

## **The impact of austerity and the plight of refugees - a humanitarian crisis in Greece**

Behind the proud apparent affluence of Athens both ancient and modern there lies a growing humanitarian crisis fuelled by the impact of austerity and the plight of refugees. During a pre planned holiday to Athens with friends in November 2015 I took the opportunity to contact social work colleagues both in teaching and practice to obtain a deeper understanding of the problems they face. This was prompted by the welcome news that the Hellenic Association of Social Workers re joined the International Federation of Social Workers Europe (IFSWe) earlier in 2015. The Association has just celebrated its 60th birthday; who else can do this?

At the IFSWe September Conference in Edinburgh the Secretary General Dr Rory Truell announced an action plan would be drawn up to help social workers fight austerity measures.

IFSWe held a Solidarity Symposium on Social Work and Austerity in Athens in January 2016.

I was privileged to meet Charalampos Pouloupoulos, Associate Professor of Social Work at the Democritus University of Thrace with special interest in the misuse of drugs and alcohol, Olga Verikaki, Psychiatric Hospital Social Worker and Amalia Gkorou, member and secretary of the Hellenic Association of Social Workers, Tzanetos Antypas, Ioanna Pertsinidou and Sissy Levanti from Praksis and Dora-Dimitra Teloni, Associate Professor (Scientific Associate) Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Social Work Department and SWANgr activist.

I am grateful for their insights which I hope to briefly share with you through this article.

Charalampos explained it is important to understand that Greece has been facing austerity measures imposed by the IMF and the EU the and the influx of refugees for several years.

Greece has experienced massive economic and social problems due to the imposition of austerity measures during the last five years. Many families have been marginalised and communities disintegrated as social instability, mental and physical ill health and have grown.

Unemployment for adults is about 26% whilst for youth runs at over 60%; pay for the young can be very low; reductions in salaries, pensions and tax increases reduces living standards. The shrinking of the welfare state and "Recession also contributed to the development of an uncertain and often threatening environment for the well-being of citizens and society at large"

(European Commission

2013)

The decline of the "Greek social welfare state ...leaves citizens without a safety net and at low living standards comparatively to other OECD countries" (OECD, 2014).

This coincided with the introduction of more suppressive policies further marginalising the vulnerable, reinforcing racism, violation of human rights, social inequality and social injustice.

It is easy for politicians to use crisis to engender fear of others by race, gender, or illness.

“Fear can manifest itself in violence and horizontal aggressiveness to minority and other diverse groups. Social exclusion, violation of human rights, collective guilt for failure in the mainstream population, scapegoating, forming guilty groups, penalisation of physical and mental health illness and the overall aggressive behaviors to certain groups are omnipresent”.

The introduction of more suppressive policies and state violence began with disparagement of

HIV positive young women from public office; it is a symbolic transformation from ‘welfare to restrictive’ and a unique if extreme example of human rights violation in Western Europe.

As Charalampos explains:

“This case is also a paradigm of the confrontation between an authoritarian state that attacks directly socially vulnerable groups and a humanitarian front of social care organizations, active citizens and non-government organisations that advocate human rights and social justice.”

The refugee crisis did not begin when the media grasped pictures of dead Aylan Kurdi brought ashore in Turkey; his brother Galip and his mother Rehan also died. Father Abdullah survived.

“...Police operations to ‘reclaim the city center’ ... by arresting immigrants, homeless people, drug users and anyone they thought that may turn into a threat for ‘law and order’ led to ‘ All people arrested were forced against their free will to *undergo* HIV/AIDS and other tests.”

Operation Xenios Zeus led to the deportation of immigrants from Athens centre to Amyglaleza.

Operation Thetis followed targeting drug users who were arrested out of public treatment.

What price now the proud affluence of central Athens here? Disguised from tourist reality?! More people are now to be seen sleeping rough in central London than in Athens. True?

Greek social workers and social care organisations reacted swiftly. Press conferences, court protests, press releases against state violence/autocracy; free legal aid was offered to women.

They challenge ‘witch hunting’ whilst appreciating public fear promoted by parties on the right.

Doctrines of ‘law and order’ have been used to divert a sense of public fear from actual economic problems. They merely serve the cultivation of public fear and moral panic.

Austerity measures have bitten Greece for over five years. Most Greeks and settled immigrants once flourishing feel their economic and social status is at risk and compromised.

Fear dominates as most citizens feel they may lose their job at any time without any safety net;  
Many highly skilled professionals have left beyond the normal interchange within this class.  
The traditional family in the countryside on reduced pension remains the haven of last resort.

There is now an absence of state provision in Greece not at all fully supplemented below:

NGO s have been obliged to step in on EU Grants to replace not supplement State provision.

Non NGOs also provide free non attributed support to those in need. Both are essential. Both encapsulate a shared intention to help and promote social work in principle and practice.

However austerity has reawakened the need for social workers to recover their role as agents of social change whilst recognising their role in social control; eg Child and Adult Protection.

In Greece as in Britain critical and radical social work may provide us with new forms of action/ intervention via Social Work Action Network and our associated professional networks. It may provide a platform to question dysfunctional relationships & practices both in Greece & the UK.

Charalampos also appreciates the contribution of Naomi Klein: [www.naomiklein.org](http://www.naomiklein.org)

Then I met Olga Varikaki of Sicilian heritage, as we approached the lift to the PRAXIS Office. I also met Tzanetos, Praxis President and Ioanna Pertsimidou who kindly drove us in Athens.

Olga works in a state psychiatric hospital and refers patients to PRAXIS for services; together we explored the provision as she showed her face to those to whom she often sends referrals.

Praxis is such a Non - Government Organisation referred to above and is dependent on a raft of publicised grants to fund its vital provision to all of free services, mainly from the Eurozone.

## “About PRAKSIS

PRAKSIS (PROGRAMS OF DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MEDICAL COOPERATION) is an independent Non Governmental Organization whose main goal is the design, application and implementation of humanitarian programs and medical interventions.

## Our goals

Our main goal is the elimination of social and economic exclusion of vulnerable social groups and the defense of their personal and social rights.

Our beneficiaries: Greek poor, homeless, uninsured, economic immigrants, asylum seekers/ refugees, unaccompanied minors, trafficking victims, sex workers, children begging in the streets, injection drug users, Roma, HIV seropositive people / PLWA, Hepatitis B and C patients, MSM (Men having Sex with Men), prisoners, people released from prisons, Greek families that face the repercussions of the financial crisis ... any person that faces social or / and financial exclusion and is deprived of basic goods.

## The three axes constituting our job

- Prevention
- Direct intervention / support
- Lobbying and Advocacy

## Praxis is also active on a National and European level.”

First was a visit to a Polyclinic where all comers receive social work, medical, educational accommodation and employment advice under the same roof. We could learn from this.

Next was a visit to a Day Centre which provided day similar services for homeless people. Ioanna left us and Amallia, Secretary of the Hellenic Association of Social Workers joined us

Finally we visited a hostel for unaccompanied minors which has acted as a transit refuge; Sissy Levanti explained children often only stay briefly and then return to their traffickers for onward illegal travel. Legal travel is possible but takes much more time to arrange for minors.

Their youngest child ever was 9 years and one in residence during my visit was 12 years.

Much more information about PRAXIS is available here: <http://www.praxis.gr/en/>.

Last but by no means least I met with Dora-DimitraTeloni. Dora lives in Patras but teaches one day a week in Athens. She is both an academic and an activist in no particular order.

Her professional salary is a fraction of that paid to academics elsewhere in Europe; her job security is fragile. She could soon be out of work and obliged to seek employment abroad.

She is obliged to fund her research and any academic trips abroad from her own funds.

Dora also explained Greece faced a humanitarian crisis beyond austerity already imposed.

The Greek public sector faces much higher taxes as a proportion of income; traditional ownership of houses are also facing much higher taxes - a double pressure on survival.

Solidarity movements have grown across Greece, support anti racism and include refugees.

Refugees have arrived to Greece from Afghanistan for the last 15 years, many dead. Now they arrive from Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa too, many unaccompanied minors. They congregate in Victoria Square where they remain vulnerable to traffickers old and new.

All face degrees of austerity wherever they land despite the hospitality of host EU countries. This is of a different order to known UK austerity, painful and destructive as it is in social care.

Dora explains there is no welfare state in Greece and no safety net; work benefits are low and expire soon as described above; young couples often have to live with their parents to survive.

Dora presents a similar perspective on theory to Charalampos but a very different practice model to PRAXIS. She presented this video to the SWAN conference in Liverpool in 2012; it is still valid and the situation is worse rather than better: <https://vimeo.com/39398286>.

## “Greece 2012: Social Work in Austerity”

from Dora Dimitra Teloni 4 years ago NOT YET RATED

“The above documentary film describes, by the social workers’ point of view, the situation in Greece.

Three social workers from different agencies -NGO, Semi-Public Agency and State Sector- describe the reality of the users and the one of the social services in the era of crisis, austerity and poverty that domain in Greece the last two years after the entrance of IMF....

It’s an attempt for spreading the “voice” of the “front-line” social workers from Greece but it is also an attempt of revealing the reality of the Greek people as well as the attempts and initiatives for resistance and solidarity.”

Her work also provides free services including medical care to people in need but is funded entirely from voluntary contributors who abjure recognition from anyone, unlike NGOs. This includes the donation of drugs and other medical exigencies essential to basic health care.

As state provision expires after a few months for even those receiving unemployment benefit and there is little state income support for anyone else, many are forced back from cities to the countryside to depend on older relatives whose pensions have also suffered big reduction.

Dora is unsure what the future holds but Greeks will have to rely more on their own resources.

Solidarity movements exist at the grassroots away from bureaucracy to empower local communities and resist the financial neoliberalism imposed by the international community.

I put three questions to both university academics to whom I spoke about commonly held views across Europe:

- The Greek State was economic with the truth on application to join the Eurozone - generally held view ;
- Greeks don't pay their taxes - Christine Lagarde (perhaps meaning richer Greeks);
- Public servants are better protected than those elsewhere - not supported by my co-respondents who all face job insecurity.

Here is the general response so far:

- Greece has been scapegoated as the weakest member of the Eurozone;
- Greece has been used as a guinea-pig for EU austerity;
- Greece has been obliged again to depend on its historic communal resilience.

Both academics were wary of the potential of Syriza to effect change but feared its failure might open the door to an advance of the right wing populist movement Golden Dawn.

Only Tas, our Greek taxi driver, was openly critical of previous ruling elites who acted mainly in their own self interest. Tas a Greek/Australian teacher in his own right with attitude and accent sent us up the Acrocorinth, took us to ancient Corinth, his cousin happened to run a restaurant nearby, and to both ends of the Corinth canal, on a bespoke journey; he explained to us the economy had been f...d by the self serving ruling elites of both main Greek political parties.

Tas arranges tours and knows his stuff, ancient and modern: <http://www.ancientgreece.tours>.

It is vital to learn about ancient Greece and understand its enduring strength to appreciate the incredible resilience of the Greek people and their communities over time when faced with austerity, refugees whilst rejecting racism in all forms. Surely an example to us all in the EU?

We ate at a local family restaurant recommended by our hotel management. We were mainly served by a member of the family who worked by day as a solicitor but helped out in evenings.

She is a professional who still supports her family whilst the reverse is increasingly the case.

Meanwhile our hotel management were worried as more northern states closed their borders, fearing a build up of refugees unable to reach their desired destinations in northern Europe.

Sadly this is increasingly the case in 2016 with little hope of an early resolution for refugees.

The IFSWe conference in January 2016 published a statement on austerity here:

<http://ifsw.org/news/ifsw-statement-from-the-solidarity-symposium-on-social-work-and-austerity/>.

In Greece austerity provision also goes hand in hand with anti racism for all world refugees.

**In conclusion:**

I was pleased to recognize Charalambos and Ioanna as fellow post graduates of Bradford University and Dora-Dimitra also counts as a Liverpool postgraduate. All up north England.

They valued tuition from Eileen Moxon and Hilary Rose in Bradford, and SWAN in Liverpool.

The combination of social work academics and practitioners on the ground provides a striking and challenging example of Greek resistance to the imposition of IMF and Eurozone austerity.

BASW has recently hosted a similar event: "Talking About the Future of Social Work".

The extraordinary compassion of individual Greek people and Greek communities already in austerity expressed to refugees in need shames the response of all but a few here in the UK.

Do see a film about the experience of refugees and migrants in Greece: [www.intothefire.org](http://www.intothefire.org)  
Greek support for Social Work colleagues coping with refugees in Turkey is also admirable.

Beware, UK austerity is already on its way to a district where you live! Let's hope we social workers are not confronted with the same deprivation faced by our colleagues in Greece. Our electorate voted for this of its own volition in May 2015. Greeks voted under coercion.

I finish with Olga Verikaki 's last comment to me with Amallia; I had expressed my "debt" to the Board of the Hellenic Association of Social Workers for entertaining me here: <http://rozalia.gr/?language=en>; the readmittance of HASW was sealed here with Rory Truell:

"Thank you for your visit again and for being so open and willing to share your experience with us!  
Do not worry about the "debt" issue, though. I am sure your article will contribute immensely to presenting the practices of SW in Greece and that of course will ensure your payment back. You see, we really don't want you to feel obliged for ever!"

Andrew MacDonald, MBASW, Member of Council,  
Policy Ethics and Human Rights Committee, Movement of People Group.

[www.naomiklein.org](http://www.naomiklein.org)