and repressive due to the restriction for other ideas to be included. The paper calls for new forms of social policies to focus on reducing the risks that lead to homelessness and on promoting the inclusion of homeless people back into society.

POLICY LINE	SERVICES	CHALLENGES
PREVENTION Interventions that aim to keep those threatened by housing exclusion in decent housing conditions.	→ Housing benefits and programs to fuel poverty → Social work and empowerment services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structures have not been adequately developed: absence of a coherent network of prevention measures for the protection of housing. Few interventions of a limited scope of NGOs focus on developing social housing programs or mediation services to solve economic and social problems: but not thus far promoted at a central political level
EMERGENCY SERVICES Covering the immediate subsistence and health needs.	→ Traditional forms of protection: dorms and day centers for homelessness with in-kind provisions → Charitable institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative efficiency remains unknown as there are no attempts for measuring the real dimensions of the problem A large part of the budget is intended for the provision of food. The duration of the programs is short.
TRANSITIONAL SHELTERS Long-term stays in transitional accommodation play an important part in achieving a smooth housing reintegration process.	→ Social hostels; social apartments with rent subsidies. → Treatment of mental health and addiction problems. → Efforts to connect these services with services with training and employment policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The facilities for transitional accommodation are characterized by quantitative and qualitative inadequacy, while the absence of any systematic planning of social inclusion is obvious.
HOUSING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION An attempt to solve most of the causes that lead to the loss of home. By providing employment strategies.	→ Supported employment → Psychological support services → Education and training policies aiming at enhancing his/her professional skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structures have not been adequately developed.

Table 1. Resume of greek homelessness' policy lines. Source: Own creation based on ANDRIOPOU-LOU 2017.

Finally, the online research for initiatives provided some ideas where the spatial and social context provided homeless people with options to alleviate their situation. For example, when existing restaurants or other sorts of food merchants give the remaining edible food of the day to homeless people, instead of throwing it away (KABBAGE 2015); or when the homeless people offer “invisible tours” of their city where visitors learn about the experiences of their guides living in the backstreets (SHE-DIA MAGAZINE 2015). These ideas helped to link the studied physical context and the policy challenges in the making of new strategies. This bank of initiatives and programs also provided an understanding of the responsibilities, roles, and benefits that the different actors in the activities could have.

In parallel to all the previous actions, the exchange of thoughts and experiences in the Summer School introduced some general considerations for the group’s exercise. For instance, it

had to be recognized that after the economic crisis the people living on the streets were not only the conventional most vulnerable groups (such as those with a below-average income, single-parent families, victims of (sexual) violence, the mentally ill, drug and alcohol addicts) but there were also people that previously had access to higher education or a stable job that had found themselves suddenly living on the streets (KOUGEA & SPANIDIS 2018: p. 5). New strategies should, therefore, not only tend to the permanent trends of (social) issues but also think and prepare for the way crisis could affect the traditional dynamics of the (socio-economic) system.

First, the policy lines and their challenges from Table 1 were used as a foundation for the group's proposal to structure the weak points of the existing efforts. By doing so, the group also intended to associate the different stages of the homelessness phenomenon and concerted actions and efforts. The team conversations that followed appealed to the components of the dignity of life and thought of implementations through the existing local circumstances (such as the key mapped physical spaces and actors in the study area). The arguments also often found relations with the topics assigned to other groups of the Summer School. This reasoning led the team to integrate ideas with other parties, especially those with the themes of Affordable Housing and Local Food Production. These alliances then became vital for answering the most pressing matters of access to quality shelter and basic needs. Integrating efforts permitted a more efficient use of resources and displayed a broader spectrum of success.

As a result, seven strategies were made under all the four policy lines. Starting with Emergency Services, as the most pressing issue, the intention is to find ways in which the services can initiate more enduring outcomes. In Housing and Social Inclusion, the aim is to tie the provision of material needs (shelter and income) with communal support. As for Transitional Shelters, the idea is to shift the spatial design concept of shelters towards the collective space and social interaction. At last, the strategies for the Prevention line focus on organizing the existing empirical knowledge of the actors dealing with homelessness in the field

Results: New strategies for dealing with homelessness beyond the Streets

and empowering them into policy-making and continuous improvement of the services.

Each of the strategies is described in their respective line. For further detail, the steps of implementation are sketched for the short, medium and long-term; the required actors and their roles are also briefly described (see Table 2).

Policy Line: Emergency services

→ IMMEDIATE ACCOMMODATION AIMING FOR FUTURE HOUSING

In alliance with Abandoned Buildings and Affordable Housing. As a starting point, the municipality would make an open call for the owners of abandoned places who want to allow the recovery of their spaces via public investment on construction materials. The owners of the buildings will grant the renting rights of their property (the number of years depending on the needed investment) and in exchange will be free from payment of the property’s taxes for the duration of the contract, while reclaiming a well-recovered construction once the contract is over. The municipality will manage the contracts and will work as an intermediary to keep an eye on contracts to guarantee the rights of all those involved; with the intention of giving renting contracts for 5 to 10 years in the improved constructions to homeless people.

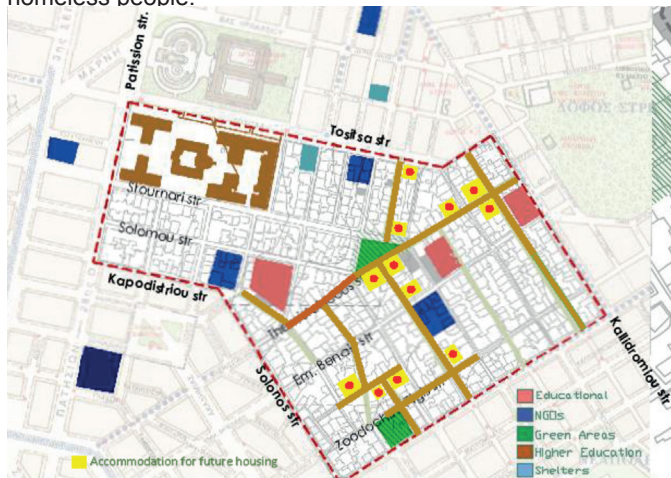


Fig. 3. Proposal of location of abandoned buildings to recover and rent to homeless people. Source: Own creation based on LUH & NTUA 2018

The architecture faculty allocated in the neighborhood will provide the necessary knowledge for plans and construction processes to recover a building while preserving its values; members of the academy can also volunteer to work in the construction and gain in-the-field knowledge. The homeless beneficiaries must actively participate in the reconstruction process of a building and gain knowledge to keep it in the right state once the reconstruction is over.

Under this idea, it could even be possible to prolong renting contracts later in the future.

It is worth mentioning that the abandoned buildings located in the previously identified pedestrian paths should be given priority to intervene. The reason for this is the generous social space accessing the house and providing more chances of close and safe interactions with neighbors (see Fig. 3).

→ PLANTING SEEDS OF SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY:

One difficulty that governmental bodies face in the hiring of professionals to attend the need of homeless people is the limited hiring time due to legal boundaries. Such situation compromises the continuity of the recuperation process of homeless people. The proposal is that these professionals dedicate some of their working hours to spread their knowledge over homelessness in the community. It can be done in activities that bring understanding over the hardships of a homelessness situation and how to support people in this condition.

This way, it could be expected that even once the working time for the professional is over, the community around a homeless person will keep providing support to homeless individuals.

These activities and the shared knowledge can be part of communitarian free workshops in the neighborhood.

Policy Line: Housing and social inclusion

→ IMPROVING EXISTING SHELTERS

Existing temporary shelters for homeless people only offer a single bed for the beneficiaries. They do not provide opportunities for social interaction. The proposal is to improve the conditions of existing shelters by doing workshops that aim to facilitate social exchanges, e.g., building

furniture for common areas such, as sofas, dining tables, among others. Participants in these workshops should be both neighbors and homeless beneficiaries of the shelter. This kind of workshops is to be combined with the previous strategy of PLANTING SEEDS OF SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY.

→ SHAPING SKILLS TO GUARANTEE AN INCOME

Homeless people should be able to improve or widen their capacities in a way they can make a profit out of them.

The suggestion is to orientate the charge-free workshops' offer (such as those given in the "open school" or those organized in the IMPROVING EXISTING SHELTERS strategy) towards building and strengthening abilities of homeless people for them to be able to offer a service they can guarantee an income from, i.e., offering backstreets tours (SHEDIA MAGAZINE 2015). The workshops' topics could also complement each other to give participants the opportunity to build or sharpen a "vocational profile", i.e., combination of construction workshops of IMMEDIATE ACCOMMODATION AIMING FOR FUTURE HOUSING and IMPROVING EXISTING SHELTERS strategies. This proposal is taking advantage of existing NGOs in the neighborhood supporting searches for a job.

This strategy is to be combined with PLANTING SEEDS OF SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY.

Policy Line: Transitional shelters

→ PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR TRANSFORMATION OF TRANSITIONAL SHELTER

Based in the challenge that spatial design of existing shelters imply for the social integration and interaction of homeless people, this proposal insists on making the design of future shelter with a focus on common spaces and social areas. Future shelters should no longer privilege some beds, but also assign areas for social gatherings, such as central common gardens, public halls, and open terraces and balconies.

This proposal is to be implemented in hand with the IMPROVING OF EXISTING SHELTERS strategy.

>>STRATEGIC INVESTMENT OF BUDGET ON FOOD PRODUCTION
The construction of future shelters is conditioned by the amount

of money that can be invested in it. Currently, the most significant portion of the budget of the organizations and institutions working in the homelessness issue is being used for food (KOURACHANIS 2015: p. 119). Allying with the group of LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION, the proposal is to invest an initial part of the money used for food to a local food production program with the compromise that the resulting products will be given to homeless people participating in the program. On the one hand, this alliance allows more places of the implementation for the PLANTING SEEDS OF SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY strategy. On the other, the progressive increase of local food production has the potential to lower the amount of money required for food and instead use it for improvement of existing shelters or construction of new ones (also following the IMPROVING OF EXISTING SHELTERS and STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SOCIAL-INTERACTION ORIENTED DESIGN OF TRANSITIONAL SHELTERS strategies). Additionally, the working groups could take advantage of their collective work to promote the donation of food from numerous local establishments (like restaurants or cafes), so that no more food is wasted but also more of the budget could be released.

Policy Line: Prevention

→ SOCIAL NETWORK BUILDING FOR DATA COLLECTION

Data is an essential element for understanding the status quo of the homelessness problem. The proposal is to facilitate the collection of information by building an online platform where the different actors dealing with the issue of homelessness (NGOs, governmental bodies, social organizations) can provide information and benefit from it. Not only the number-related data would be collected, but the news over successful and failed initiatives/projects would also be shared so that the experiences can support future decision-making and promote ideas.

→ COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES FOR HYBRID CONSTRUCTION OF LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

The existing policy lines lack a legal framework that organizes the efforts to tackle homelessness in an integrated way. Additionally, because policy construction is often a work of solely governmental actors, it often leaves out valuable knowledge of field-work experience.

POLICY	NEW STRG.	STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	ACTORS & ROLES
EMERGENCY SERVICES	IMMEDIATE ACCOMMODATION AIMING FOR FUTURE HOUSING	<p>Short term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Call for owners of abandoned buildings to allow temporary accommodation in their unoccupied properties, in exchange for non-payment of ownership taxes for the years of occupation (5-10 years) and free recovery of the building. - Evaluation of buildings and beneficiaries, assignation of houses. - Initiation of an occupation, when possible <p>Medium Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design & planning of construction stages between willing owners, academics and future inhabitants - Beginning of social integration processes and economic opportunities. - Start of intervention in constructions with the collaborative work between academics and (future) inhabitants <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidation of social integration processes and economic opportunities. - Mediation process for negotiations over renting prices for longer habitation of recovered buildings. - Listing of abandoned buildings with willing owners to include in future stages of the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Governmental Institutions: Initial investors and policy executors - School of architecture: Knowledge providers and beneficiaries in term of laboring experience - Homeless population: Beneficiaries and working force - Owners of abandoned buildings: Long-term beneficiaries.
	PLANTING SEEDS OF SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY	<p>Short Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focusing professional social workers activities towards the education and capacitation of social networks towards building trust-based relationships with homeless people. <p>Medium Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation of trust-based relationship building in local activities and programs. - Documentation of experiences for future improvements. <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of experiences for improving and up-grading of programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NGOs and social organizations: Coordinators and implementation of activities - Homeless people: beneficiaries
HOUSING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION	IMPROVING EXISTING SHELTERS	<p>Short Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of workshops around the topic of housing and furniture improvement. Choosing topics around <p>Medium Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development workshops and documentation of it. <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing of experiences in-between temporary shelter facilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional social workers: building of programs for building community networking - NGOs and social organizations: Coordinators of activities - Voluntary participants - Homeless people: beneficiaries - Neighbors: Participants and seeds for social resilience

POLICY	NEW STRG.	STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	ACTORS & ROLES
HOUSING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION	IMPLEMENTATION OF A GUARANTEED INCOME	<p>Short Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of packages of workshops around topics to build or improve working skills and/or small and medium business initiatives <p>Medium Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for selective participation in workshops to develop an occupational profile. - Accompaniment for small and medium business initiatives appliance for funding <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accompaniment and support in job-hunting - Accompaniment and support for the implementation of small and medium business initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional social workers: building of programs for building community networking - NGOs and social organizations: Coordinators of activities - Voluntary participants - Homeless people: beneficiaries - Neighbors: Participants and seeds for social resilience
TRANSITIONAL SHELTERS	PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR TRANSFORMATION OF TRANSITIONAL SHELTER	1. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SOCIAL-INTERACTION ORIENTED DESIGN OF TRANSITIONAL SHELTERS	
		<p>Short and Medium terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of widening the spectrum of modes for transitional shelters with focus on spaces for social interaction and access to basic services (drinking water and hygiene) - Adequacy of public spaces for the provision of shelters of immediate response in case of crisis. (Earthquake and heat waves) - Improving security: visibility and accessibility <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of social-integrating transitional shelters and active use of facilities for local community activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NGOs and social organizations: Coordinators of activities and investors - Homeless people and in risk of homelessness: Beneficiaries - Neighbors: Beneficiaries for permanent communal active spaces and in case of crisis
		2. STRATEGIC INVESTMENT OF BUDGET ON FOOD PRODUCTION	
		<p>Short Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment in food production programs:- Gardening programs -Association with restaurants <p>Medium Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshops: Resulting in food accessibility and reducing the budget used for food; freeing of budget. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NGOs and social organizations: Coordinators of activities - Voluntaries: Teachers in workshops and participants - Homelessness people and in risk of homelessness: Food beneficiaries - Neighbors: Participants and seeds for social resilience
		3. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SOCIAL-INTERACTION ORIENTED DESIGN OF TRANSITIONAL SHELTERS	
		<p>Short and Medium terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design of widening the spectrum of modes for transitional shelters with focus on spaces for social interaction and access to basic services (drinking water and hygiene) - Adequacy of public spaces for the provision of shelters of immediate response in case of crisis. (Earthquake and heat waves) - Improving security: visibility and accessibility <p>Long Term:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of social-integrating transitional shelters and active use of facilities for local community activities. 	

POLICY	NEW STRG.	STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	ACTORS & ROLES
PREVENTION	SOCIAL NETWORK BUILDING FOR DATA COLLECTION	Short Term: - Agreements over the basic data in need of being collected and the collection process. - Building of online platform for data collection and publication. Medium Term: - Analysis of collected data and feedback of obstacles Long Term: - Analysis of impact and feedback for future improvement.	- Governmental institutions and politicians: lobby and implementation of policies. - NGOs: Sharing of information
	COLLABORATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF LEGAL FRAMEWORK	Short Term: - Open call for stakeholders - For exchange of experiences - To participate in roundtables for policy and strategies making. Medium Term: - Implementation of policy and strategies. Long Term: - Analysis of impact and feedback for future improvement.	- Representatives and leaders: Beneficiaries

Table 2. New proposals' stages of implementation and actors & roles. Source: Own creation

Conclusions

Through the resulting channels from the SOCIAL NETWORK BUILDING FOR DATA COLLECTION, the intention is to empower experienced groups on field-work with homeless people so they can actively participate in the creation of the missing legal framework.

Homelessness is an issue that involves social and economic aspects of life. A proper response to it requires a sensitive integration of both dimensions. Likewise, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the context (existing physical elements, circumstances of interaction, and actors and their role) and of the effects that a crisis can have on it (regarding effects over the interactions and responses of the actors). These are vital aspects of starting thinking of socio-economic resilience.

Because socio-economic phenomena have multiple dimensions, they need to be addressed through integrated actions which would also facilitate efficient management of resources

while strengthening cooperation.

A strategic approach to socio-economic resilience should support community interactions with a highly efficient distribution of resources in the short, medium and long-term without compromising the dignity of life of all the members of the society.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that sensitive and integral strategies that deal with socio-economic issues are more successfully built by joining efforts. This collaboration does not refer that government programs must be developed across sectors, but also that civil society should be given a role in action plans and other actors, such as NGOs, can provide crucial insight of problems and therefore should be given more value.

Bibliography

- ANDRIOPOULOU, E., KARAKITSIOS, A. & TSAKLOGLOU, P., 2017: Inequality and Poverty in Greece: Changes in Times of Crisis. Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and South-east Europe. GreeSE Paper No.116. URL: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/85329/1/GreeSE%20116.pdf>. Last accessed: 22.11.2018
- KOURACHANIS, N., 2015: Confronting homelessness in Greece during a time of crisis. *Social Cohesion and Development*, 10, 113-129. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301644550_Confronting_homelessness_in_Greece_during_at_time_of_crisis
- SHEDIA MAGAZINE, 2015: Invisible tours, A social initiative through the backstreets of Athens. URL: <http://www.shedia.gr/diadromes/>. Last accessed: 22.11.2018
- THE GUARDIAN, 2015: Greece: 'The crisis has brought out solidarity, love and collective action'. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/jun/22/greek-crisis-civil-society-youthnet-hellas>. Last accessed: 22.11.2018
- KOUGEA, C. & SPANIDIS, K., 2018: Homelessness in Athens: How can the vacant buildings be a solution? URL: <https://forum-women.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Kougea-Spanidis.pdf>. Last accessed: 30.11.2018
- KABBAGE, 2015: Small Business Philanthropy: Restaurants Feeding the Homeless. URL: <https://www.kabbage.com/blog/small-business-philanthropy-restaurants-feeding-homeless/>. Last accessed: 22.11.2018