



Civil Society Organizations and Labour Market Integration for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece

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Abstract The 2015 crisis of refugee policies saw an upgrade in the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as service providers for the migrant population in Greece. CSOs attempted to substitute for the government's failure to provide a migration policy designed for the social integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs). As a result, they have been overseeing a majority of services related to the integration of MRAs in the labour market. This paper aims to enrich the underdeveloped so far discussion on the role of CSOs in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers (RAs) into the Greek labour market. This will be attempted by adopting a qualitative approach. The paper is based on 34 interviews done in 2019, involving refugees, asylum seekers and representatives of third-sector organizations, namely non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots solidarity initiatives (GSIs) provide various activities that seek to improve the employability of refugees and asylum seekers and help them navigate the employment policies. The article concludes that the lack of a follow-up to the various actions, the fragmented funding schemes and the absence of a clear integration policy from public actors and support from the public administration lie behind the relatively limited role played by CSOs for refugees and asylum seekers in labour market integration.

Keywords Refugees · Asylum seekers · Labour market integration · Civil society organizations · Greece

Introduction

In the scholarly literature, it has been noted that Greek civil society has characteristics of underdevelopment. The relatively low number of NGOs and the limited civic engagement as compared to other European countries seem to indicate a weak formal civil society sector (Kalogeraki, 2019). On the other hand, however, it is also believed that a vibrant civic engagement exists, which can be seen as a sign of a particularly active (informal) civil society sector (Sotiropoulos, 2017).

The role of civil society until the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis was rarely analysed by the academic literature, since Greek civil society had mild and atrophic characteristics. There was no significant growth, and their presence in the public sphere was limited. At the same time, social policy in Greece, during its short-lived upswing in the post-dictatorship period (1974–2009), failed to adequately put its values into practice. Over the years, a range of social services has been formed with strong characteristics of inequality provided through different occupational and social groups (Venieris, 2013). For example, a number of occupational groups with strong political influence, such as doctors, lawyers and journalists, enjoyed privileged access to the social protection system compared to other social groups. The multiple inadequacies of the Greek social protection system were very often replaced by the informal solidarity of the family institution (Petmesidou, 1992, 2012).

In this context, the role of GSOs in migration issues and more broadly in social policy until the onset of the crisis

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was not a prominent one. Their stronger involvement in the management of social problems has been observed since the 1990s, a period during which the absence of state intervention for a number of vulnerable social groups, migrants included, became more visible. In addition, the late activation of public policy on the social integration of immigrants has shaped the need for collective interventions by civil society actors (Rozakou, 2018). The influx of mass immigration into Greece during the 1990s provided the basis for social integration initiatives by NGOs (Bagavos et al., 2018).

The economic crisis led to a serious worsening of social problems while, at the same time, the austerity measures resulted in widespread cuts to social spending (Dimoulas & Kouzis, 2018; Papatheodorou, 2014). The deterioration of the welfare state left unwarranted gaps in the social protection system (Venieris, 2013), while it also weakened the effectiveness of social protection (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013). These gaps in Greek social policy were addressed more broadly by the increase in the number and activity of CSOs (Sotiropoulos & Bourikos, 2014).

Thus, the refugee crisis of 2015 took place at a time when the Greek state was unable to cope with the multiplying social problems (Christopoulos, 2020). Following the EU–Turkey statement, the Greek Parliament was forced, in urgent and extortionate circumstances, to make changes to the institutional framework of asylum, in order to create a more functional reception and identification system. Almost all the efforts of the Greek state were spent on emergency services (such as housing in camps) (Kourachanis, 2018a). Social integration actions, such as the development of employment or training programs provided by the state, are almost non-existent (Kourachanis, 2018b).

Even in emergency services, intended to meet the essential human needs of asylum seekers and refugees, the state has a minority role. The combination of the economic downturn with the refugee crisis led to the mobilization of a large spectrum of civil society in order to manage the humanitarian crisis (Chtouris & Miller, 2017). In addition, the refugee crisis resulted in a more prominent role for NGOs (Sotiropoulos, 2017) active in the areas of social solidarity, education, employment promotion, etc., along with a rise in institutionalized and atypical civil society organizations that seek to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees (Kalogeraki, 2019).

Financial constraints on the development of social actions other than humanitarian interventions are a serious obstacle to the shaping of a coherent range of social inclusion policies for asylum seekers and refugees by NGOs. At the moment, state policy shapes a range of anti-social policies for asylum seekers (Kourachanis, 2018a) and any margin for the development of social integration

policies lies with NGOs. Any refugee policy aims more at a logic of repelling them from Greek and European territory than at their social integration. Moreover, this repressive form of refugee management functions as a preparatory phase for the allocation of refugees to low-status jobs (Xypolytas, 2017).

This paper deals with the role of CSOs in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the Greek labour market. It is based on evidence from qualitative interviews conducted with refugees, asylum seekers and representatives of CSOs. The presentation of some theoretical issues (Sect. 2) and of the main barriers to the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers (RAs) in Greece (Sect. 3) are followed by a description of the methodological issues (Sect. 4), the analysis of how CSOs react to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers (Sect. 5), and a discussion of what refugees and asylum seekers get from CSOs (Sect. 6). Section 7 summarizes the main conclusions of the study.

Theoretical Considerations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are expected to play a significant role in the labour market integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs), through the provision of individually targeted services, and the involvement of CSOs in collective action by participating in decision-making processes and advocating for the rights of MRAs vis-à-vis the state or employers (Numerato et al., 2019). They assist MRAs by helping them navigate the labour market and improve their linguistic and working skills and through the provision of legal counsel (Garkisch et al., 2017; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). Of course, the role and operation of CSOs are closely related to contextual factors. Thus, according to Numerato et al. (2019), five different roles attributed to CSOs can be identified in the European context: (1) uncritical extenders of national integration policies; (2) pro-active service providers who are nonetheless significantly dependent on the state; (3) autonomous co-producers of labour market integration services; (4) innovative and creative CSOs that view MRAs as effective actors and push them toward social and economic innovations; and (5) alternative CSOs that operate autonomously and independently from the established institutional structures and work against rather than alongside the public administration and the state.

Civil society organizations have played an important role in social policy in recent decades (Baglioni & Giugni, 2014; Lahusen, 2020). This dynamic of civil society organizations in the modern world must not be cut off from its wider economic, social and ideological context (Dwyer & Wright, 2014). Instead, it must be approached as a

plausible symptom of a series of developments that have taken place in recent decades and which have led to a reshaping of the welfare mix (Fine, 2012). Developments such as the rise of neoliberalism, globalization and the strengthening of the European integration framework, unfavourable demographics and new family patterns, changes in work, technology and the organization of production, as well as worsening income inequalities have decisively tested the resilience of the Keynesian welfare state (Petmesidou, 2006: 6).

All of these developments have been accompanied by a need for changes in the application of Keynesianism, which has led to the emergence of an active (or neoliberal) welfare state. The prevalence of neoliberal ideology since the 1980s has reinforced the privatization of social policy (Taylor-Gooby, 1994). Within these rearrangements, the re-commodification of social benefits has reverted to the philosophy of social policy (Fine, 2012). Access to social benefits is linked to increased criteria and conditions aimed at reducing the number of beneficiaries and social spending. One substitute for state retreat has been the strengthening of the non-governmental and private welfare pillar (Wallace, 2004).

Giddens' 'third-way' approach strongly influenced the redesign of the welfare mix. According to this perspective, cooperation between the state, civil society and the private sector could bring about the greatest possible effectiveness in the delivery of social goods and services (Giddens, 1994). The most typical case in the transfer of state social policy to decentralized institutions is the prevalence of the concept of Welfare Pluralism. Welfare Pluralism as a concept argues that welfare can also be offered by non-public pillars (Johnson, 2014). A number of institutions, such as the informal family protection network, wider civil society, and even the private sector, can complement or autonomously contribute to the provision of welfare (Alcock et al., 1998).

Welfare Pluralism has been a dynamic part of the social and political dialogue since the 1990s (Johnson, 2014; Offer & Pinker, 2017). Its gradual rise to prominence as an interventionist philosophy resulted, before the crisis, in the state's subversion of social policy and the expansion of the role of civil society. Civil society organizations have increasingly taken on social responsibilities, which are viewed as an enduring and effective method for solving social problems. The most distinctive manifestation of this development was the ever-expanding role of NGOs in the implementation of social policy (Wallace, 2004), a phenomenon that has been realized mainly through the devolution of social policy.

The practical result of these developments is the decentralization of social services in terms of both the economy and personnel. Alongside this has been the

introduction of private-sector administrative practices imbued with the philosophy of New Public Management, such as the adoption of a series of economic consolidation and 'rationalization' measures that ultimately lead to the privatization of services (Dwyer & Wright, 2014). Finally, there is a tendency to separate the design and financing of services from their implementation. Public authorities are responsible for regulating the basic rules of the operating framework and for financing policies. Their actual implementation, however, is left to the non-state or private sector, following respective agreements (Paulsen, 2005: 17–22).

The Great Recession of 2008 legitimized Welfare Pluralism as the dominant philosophy of social intervention. In the years of the economic crisis, the consolidation of NGOs as a way of tackling growing social problems gained social acceptance, as several states experienced fiscal bankruptcy (Farnsworth & Irving, 2011). At the same time, informal grassroots solidarity initiatives by activists and social movements sought to highlight the inadequacies of neoliberal social policy, as well as to demonstrate solidarity with vulnerable groups affected by the austerity measures. At such a juncture civil society is playing an increasingly important role in managing social problems (Stockhammer, 2012). Another enduring form of informal solidarity and a mechanism for integrating immigrant populations is the migrant networks. Despite significant differences within them, ethnic groups rally around the criterion of ethnic origin and develop bonds of solidarity and mutual assistance for the social integration of their members. Social integration policies for migrant populations are part of this broader welfare mix rearrangement. The NGO-ization of social policy and the reaction of social movements and migrant networks to shrinking state intervention are also reflected in solidarity efforts for immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Kourachanis, 2018b).

Aspects of the above theoretical considerations have also been strongly observed in social integration policies for refugees in Greece over the past five years (Tsitselikis, 2018). Any form of social support is carried out through the actions of NGOs (Kourachanis, 2018b) or through the initiatives of informal citizen solidarity initiatives (Kotronaki et al., 2018). The role of migrant networks has always been crucial to supporting integration (Xypolytas, 2017). The parameter of labour market integration policies is an indicative aspect of these social policies.

A consequence of the residual social policy of the Greek state for MRAs was that civil society actors provided a substitute for the labour market integration actions. Current research efforts show that in times of crisis, NGOs and informal solidarity actions by activist or migrant networks are the actors that assume the main responsibility for the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees

(Bagavos et al., 2019). This argument will be developed in the following sections.

Barriers to the Labour Market Integration (LMI) of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (RAs) in Greece

Since the onset of immigration in the early 1990s and the increase in refugee flows from 2014 onwards to Greece, employment in the secondary labour market and the migration/ethnic networks has been the main channel for the economic integration of MRAs. This is combined with temporality and seasonality in migrant employment, which is very often coupled with informal activities and informal work (Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2017).

In practice, migrants are mostly seen as a flexible and temporary labour force that offers a response to the seasonal needs of agriculture, construction, distributive trades, hotels, restaurants and (domestic) services provided to households (Kapsalis, 2018). In other words, their position in the labour market varies, to a great extent, according to favourable or unfavourable economic conditions. Greece has experienced a lengthy economic downturn and subsequent austerity measures which, by leading to high unemployment and restrictions in labour rights in the areas where MRAs are mainly employed, has further prevented the integration of MRAs into the labour market. Additionally, this unfavourable economic environment makes it difficult to implement targeted job creation programs for MRAs.

The ambivalence of the legislative framework relative to the legal and long-term residence of refugees and asylum seekers, a key element of their socio-economic integration, is an additional barrier to their labour market integration (Bagavos et al., 2018). Since 2014, refugees and asylum seekers have had a precarious legal status. Large numbers of them are still living in refugee camps, while there is still a clear division between those refugees who entered the country and after 20 March 2016 and those who came after.

Public policies related to the integration of MRAs into the labour market are mostly absent or are constantly polarized and fragmented while, at the same time, the involvement of the state and particularly of the public employment services in their labour market integration is still of limited importance (Karandinos, 2016). The discontinuity of action plans, e.g. the non-binding nature of the 2018 National Strategy for Integration, the instability of the institutional framework (e.g. in 2019 the Ministry of Migration Policy was first merged with the Ministry of Citizen Protection and was then reestablished in 2020 as the Ministry of Migration and Asylum) and the absence of any ex post evaluation of the implementation of policy measures are some of the most typical examples of this.

In reality, a real strategy for the integration of MRAs into the labour market is lacking. This is clearly reflected in the role of CSOs, which have overseen the large majority of integration services. The absence and inability of the state to establish targeted and institutionalized structures for the provision of integration services hinders the transformation of the barriers to enablers (Kourachanis, 2018b).

One additional weakness of the current system of migrant labour market integration is its reliance on a weak understanding of heterogeneity in terms of ethnic diversity, duration of stay and migration status (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers). Migrants are in a better position than refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into the labour market, given that they are able to secure a long legal stay, to use informal ethnic networks to learn the Greek language, and to be familiar with the state administration.

Methodological Issues

Field research on CSOs was done using qualitative research methods. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in the period from May to June 2019 in the workplaces of the CSO representatives, so that along with the information provided there was also the possibility of observing the environment in which they work. The interviews with the beneficiaries were conducted during the same period, at the spaces of the organizations receiving social support.

The city of Athens was chosen for the field research, as the city where the vast majority of civil society organizations operating nationwide or locally are located and where a large number of refugees and asylum seekers live. Around 80% of migrant associations and NGOs dealing with migration issues are located in Attica (Papadopoulos et al., 2009). In addition, according to the UNHCR (2018) almost 40% of all RAs residing in Open Mainland Reception Facilities were leaving in those based in Attica and that 56% of the accommodation places—created as part of the ESTIA (Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation) programme for RA's—are in Athens, 38% in the rest of mainland and 6% on the islands (UNHCR, 2019). Since the support actions for the employment integration of RAs carried out by civil society actors outside Athens are weak, the research was focused on their work inside the Greek capital.

Interviews were conducted with civil society actors (project managers, protection officers, social scientists, employment counsellors, staff of social cooperatives and activists) working on social support actions for vulnerable groups, support actions to integrate vulnerable groups into the labour market and organizations and groups involved in the social and employment integration of RAs. The civil society organizations were selected on the basis of those

mentioned as most useful by RAs and as the most important according to the research we conducted. Priority was given to key players and to those representatives who have the skills most relevant to labour market issues. The choice of interviewees was driven with by an effort to achieve empirical saturation and to gather a plurality of experiences of both CSOs and RAs.

More specifically, sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Greek representatives of CSOs. Eight interviews were conducted with NGOs (four promoting social interventions for vulnerable social groups more generally and four specifically targeting MRAs). Four interviews were also conducted with representatives of GSIs by left-wing activists in support of MRAs. Finally, four interviews were conducted with social cooperatives involved in developing employment actions for vulnerable social groups, including MRAs. Of the interviewees, seven were men and nine were women, aged from 29 to 62.

Concerning the beneficiaries, the main criterion of selection was that the refugees and asylum seekers to be interviewed had a personal/direct experience of CSOs from 2014 onwards. The interviewees were reached through civil society organizations and through contacts and acquaintances with the support of interpreters. Seven were from Afghanistan, five from Syria, three from Iran and one each from Iraq, Pakistan and Chad. In terms of gender, women are under-represented and constitute a small portion of the sample, just (two) out of eighteen. This can be explained by cultural as well as social factors, such as the position of women in society and their role in the family. Moreover, single mothers face further difficulties in attending integration programs as they will need to find someone to take care of their children, which is not always possible. Interviews with Afghan (5 out of 7) and Iranian refugees (1 out of 3) were conducted in Farsi. The interview with refugee from Chad was conducted in French. The remaining (11) interviews were conducted in English. Sixteen of the interviewees were men and two were women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-seven.

How do CSOs React to the Needs of Refugees and Asylum Seekers?

The findings of the field research confirm the argument that the state chose to deal only with the design of a reception and identification system and assigned almost all social integration actions to CSOs (Kourachanis, 2018b). This fact can be connected with the wider tendency of the “NGO-ization” of social policy (Fine, 2012) discussed in the theoretical section. As already mentioned, the involvement of CSOs (Tsitselikis, 2018) in refugee

management is strongly observed, especially in the development of social integration actions.

These CSOs are active in the areas of humanitarian aid, human rights, human trafficking, legal and administrative assistance, advocacy work, accommodation and housing, dissemination of information, socio-economic integration and culture (Rozakou, 2018). In practice, the CSOs primarily find themselves having to manage the governmental gap of a targeted migration policy that focuses on the integration of RAs. The GSIs and NGOs oversee most of the services that aim at RAs’ integration into the labour market, such as the provision of language courses, skills development training and employability programs (Oikonomakis, 2018).

The interviews with the main civil society actors (primarily NGOs and GSIs) offer valuable evidence for their role as providers of labour market integration services for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. It should, however, be noted that there are fundamental differences in the philosophy of interventions among the different civil society actors, which impacts the ways in which labour integration is being sought for RAs. For example, through their networks and partnership agreements NGOs primarily aim at routing the beneficiaries to private sector companies as, in most cases, unskilled workers (Bagavos et al., 2019). In contrast, the emphasis of solidarity initiatives is on the development of a solidarity culture, in the sense that they channel those who benefit from interventions into areas of employment that promote social solidarity, such as social cooperatives (Kotronaki et al., 2018).

The refugee crisis has significantly affected the role of civil society organizations. Since 2010, Greek society has experienced a major economic crisis, with extensive cut-backs in the social protection system and a significant worsening of social problems (Bagavos et al., 2019). Because of tough austerity measures, the Greek state cannot adequately respond to the needs of RAs for social support (Christopoulos, 2020). Within the wider context of the deregulation of the Greek labour market—with widespread unemployment affecting young people in particular—the prospect of developing targeted employment policies for RAs seems impractical (Kouzis, 2018).

The refugee crisis led to the bifurcation of civil society and a difference, in terms of actions, service provision and scope of the intervention, between NGOs on the one hand, and the informal solidarity movement on the other (Christopoulos, 2020). The reality is that informal solidarity movements and non-governmental organizations are being mobilized in different ways to support refugees. The majority of NGOs have impressively expanded their activities during the refugee crisis due to at least two factors. The first is the EU funding they receive for the implementation of social policy programs, and the second

is the high level of knowledge that has been transferred to NGOs, through technical assistance programs offered by international organizations, the European Union and international networks and organizations (Kourachanis, 2018b). As one NGO representative reported: “*Our organization has grown impressively because of the refugee crisis. Indeed, our growth was so steep that at first we feared it would be uncontrollable. From 2015 until today, our organization has more than doubled its staff. Through the technical knowledge provided by the UNHCR and the EU, we have succeeded in developing the framework of our actions to a very high level.*”

Female, 43 years old, 12 June 2019

In contrast, solidarity movements with a left-wing political orientation attempt to support refugees by using a different philosophy of intervention (Kotronaki et al., 2018). Their primary aim is to provide better living conditions than those in the camps, but they also seek to highlight the impasse in the EU and anti-social immigration policy by proposing an alternative model of living, through the culture of solidarity. These groups refuse financial support from the EU for their interventions as they consider the EU to be responsible for shaping the landscape of the economic and refugee crisis. As one member of a Solidarity Collective Initiative put it: “*The aim of our interventions is to point out that the EU’s immigration policy violates human rights. We also want to propose alternative living standards, based on solidarity and mutual support. We do not want any institutional or informal relationship with those actors who are making people drown in the Aegean.*”

Female, 62 years old, 9 May 2019

The interviews highlighted at least two major controversies in the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers. The first concerns the unfavourable landscape created by the overall high unemployment rate, which increased from 10 to 20% between 2009 and 2018. The second is the tendency for refugees and asylum seekers to be used as cheap and unskilled labour, without taking into account the specific skills they may have (Xypolytas, 2017).

On the first issue, high unemployment rates make the task of targeted job creation for RAs all the more daunting, since priority is given to the fight against overall unemployment. Additionally, due to the economic downturn, the employability of migrants in sectors such as construction, retail, cleaning, private care and domestic services has been negatively affected. On this issue, the testimonies of NGO representatives show that the prospects available for their beneficiaries are jobs in cleaning, agriculture and unskilled jobs in the tourism sector.

Another career prospect is their employment at CSO’s labour market. The beneficiaries of the civil society

organizations that we interviewed are very often involved in the various activities of those organizations. In the case of NGOs, refugees and asylum seekers are only included in the implementation stage of their actions. They are used either as professional staff (interpreters, cultural mediators, etc.) or as volunteers who can approach their co-nationals. However, they are not included in the consultation or decision-making processes, or in the planning of social interventions. In that respect, a representative of an NGO reports that: “*Our organization has managed to transform a remarkable number of our beneficiaries into employees. They are mainly employed as interpreters and cultural mediators. They are generally channeled into implementing the actions. We would like some of them to be included in the planning of our programs, but they still do not have such skills.*”

Male, 38 years old, 5 June 2019

By contrast, in the solidarity initiatives of activist groups, refugees and asylum seekers are perceived as equal members of the community (Kotronaki et al., 2018). They therefore participate equally in the discussions that take place for shaping their actions, as well as in their implementation. As a result, refugees and asylum seekers in these groups have the same employment prospects as Greeks in the employment efforts that they apply themselves.

In addition, we can identify other differences. Differences can be observed in the ways in which NGOs and solidarity initiatives seek to achieve the integration of refugees and asylum seekers. NGOs adopt a model of active social policies based on established patterns of employment policy. These include counselling, CV and interview preparation for beneficiaries, the provision of information on the employment services of the Greek state and private agencies which promote employment, the creation of a register of businesses wishing to employ refugees and asylum seekers (active matching), seminars on labour rights, as well as the organization of events and festivals promoting employment with the participation of employers and the unemployed.

Solidarity initiatives develop employment opportunities in the field of the social and solidarity economy, in which social cooperatives are the main providers of employment. The basic occupational activities are in areas of fundamental human needs such as nutrition and clothing. As reported by a member of one social cooperative: “*We are trying to guide our members into creating solidarity cooperatives to meet basic human needs. Here, the workers are all equal, without hierarchies. For example, they are creating a cooperative for the purpose of providing food without intermediaries. They go to some farmers and receive a small income in cash and also have the*

agricultural produce from their crops. Then they sell their agricultural produce at low prices in the cities.”

Male, 45 years old, 20 June 2019

The interviews show that for NGOs the funding dimension is a key factor in prioritizing their actions. On the other hand, the opposite seems to be the case for the solidarity initiatives. More precisely, the priorities for NGO interventions appear to be fully linked to the outlook for funding. Financial allocations derive primarily from funding from international and European institutions, as well as from grants from publicly owned entities and private enterprises. This is also a key reason why they are so involved in issues relating to the refugee crisis. Characteristic is the extract from an interview with an NGO representative: *“Of course, funding plays an important role. We try to see that we have a viable plan to intervene. So, financial tools are an important parameter for what kind of actions we will develop. To be funded, these actions should, of course, be in line with the values of our organization.”*

Male, 50 years old, 23 May 2019

In contrast, solidarity groups oppose the prospect of funding from the official institutions of the EU and the Greek state, as they consider them guilty of mishandling the refugee crisis. The funding channels for these organizations include sponsorship from citizens, as well as special financial contributions from groups abroad. With the solidarity groups, it is often a matter of de-prioritizing funding. In other words, they first make decisions for which social actions to prioritize and then seek appropriate funding. According to one member of a solidarity collective initiative, *“Our basic funding principle is that we refuse to take money from those we are condemning. We cannot say that the EU and the neo-liberal actors are to blame for the crisis and then take their money.”*

Female, 62 years old, 9 May 2019

What Do Refugees and Asylum Seekers Get and Seek (If They Do at All) from CSOs?

CSOs act within a context of fragmented or sometimes absent integration policy from public actors. This is somewhat of a controversial issue if we bear in mind that Greece is one of the main countries of entry for new arrivals into the EU and it has received a massive flow of refugees over the last years. One would think that a country in such a position would have developed several integration policy measures, but this is far from the reality. The fact that CSOs and NGOs in particular are the main and very often the only provider of labour market integration services for RAs coupled with the weak involvement of public employment services leads to a disconnect in the

provision of services through which RAs can access the labour market. This could be considered a specific symptom of the broader weak employment policies of the Greek social protection system. One significant aspect that was made clear in the interviews is that, although refugees and asylum seekers have great aspirations in terms of the provision of services aiming to facilitate their integration into the labour market, they do not necessarily expect that the service providers will be CSOs. On the ground, they are in contact with CSOs and, especially, with NGOs as they are the only providers of those services. The great expectations that RAs have is important for appreciating to what extent the service provision of the CSOs meets the needs of RAs for their integration into the labour market. From the interviews, it appears that these expectations are shaped mainly by: (a) the skills that they had developed in their country; (b) their previous positive experience with CSOs in other host countries; and (c) the information that they have been given through their informal networks about other host countries regarding the greater effectiveness of CSOs and public authorities in routing RAs toward employment.

Most of the time, the experience that RAs have with the Greek CSOs comes through the provision of language courses. The majority of our interviewees had thus attended the Greek language courses provided by an NGO, because they perceive language proficiency as an important factor when searching for work. However, many of them also underlined the necessity for more intensive and better organized courses that are offered in a more formal way. As one RA commented: *“As for the Greek courses they have...they put 60 people in a living room, I can't [learn like that]”* Female, 37 years old, 23 May 2019. Another common complaint was that *“the classes that the NGOs provide are only on once or twice a week and so are not helpful at all”* Male, 30 years old, 23 May 2019.

On the whole, the interviewees felt that that language lessons were too infrequent, offered for too short a period of time and often for a limited number of persons. They also mentioned the lack of any control on who attended the courses and an absence of professionalism as significant shortcomings. As was reported by one RA, *“I believe that the Greek government has to put pressure on RAs; for example, in Germany if you do not go to a language course they do not give you money, services or benefits”*. Male, 32 years old, 7 June 2019.

Refugees and asylum seekers are not particularly satisfied with their experiences with employability programs either, perhaps because of a misinterpretation or misunderstanding of what role NGOs should play in the Greek context. In any case, they report the lack of skills recognition and qualifications and of no follow-up to the various activities as major reasons for their dissatisfaction with

such programs. These programs focus on training the RAs with skills, such as how to improve their curriculum vitae, using search engines to look for employment, and skills documentation, which are considered requirements for finding a job. A number of interviewees found this training to be useless because, ultimately, it does not seem to be very effective in finding a job. One RA reported that: “*I visited so many NGOs but the only thing they can do is create the CVs and give us some websites which, if you are educated you can find them by yourself anyway. But the problem is that for 6 months now and every day I send 20–25 CVs and I get no response.*” Male, 35 years old, 23 May 2019. Another said: “*The first thing they do here and in other NGOs is they help you create a CV and then send your CV to a few places, but after that they don’t search for something that may suit you better so it ends up being unsuccessful.*” Male, 37 years old, 5 May 2019.

However, this dissatisfaction should not be understood as a sign of the inadequacy of CSOs as actors who aim to facilitate the integration of RAs into the labour market. It is instead most probably related to the inadequacy of the formal employment policies that are supposed to facilitate the labour market integration not only of RAs but of the local population as well. For RAs in particular, finding a job through formal employment channels most of the time succeeds only when done through private employment agencies, leading to their placement in unskilled jobs in the tourism and agriculture sectors.

Three additional aspects emanated from the interviews, as regards the adequacy of what refugees and asylum seekers can expect to receive from NGOs in order to ensure their employability. The first is that, very often, RAs consider or experience ethnic networks as the main channels of their integration into the labour market. Although they do recognize the importance of employability and language services for their integration, they tend to find jobs through friends and contacts within their ethnic group. This fact reveals that the initial entry of RAs into the Greek labour market takes place more through ethnic networks and not so much through public employment services. The second aspect, which also relates to the ethnic dimension, is that ethnic networks seem to channel RAs into ethnic businesses and that, very often, RAs aim to establish their own business, similar to the one they had in their country of origin, instead of working as employees for others. A final significant aspect is the fact that many of the RAs see their stay in Greece as a transitional phase towards their ultimate goal of reaching another EU member state with higher incomes and more generous social policy schemes.

Although RAs are not fully satisfied with the provision of language and employability services, they consider the legal and administrative assistance they receive from NGOs very helpful—an aspect which greatly differentiates

NGOs from other stakeholders. They have a positive view of the assistance offered for obtaining a Tax Identification Number or a Social Security Number, or for opening a local bank account, which are prerequisites to finding a job. As one RA said in an interview: “*When you go to an NGO or an organization, they can do the bureaucratic work for you, they can help you with a lot of paperwork*”. Male, 30 years old, 23 May 2019.

Although NGOs have made a valuable contribution to the humanitarian aid provided to refugees, they do not appear to have been as successful in meeting the needs of RAs for integration into the labour market when we analyse the opinions of the refugees and asylum seekers themselves. This may be either because the results that were expected from the services provided did not materialize (or, equally, the scope of the actions was not clearly defined) or because there was no follow-up to the actions. The reasons for this could be that the fragmented funding meant that services were provided for a limited period of time and because NGOs were being asked to fill a gap that had resulted from the absence of a clear integration policy from the government and the lack of support from the public administration. It is also probably related to the fact that, in some cases, refugees and asylum seekers, by perceiving NGOs as employment services providers, have great expectations of them that are ultimately not met and, hence, there is frustration among RAs.

In the eyes of RAs, the effect of GSIs is diffuse and cannot be assessed systematically. This is due to the fact that these initiatives have informal characteristics (Kourachanis, 2018a). For example, in a refugee-squat which organized by GSIs, free Greek language courses may be offered or intercultural seminars may be held. However, their duration and the smoothness of their conduct depend on many parameters, such as the availability of activists to carry out these actions or the retention of the squat (as long as there are always fears of being evacuated by the police).

The most important feature that can be highlighted is related to the philosophy of GSIs. GSIs are inspired by an egalitarian approach between activists and RAs. RAs are treated as equal members of these communities (Kotronaki et al., 2018). The charitable/hierarchical perception that is often found in the speech and practices of NGOs does not exist here. This egalitarian conception stems from the political perceptions of activists who usually approach the RAs as a inevitable part of the working class. Indicative is the following quote from an interview with a refugee who hosted in a GSI squat: “*The squat I hosted was not just a place to have a bed to sleep on. They didn’t just host us there. They were talking to us about our rights. Together we discuss the actions of the initiative. Those of us who lived there felt equal*”. Female, 37 years old, 23 May 2019.

Conclusion

The unprecedented migration inflows into Greece in the 1990s led to the development of civil society organizations for the support of migrants. Protecting rights, promoting social inclusion and providing support to an increasing number of, mostly irregular, migrants have been the main aims of this civil society support. Subsequent to this, and in particular since 2015, there has been an unprecedented rise in refugee flows into the country, and civil society organizations have again played a major role in terms of humanitarian aid and the provision of social services to refugees, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. In addition, CSOs and, especially, NGOs have attempted to manage the governmental gap of a designed migration policy that focuses on the social integration of MRAs. In this context, NGOs oversee the majority of integration services, such as the provision of language courses, skills development training and employability programs for the integration of MRAs into the labour market. At the same time, the long-standing economic recession in Greece inevitably makes the prospect for framing and developing policies for the integration of MRAs into the labour market difficult. This difficulty is even more profound for refugees and asylum seekers than for those migrants who are long-term residents in Greece.

GSI and NGOs frame their activities as those of a temporary agent that provides support to migrants, yet these activities are not connected with the implementation of government policies. Most of the time, the design of actions is assigned to CSOs themselves, while the public authorities are responsible for monitoring and the allocation of funds, which usually come from European programmes. However, the framework and the aim of integration policies are mostly absent. Thus, informal networks such as friends and contacts end up playing the major role in providing help to refugees and asylum seekers to reach the labour market.

The refugee crisis has also had a significant impact on CSOs, and NGOs in particular, in terms of the knowledge they have gained from technical assistance programs provided by international organizations, the closer connections made between priorities and funding, the diversity of their activities and the effective management of their increasing staff. The refugee crisis has also mobilized informal civil society sectors on a large scale. Yet, for the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers, there are fundamental differences in the philosophy of the interventions of formal and informal civil society actors. It seems that

formal actors such as NGOs, through their interconnections and partnership agreements with private sector companies, are primarily routing beneficiaries into employment as unskilled workers. In contrast, informal actors such as citizen solidarity initiatives place emphasis on the development of a solidarity culture. To this end, they channel those who can benefit from interventions, who are of a limited number, into areas of employment that promote social solidarity, such as social cooperatives.

Two issues must be highlighted as regards the role of the formal civil society sector in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the labour market. The first concerns the unfavourable landscape created by the high unemployment rate and the gloomy economic environment, which makes it difficult to implement targeted job creation programs for refugees and asylum seekers, since measures to facilitate employment are mainly related to the effort against overall unemployment. The second issue is our finding that NGO beneficiaries are most probably routed to flexible forms of employment and to low-skilled jobs in cleaning, agriculture and the tourism sector. Since this finding is currently based on a small number of interviews, this is one issue that requires further investigation.

On the whole, the Greek integration policy is fragmented. Since 2015, the state has reacted to the mass inward migration flows as an emergency situation, leaving integration services to the side. The upgrade of CSO's role is evolving with a strengthening of the know-how and professionalization of NGOs. It is also linked to the development of solidarity actions by left-wing political groups. These two aspects do not interact with each other. On the contrary, there is a fragmentation that is justified by the different perceptions that these two poles of civil society have about the welfare. NGOs are endowed with a philanthropic philosophy of managing the humanitarian crisis, GSI are inspired by an egalitarian understanding between MRAs and Greek citizens. Assessing the role of these two poles for the integration of RAs into labour market in the recent unfavourable context is undoubtedly of significant interest for future research.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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