

# Informal Citizen Networks

The case of Greece

May 2013

Annex to Deliverable 5.3 of  
the FP7-project: TEPsie  
(290771)



### **Suggested citation**

Garefi, I., Kalemaki, E. (2013). Informal Citizen Networks: The case of Greece. A deliverable of the project: “The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe” (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Anna Davies and Julie Simon from The Young Foundation for their valuable comments and suggestions.

### **TEPSIE**

TEPSIE is a research project funded under the European Commission’s 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme and is an acronym for “The Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe”. The project is a research collaboration between six European institutions led by The Danish Technological Institute and the Young Foundation and runs from 2012-2015.

Date:	May 2013
TEPSIE deliverable no:	Annex to 5.3
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## 1. Introduction

Since 2009 Greece has experienced a severe financial recession and the government has adopted austerity measures that have had a severe impact on the lives of citizens. High rates of unemployment, people living below the poverty line and social disruption are just some of the main characteristics of the current situation. At the same time, we are seeing the emergence of a large number of informal citizen networks and grassroots movements aiming to provide innovative solutions to the difficult situations which the country is facing.

Our aim in this paper is to provide a further insight on the main characteristics of the informal citizen networks in Greece which have gradually emerged during the last few years and which have recently become more visible.

This paper is thus structured around the following sections:

- The first section covers the description of the structure of Greek civil society, its special features and its evolution during the last century. Given that there is a long road ahead before civil society gains the position and recognition it deserves within modern Greek society, our approach will be to present and highlight the most important factors that not only shaped civil society, but also those factors that hindered its development in contrast to other European countries where the sector is more developed.
- The second section attempts to provide the main characteristics and differences of the informal networks that have developed during the last thirty years. Our main focus will be to answer two very important questions: Can the emergence of the informal networks be attributed only to the current financial crisis? And, what other factors eventually led to their widespread adoption across Greece?
- The third section presents an indicative number of informal networks that are currently active in Greece based on a typology that we have developed as a result of their main characteristics and objectives.
- In the fourth and last section of this paper our endeavour is to highlight those factors that may influence the future of the informal networks as well as the extent of their contribution in forming a new future for Greece. Some first considerations regarding current and future trends are also presented.

## 2. Civil Society in Greece

Civil society in Greece has a very long tradition which has been quite chequered throughout the years. The term, 'civil society' is widely used by the public and in academic discourses in Greece. It describes both formal organisations and informal collective activities of people who are independent of the state, contributing to the development of civic values and social capital and taking a generally constructive stance towards democracy as a social order (Sotiropoulos, 2004).

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as the main precursors of civil society activity have played a rather significant role in the country's history, starting from the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire (1821-1827) and then throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. **The process of democratisation is associated with the development of civil society and with rising political participation** (Schmitter 1986, Diamond 1997). While parliamentary democracy and the development of CSOs were closely related in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century this democratic tradition was interrupted by the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), which followed the end of the Second World War and also by the military intervention into Greek politics. The last intervention occurred in 1967 and led to a military dictatorship which lasted for seven long years.

During this period (1967-74), a number of resistance organisations of students, intellectuals and left-wing activists developed. Following the transition to democracy since 1974, we have observed a phenomenal boom in civil society. According to Sotiropoulos (2004), *“compared to other young democratic nations, including South-East European nations, Greece is an example of a successful democratic consolidation and civil society development. However, compared to other West European nations with strong civil society traditions, Greece has a less well-developed civil society”*.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the literature, we observe a frequent characterisation of the Greek civil society as underdeveloped, weak, poorly organised as well as having a limited impact on society at large. Even though we observe the existence of a rather strong informal civil society which has flourished during the last years and has become more evident during the economic downturn which is currently traumatising the country, Greece was further described by Sotiropoulos (2004) as *“having a low stock of social capital and trust”*<sup>2</sup>.

There are two distinct factors which have hindered the development of social capital in Greece. The first one refers to the economic and political instability throughout the years of Greece’s modern history. The second can be attributed to the heavy dependence of Greek civil society on central state institutions (ministries and public sector organisations). Mouzelis (1995) also confirms this trend by reporting that *“the “weakness” of Greek civil society is attributed to the dominance of clientelism and patronage and the vertical, rather than horizontal, incorporation of the social spectrum to politics”*<sup>3</sup>. Even though democracy has flourished in Greece since 1974, CSOs did not emerge in large numbers until the 1990s which is also when empirical research on them began.

### **3. The emergence of informal networks during the last 5 years**

#### **3.1. The emergence of informal networks**

Up until 1990 and since the democratisation of Greece in 1974, the emergence of civil society organisations was not that common or at least, as mentioned above, empirical research on them has only begun after 1990. From that period onwards and up until the beginning of the Greek economic recession in 2009, many informal citizen networks have emerged but without much communication about them, which means many people are unfamiliar with these organisations and their activities. Some key questions emerging from this situation are: What does it tell us about informal citizen community mobilisation in the years prior to the economic crisis?; Were CSOs structured in an organised manner?; What specific examples of informal civil society mobilisation are there, what are their main characteristics and, if and how they differ from those networks flourishing after the crisis?

As the literature shows, there have been quite a few events during the late 90s that can be described either as cases of constructive civil society participation or that could be seen in a more negative sense, as being quite destructive. We provide two examples of these cases below, which

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<sup>1</sup> Sotiropoulos, D.A., Formal Weakness and Informal Strength: Civil Society in Contemporary Greece, *Discussion Paper No. 16*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, February 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mouzelis, N., “Modernity, Late Development and Civil Society,” in *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*, ed. J.A. Hall, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 224–249.

indicate the characteristics of such networks prior to the crisis<sup>4</sup>. These cases were widely communicated to the public, although they were not representative of all the existing networks during that period.

On the one hand, there was a constructive civil society mobilisation which surfaced during the early fall of 1999. It was the case of non-governmental mobilisation which aimed to help the victims and the material damages of the earthquake in Western Athens. A lot of collective actors devoted part of their resources to alleviate the situation of the victims of the earthquake in 1999. A vast number of associations (it was estimated around 700), foundations, NGOs as well as a lot of private businesses were mobilised. They offered goods, such as money, food, clothes, and also services, such as health care and psychological support to the victims.

On the other hand, an example of a not-so-constructive, but rather destructive, civil society mobilisation also surfaced in the late 1990s. This refers to the Greek school parades, which take place to celebrate national anniversaries. The parade follows the lead of the pupil who carries the Greek flag and who is chosen from among the graduating class as being the top pupil in his or her class (according to a specific ministerial ordinance). In 2000 and again in 2002, in two small Greek towns the local community convened to reject the decision of the school's head master to deliver the Greek flag to a student because he happened to be of Albanian origin. People from the local community announced that they would use force to obstruct the parade if it were headed by the Albanian student carrying the Greek flag. Just one day before the parade was scheduled to take place, the Albanian student backed down and passed the flag to the second best student who happened to be Greek.

What do these stories tell us about the different informal collectives that appeared then in comparison to the current citizen networks identified and developed after the crisis? According to Sotiropoulos (2004), it seems that under particular circumstances, the informal collectives that were formed prior to the crisis fought to preserve their own interests against those of the wider region or the country as a whole opposed to what is happening with the post crisis citizen networks.

Another important aspect that should not be neglected is the structure and organisation of those collectives. Careful attention needs to be given to the terms and definitions adopted before and after the crisis period when characterising the mobilisation of the informal civil society. The main difference of those phenomena in the late 90s was the fact that they were mentioned and acknowledged as *collectives- which of course continue to exist even after the crisis serving different or the same interests-* instead of how they are conceived nowadays, after the crisis, i.e. informal citizen **networks**.

In order to have a more complete picture of the situation of civil society in Greece and more specifically of informal networks, it is important to describe how the mobilisation of those networks has evolved over the years gaining greater momentum after the economic recession.

A new era for civil society organisations started in 2009 and is still developing today. Since 2009 there has been a boom in informal citizen networks and grassroots movements shaping an "alternative", "parallel" economy in Greece. Despite the poor tradition of Greece in the field, a rather stronger "informal" civil society has emerged. In various Greek cities, informal gatherings of citizens have turned into local social movements trying to provide solutions or a new way of

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<sup>4</sup> Sotiropoulos, D.A., Formal Weakness and Informal Strength: Civil Society in Contemporary Greece, *Discussion Paper No. 16*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, February 2004.

thinking in order to structure a new future for Greece. This new alternative economy is becoming more and more popular in Greek society as it spreads rapidly across the country.

However, the emergence of such networks is not a new phenomenon, at least during periods of economic crisis. Although completely new for Greece, in several other countries around the world such informal networks have a long history – for example, Argentina. During the Argentinean economic crisis (1999-2002) several citizen networks and parallel currencies were developed. Social currencies such as credits<sup>5,6</sup> of the Red Global del Trueque (RGT)<sup>7</sup> – literally "Global Network of Multi-Reciprocal Exchange Clubs" or more simply the "Global Exchange Network" (GEN) which facilitates trade between some 200.000 producers and consumers- emerged, involving millions of people. Soon, a massive barter exchange movement expanded to several other parts of Latin America.

Another example is the cimarrón<sup>8,9</sup> one of the several alternative currencies in Venezuela. LETS is a very popular Exchange System which started in the UK and expanded in many countries around the world. Many other schemes such as the time banks operate within the framework of a parallel economy springing up in many regions of Spain. These are just some of the ways that people develop creative approaches to meeting their needs, especially during tough economic times.

Returning to the situation in Greece: could such networks be considered as an after-effect of the crisis? We believe that the answer here is twofold. Undoubtedly this is the case for Greece as the emergence of many informal networks coincides with the outbreak of the financial crisis. Having this perspective in mind, someone could easily and logically believe that the emergence of these networks should be attributed to the economic recession. But what other reasons lie behind their existence?

The emergence of these informal networks can also be attributed to the transformation of consumers' behaviours and attitudes towards a more responsible way of living different from the current one which is characterised by passive consumerism, over-production and the great dependence on money. In particular, it is the desire felt by many people for a new way of thinking and acting in their everyday life, a kind of creative resistance to the current situation.

Other sources claim that these new kind of networks have appeared in order to fill the gaps between people's needs and the social services provided by the state. In spite of the large public sector in Greece, the country's social services are often not up to the task of helping people in need<sup>10</sup>. More broadly what is happening in Greece and elsewhere could be understood as a way of

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<sup>5</sup> DeMeulenaere, S., Reinventing the Market: Alternative Currencies and Community Development in Argentina, International journal of community currency research, retrieved 8 April 2013, <[http://www.ijccr.group.shef.ac.uk/vol/vol4/Reinventing\\_the\\_Market.htm](http://www.ijccr.group.shef.ac.uk/vol/vol4/Reinventing_the_Market.htm)>

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, The free Encyclopedia, Crédito, retrieved 8 April 2013, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cr%C3%A9dito>>

<sup>7</sup> Ramada, C., Strohalm, A., Utrecht, The Netherlands, May 2000, User-created currencies in Latin America, retrieved 8 April 2013, <[http://www.complementarycurrency.org/ccLibrary/materials/user\\_currencies.html](http://www.complementarycurrency.org/ccLibrary/materials/user_currencies.html)>

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, Venezuela's alternative currencies, Token of utopia, A different take on the cashless society, 18 December 2008, retrieved 8 April 2013, <<http://www.economist.com/node/12814666>>

<sup>9</sup> Swinden, S., Local currencies appearing in Greece, like they did in Argentina after the 2001 debacle, 4 June 2012, retrieved 8 April 2013, <<http://www.presenza.com/2012/06/local-currencies-appearing-in-greecex-like-they-did-in-argentina-after-the-2001-debacle/>>

<sup>10</sup> Donadio, R., Battered by Economic Crisis, Greeks Turn to Barter Networks, 1 October 2011, retrieved 10 April 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/world/europe/in-greece-barter-networks-surge.html?pagewanted=all&r=4&>>



redesigning the mainstream economy that has failed to meet people's needs, and prioritising well-being and resilience.

Taking a closer look at the core features of these informal networks, all the above mentioned reasons for their appearance are reaffirmed. Starting from their objective, which is explicitly claimed by each one of them, most of these grassroots movements aim to respond to the current crisis through innovative ideas and joint solutions. They aim to modify existing thinking and provide support to people in need in order to improve life in community, to promote fair and equitable sharing and distribution of goods and services as well as to promote and preserve resources and assets of their local communities.

Most of the informal citizen networks in Greece also share some common features among them. These mainly involve the following:

- The participation of people in the networks on a voluntary and democratic basis.
- The promotion of fair and equitable distribution of resources.
- The development of relationships based on solidarity.
- A focus on a smaller scale economy.
- A different value system, which promotes concepts such as self-sufficiency, mixed with modern ideas like sustainability and ethical consumption.
- Independence from public authorities.

As a consequence, we have tried to categorise the various existing citizen networks based on the following typology. More information as well as examples of the different categories will be provided in the next section. Our typology includes the following eight categories:

- Exchange and virtual currencies networks
- Cost cutting networks - "Without intermediaries"
- Social kitchens
- Social clinics- social pharmacies
- Social education networks
- Social /Cultural activism
- Self-management & self control networks
- Networks for change

## **4. Informal citizen networks in Greece**

### **4.1. Examples of informal citizen networks**

As described above, we have divided the existing informal citizen networks into eight distinct categories. Below we provide examples of the different networks we have identified which are primarily concerned with promoting fair and equitable sharing, solidarity and self-sufficiency and thereby contributing to the development of new concepts and ideas while building a new future for Greece. The list of examples provided was by no means intended to be exhaustive but aimed to provide an indication of the variety of networks that exist.

More detailed case studies will follow providing further insight on two very successful and well known networks in Greece, that of the exchange network TEM and the potato movement which have emerged and grown both in terms of their structure and organisation as well as in terms of the communication and visibility they have gained.

#### 4.1.1. Exchange and virtual currencies networks<sup>11</sup>

Exchange and virtual currencies networks refer to activities organised by groups of citizens in specific regions or across the whole of Greece, where transactions are taking place without the use of money. They are based either on the exchange of products and services or on virtual currencies such as the unit of time or coupons issued by the networks' members. Some of them are online networks where the members can notify when they want to give something away for free or when they need something. Some of the most popular networks are presented below:

- **Time Exchange** (<http://www.time-exchange.gr/>): This is a network for exchanging free services. In 2011, thousands of people flooded the squares of Greece trying to resist the introduction of new austerity measures which would have such devastating effects on people's lives. A group of people who had gathered in Syntagma Square decided to exchange views and knowledge in order to operate a time bank, i.e. a network for exchanging free services, using time as the unit of transaction.


- **Ovolos** ([www.ovolos.gr](http://www.ovolos.gr/)): An alternative social currency that facilitates commercial activities between its members. The network is organised and operated by its members and is open to anyone who wants to participate.
- **TEM** (<http://www.tem-magnisia.gr/>): An alternative economic/ social model. More than 800 citizens in the town of Volos have signed up for a local currency scheme called TEM. The network includes teachers, doctors, babysitters, farmers, hairdressers, etc. who interact with each other online. All transactions are recorded in a special electronic system, in order for any network member to be able to offer or search for products and services in any given time. Members transfer units into and out of each others' accounts online. TEM provides an alternative way of showing practical solidarity and a response to the crisis effects.



*TEM photo, courtesy of Georgios Makkas, [www.gmakkas.com](http://www.gmakkas.com)*
- **Skoros** (<http://skoros.espiv.net/>): Skoros is a solidarity bazaar, which is anti-consumerist and is open to everyone, regardless of their economic situation. A give-and-take of things but also a meeting point for exchange of knowledge/ experience/ practices (for example, I offer a hair-cut and you teach me how to knit!). It is neither a philanthropic organisation, nor a kind of "alternative church". It is a group of people that question in practice the dogma "I consume, therefore I am".



<sup>11</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website.

- **Fasouli** (<http://fasouli.wordpress.com/>): This network is for the underpaid or unemployed youth of Athens – all those whose welfare payments are decreasing while the world they live in is becoming increasingly expensive. The so called 700 euro generation that today became the 300 euro generation is the name that young Greeks have given themselves. Two years ago when young people managed to find a job, they rarely got more than 700 euro (with a minimum net wage of 750 euro per month) whereas today they roughly get more than 350 euro a month which is the minimum net wage for young employees up to 25 years old in accordance to the law implemented as a result of the austerity measures adopted. Fasouli serves their needs by giving the opportunity to each network member to exchange services and products. The tenders are communicated to the network through classified ads. The payment is made in Fasoulas, a virtual currency, whose use is restricted to the members of the network.



- **Free-economy** (<http://network.free-economy.gr/>): Online exchange network in which dozens of professionals offer and receive services by using an alternative currency.

- **Xariseto.gr** (<http://www.xariseto.gr/>): Online exchange network which aims to decrease the volume of useful objects ending up in landfills which are useless to someone after a period of time. This initiative is an alternative economic model, a give-and-take of things which are offered free of charge.



Photo taken from <https://www.facebook.com/hariseto>

- **Dose- pare** (<http://dwsepare.ning.com/>): Online exchange network. A give-and-take of things which are offered free of charge.
- **Solidarity and exchange networks in several Greek cities and islands:** The main focus of these networks is to allow their members to exchange services and products as a means of meeting part of their daily needs without the use of money. Such networks are: “Votsalo”, “Ilianthos”, “Lets.net.gr”, “Stakraeli”, “Ilios”, “Rodia”, “Iliohoros”, “kyklos-kos”, “DiktioElia”, “Sano”, “Kaereti”, “Mesopotamia”, “Perivolakia”, “KOINO”, “EMRO”, “Boutsouni” etc.

#### 4.1.2. Cost cutting networks - “Without intermediaries”<sup>12</sup>

These are mainly citizen networks focusing on fair transactions between producers and consumers. In particular, these networks aim to cut costs for consumers by organising and distributing products - mainly agricultural - without the involvement of intermediaries.

- **The potato movement:** A grassroots socio-agriculture movement which consists of Greek farmers selling potatoes and other goods such as onions, rice, flour etc. directly to the public (without the involvement of intermediaries). With many Greeks now living on the

<sup>12</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network’s website.

breadline, and with prices still impossibly high, the movement is a clever and for many, a vital way to cut costs.

- **Inipirouni** (<http://www.inipirouni.gr/>): Solidarity movement focusing on the fair transactions between producers and consumers. They collaborate with producers of organic goods and they print on the packaging of their products the maximum retail selling price in order to protect the Greek consumers from intermediaries.



Photo taken from <http://www.spame.gr>

- **Omotrapezoi** (<http://omotrapezoi.blogspot.gr/>): A group of citizens in Thessaloniki aiming to cut costs for Greek consumers by groups purchasing. Every weekend "Omotrapezoi" organise massive orders and buy several products (vegetables, flour, etc., directly from producers), without the involvement of intermediaries. The distribution of the goods to the consumers is done personally by the group.



Cooking meeting "Legumes", taken from <https://www.facebook.com/Omotrapezoi>

- **Argonauts** (<http://agronaftes.blogspot.gr/>): Network without intermediaries for organic products in the region of Peloponnesus.
- **Anosi- volunteers** (<http://www.anwsi.gr/>): Network without intermediaries in the Region of Volos.

#### 4.1.3. Social kitchens<sup>13</sup>


"Social kitchens" or "soup kitchens" were formed as a response to the current economic situation. They are informal social structures organised by groups of citizens aiming to offer food to immigrants, homeless, unemployed and poor. The volunteers that run the social kitchens are responsible for cooking, serving and collecting the food either from restaurants or citizens that want to contribute with donations.

- **El Chef** (<http://www.elchef.gr/>): The social kitchen El Chef was created by a group of citizens in Athens in 2007. Initially it was focused on migrants and now offers food to Greeks who live on the breadline. It is not a charity and it does not treat people who have been affected by the crisis as



<sup>13</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website.


unfortunate and hungry. Its goal is to cultivate solidarity and to inspire and shape other forms of social reality as a response to the current crisis.

- **The other Human (<http://oallosanthropos.blogspot.gr/>):** "The Other Human" was conceived when a group of citizens noticed that people of various ages, nationalities, and social levels were rummaging through rubbish at public food markets to find food they otherwise couldn't afford to buy. The first obvious response was to cook their own food from home and distribute it in public market places. Later on they decided to cook on site for people and to eat the cooked food together. This way they could all come together trying to break through any feeling of shame or embarrassment. "The Other Human" is an act of solidarity with fellow Greeks. These actions are not philanthropic or charity. Their motto is that "We cook "live", we eat together and we live together. It is a lunch with our fellowman on the street".
- 
- **Xanadu (<http://xanadu.espivblogs.net/>):** A citizens group focusing on the development of social relationships based on principles such as equality, collective and individual responsibility, and solidarity. Activities include social kitchen, self-education, workshops, festivals etc.
  - **Helping.gr (<http://www.helping.gr/active.aspx>):** A website providing information on free food spots within the country.

#### 4.1.4. Social clinics- social pharmacies<sup>14</sup>

During the last few years the Greek health system has almost collapsed. Many medical centres and hospitals have been closed or merged, and the cuts in funding of public hospitals have resulted in basic shortages. In response to this situation several social clinics and pharmacies have emerged. These initiatives were set up by doctors, nurses and pharmacists who provide their services voluntarily and for free. The necessary equipment and medicines are paid for by them or donated by people or pharmacies that want to collaborate.

This "social health movement" has spread throughout Greece. Social clinics and social pharmacies can be found in almost every prefecture of the country. For example:

- **Athens Solidarity Social Clinic ([http://www.mkoapostoli.com/?page\\_id=1165](http://www.mkoapostoli.com/?page_id=1165)):** Self organised network of doctors that provides basic healthcare to people that due to current austerity measures have no access to hospitals and health centres.
  - **Social Clinic of Solidarity of Thessaloniki (<http://koinwniko-iatreio.gr/index.html>):** Is a social clinic which provides free of charge primary health care across all uninsured and socially excluded, Greeks and immigrants. The clinic's main aim is also to put pressure on the state ensuring a free of charge secondary and tertiary care, hospitalisation and rehabilitation.
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<sup>14</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website.

- **Ethiatreio** (<http://www.ethiatreio.com/>): Is a Social Clinic located in Rethymno, Crete and is a voluntary effort of doctors, pharmacists, nurses, midwives, dentists and volunteers from those working in the social structures of the municipality. It has been operating since July 2008 at a place offered by the Municipality and since October 2009 at new premises. The need to move to new premises is mainly attributed to the increasing attendance of people and also to their desire to expand the clinic's activities in other areas and include actions and other volunteers such as pharmacists, gynecologists and dentists.



#### 4.1.5. Social education networks<sup>15</sup>

The Greek public education system has been structured on a dysfunctional basis. The existence of private tuition centres which provide extra out of school tuition is a common phenomenon which leads to a parallel education system, adopted by almost all Greek citizens. However, now that salaries have been cut, parents can no longer afford this extra expense. In response to this situation several social education networks have emerged. They are organised by educators who provide their services to students on a voluntary basis.

- **Tutorpool** (<http://tutorpool.gr/>): An online solidarity and volunteerism network for Education. Tutorpool puts 500 volunteer tutors in contact with pupils who need their help. In Greece most of the schoolchildren, especially those hoping to go to university, will at some stage need afterschool tutoring. Many parents can no longer afford the private tuition centres that for decades have met that demand. Public education is very poor in Greece. Many schools close down, merge or underperform. Students attend lessons without textbooks. And teachers struggle to provide knowledge, without support from the central government, given that supplementary and additional programs have been terminated. Tutorpool was established by citizens using the Internet. Teachers and former students transfer their knowledge, parents support each other, and the whole Tutorpool community discusses and collaborates, interacts and helps each other with the aim to achieve what the state is unable to offer: equal opportunities for every student.



Photo taken from <https://www.facebook.com/tutorpool>

- **Social tuition centres** have been created in most Greek cities. They are supported by municipalities and mainly by the volunteering work provided by teachers in order to help the students and their families that face financial problems.

#### 4.1.6. Social /Cultural activism

These are mainly networks of artists, actors, musicians that either offer their services for free or contribute by developing new concepts and values as a response to the current situation.

<sup>15</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website.

- **Social music school of Athens and Thessaloniki (<http://koinwnikowdeio.blogspot.gr/>):** Network of music teachers offering their services voluntarily.
- **Social Theatre Shop (<http://www.ntng.gr/default.aspx?lang=en-GB&page=36&newsid=550>):** An initiative from a group of actors of the National Theatre of Northern Greece that organises theatrical performances and invites the audience to provide food products that will be distributed to social organisations instead of paying for a ticket.
- **The caravan project (<http://www.anotherworldishere.com/en/the-caravan-project/>):** A group of artists that aim to highlight the personal stories of the people of Greece in order to emphasise a different way of life than the one promoted by the media. They try to shed light on the side of Greece that continues to create, dream, and proclaim that “Another World Is Here”! They produce short documentaries, photography books, stories and narratives through which they show alternative ways of life, and highlight different ways to take action in response to the current crisis. The Caravan Project tries to contribute to the important debate about re-evaluating the lifestyle, values and ideals that bring people closer to their real needs.



- **Journey without map (<http://taxidixwrisxarti.blogspot.gr/>):** A free, cultural membership network for people who want to express their creativity. The activities are co-decided by all participants and their creations are not related to commercial issues. Instead they promote the principle of self-education in the arts.



*Christmas creations*

- **Art bank (<http://trapezatehnis.blogspot.gr/>):** This is an art project by a group of artists who want to create a platform for discussion and debate on the terms of money, currency, exchange and economy. Therefore, the artworks created and exhibited by the team are used as money tokens or as pretexts for inviting people to exchange views on essential



*Art cash, an artistic creation of a 200 euro note*

economic notions.

#### 4.1.7. Self-management & self control networks<sup>16</sup>

These involve groups of citizens that find innovative ways to express themselves by developing a new way of thinking about everyday life while putting these ideas into action. The main objective of

<sup>16</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website.

these networks is self- sufficiency and gaining control over factors or situations in order to improve everyday life.

- **Apo Koinou** (<http://apokoinou.com/>): Citizen’s movement in the city of Trikala, aiming to show that a "de-growth" process can be a response to the current crisis. Their argument is based on the fact that we can have a better life without having to consume/produce more. The specific movement aims to mobilise the citizens to adopt a new way of thinking and acting in their everyday life (to reduce consumption, to repair and use materials, to recycle etc.) as a response to the current crisis.
- **Atenistas** (<http://atenistas.org/>): An open community of citizens of Athens who love their city and believe that they should no longer have to live with or accept some of its more negative aspects. For them Athens is not a "finished story" but a vast field of inventive and effective actions that will make them realise its enormous potential. They draw strength and energy from citizens, thousands of Athenians who want to do something for their city. They are a vibrant community, which through innovative and creative actions aims to transform Athens into a better place for living.



*Alice in Petralona (Athens): the reformation of an abandoned park*

- **Nea Guinea** (<http://neaguinea.org/>): This initiative began in September 2009, with the key objective of regaining control over the basic things which are necessary for a decent life (food, energy, health, construction, clothing, etc.). Their key objective is the development of expertise in order for someone to be self-sufficient in response to his/her daily needs. Towards this end they try to disengage from the dominant production system, to create cohesive alternative structures and to resist the exploitation of labour, creating alternative, economically viable and socially fair procedures.



*Construction of a solar oven*

- **Saligaros** (<http://saligari.espivblogs.net/>): Saligaros was created in 2009 in Athens by a network of citizens in order to investigate the possibilities and techniques of building with natural materials. Their main tool is self-education and teamwork. They are opposed to paid seminars and the commercialisation of any tool of collective self-sufficiency. They believe that knowledge should be spread freely. They are willing to share this knowledge through horizontal structures in the framework of social solidarity.



*Construction of an oven in the field*



- **Movement 136** (<http://www.136.gr/>): A citizen initiative which opposes the privatisation of water resources in Thessaloniki. Their alternative suggestion concerns the social management of water resources through cooperatives on a neighbourhood basis.

#### 4.1.8. Networks for change<sup>17</sup>

This category mainly involves group of citizens that aim to transform the negative perceptions of Greece and inspire people to build a new future for their country. Such networks include ordinary citizens, scientists, academics, entrepreneurs, students, artists and generally innovative and creative minds that aspire to build a new Greece.

- **Forward Greece** (<http://www.mprosta.gr/>): A progressive community focused on social and political change, founded in 2012 and based in Athens. It is a network of citizens, scientists, academics, entrepreneurs, students, artists etc. Their aim is to change the policy making process in Greece by contributing new ideas, and suggestions, encouraging cooperation and generally a totally different approach in political terms.

- **Repower Greece** (<http://www.repowergreece.com/>):

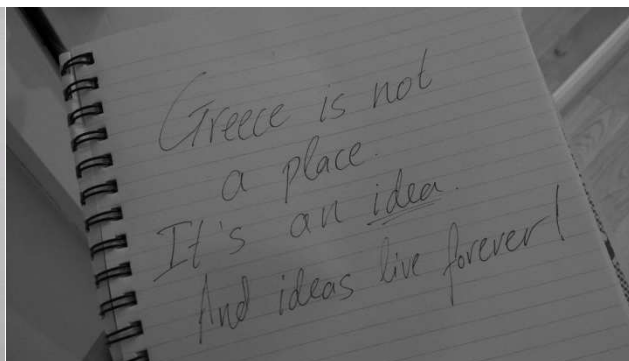
RepowerGreece seeks to confront the world's negative perceptions of Greece and its people. Through a variety of discussion events and programs with academic institutions, community organizations and think tanks across the world, the initiative offers clear evidence that Greece's story is not about the failures and special interests of the few – it's a story of the enormous talents, achievements and actions of the many. RepowerGreece is a grassroots initiative, made up of volunteers and open to everyone, designed in such a way that any public or private organization, academic institution, company or media can join the campaign and spread the word to their own network. Its objective is very simple: to portray a positive image, to attract any foreign investments, to invite tourists, to export the country's goods or to build and sustain any bilateral relations, by reconnecting with friends and allies, re-introducing ourselves and finally restore the credibility of our country.



*Alexandros Costopoulos of RepowerGreece. Picture taken from <http://usa.greekreporter.com/2013/03/12/repower-greece-releases-findings-of-academic-us-tour/>*

- **Reload Greece** (<http://www.reloadgreece.com/>): Reload Greece is an initiative by a group of young Greeks in London to bring together a community of Reloaders willing to take action for change in Greece. They are calling on all people that dare to imagine a better future for Greece. Their aim is to create a community of Reloaders that work together to achieve their goals. They focus on the fields of social innovation, community action and entrepreneurship. Reloaders attend events, present their own ideas, get feedback and find others who can help them. They take part in special workshops to develop their ideas or learn more about opportunities in Greece. They take advantage of Fellowships in partner institutions to develop start-ups and social enterprises. They actively contribute to what Reload Greece stands for by submitting their ideas directly or through the Reload Greece blog and a social media presence.

<sup>17</sup> All photos that do not bear a reference underneath are taken from each network's website or facebook page.



*Reloaders making a wish for Greece*

## 4.2. Informal network effects and impacts

### 4.2.1. The case of the potato movement

The potato movement was launched in 2012 and spread very rapidly across Greece. It is a grassroots socio-agriculture movement which consists of Greek farmers selling potatoes directly to the public.

The movement was initiated by the members of the Voluntary Action Group in the Prefecture of Pieria, when during a trip to Thessaloniki they came across a protest organised by some potato producers from Nevrokopi complaining about the low purchase-price they were being offered by intermediaries. The members of the Group invited the farmers to trade their products directly to consumers in the city of Katerini, based on a fair price. As a result, 24 tons of potatoes had been ordered in less than a day as the agreed price counted for a third of the price in supermarkets. Some days later the movement



Photo taken from <http://www.digitallife.gr/to-kinimatis-patatas-epekteinetai-se-oli-ti-xwra-twra-kai-stin-athina-33587>

spread to Thessaloniki, where the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki organised a potato sale on campus with student volunteers. 50 tons of potatoes were sold on the first day.

With the help of local volunteers ranging from ordinary citizens to local mayors — and the internet — the farmers began to organise direct consumer markets in various cities around Greece. The movement also expanded to other agricultural products, such as rice, flour, onions etc. and also launched its own brand and label (“without intermediaries”). The movement is based on a simple idea and has proved to be so successful that it has spread rapidly to consumer groups, unions and municipalities across the country.

The potato movement became so popular because it had a significant impact for both the consumers and producers. On the one hand, the consumers benefited from the low prices of the goods which they were buying directly from the farmers. On the other hand, the stores cut prices

not only on potatoes but also on other goods in response to the cheaper prices that were offered directly by producers. The Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) reported a 24.6 per cent drop in potato prices from March 2011 to 2012. There was a positive impact for the farmers too. By selling their products directly to consumers the farmers could be paid in cash straight away, instead of receiving cheques six months later, as is the case when selling their products to traders and intermediaries.



*Photo taken from*

In policy terms, the movement seems to have a political dimension given that it mobilised a great number of citizens and brought hope for the transformation of the socioeconomic situation in Greece. Given that it had a positive effect on prices, members of the movement felt they could press for more immediate market and competition related reforms. Moreover, the rapid and wide scale adoption of the movement surprised the government and the other political parties that promised to support its development. Although it started as a small movement, it quickly grew to a nationwide self-organised initiative by civil society in response to the new conditions which has had an empowering effect on Greeks, not only as consumers, but also as citizens and voters.

<http://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/?aid=180861>

#### 4.2.2. The case of TEM

The Local Alternative Unit (TEM) was launched in 2010 in the city of Volos, on the East Central coast of Greece. It is a digital exchange Unit which is used for transactions that take place within the framework of the local Exchange and Solidarity Network which covers the entire prefecture of Magnesía.

The network grew very quickly and now includes more than 1200 members, among them teachers, doctors, babysitters, farmers, hairdressers, etc. who interact with each other online. All transactions are recorded in a special electronic system, so that any network member is able to offer or search for products and services in any given time. The concept is simple. The members sign up online and get access to the specific database where they can offer or search for services or products. The exchanges are conducted with the use of TEMs which are transferred into and out of each others' accounts online.

For individuals with no access to internet but also for those who are afraid of the internet (given its impersonal characteristics which can leave many people with a feeling of mistrust and fear), the network regularly organises open markets where members of the network provide assistance to citizens in registering themselves as members and exchanging goods with the use of TEM. These organised open markets also provide an opportunity for people to gather, exchange views and opinions and familiarise themselves with this alternative means of exchange. The network's organisers have established a close collaboration with the local municipal services so that they can have access to trading points hosted in the city. It is very important that the municipality of Volos actively supports TEM through awareness raising and promotion activities.



Photo taken from <http://www.demotix.com/photo/1378609/citizens-use-tem-alternative-currency-during-greek-financial-crisis&popup=1>

The network also provides its members with printed vouchers of the TEM which can be used like cheques. Several shops and local business participate in the network by accepting these vouchers in exchange for a discount on the price in Euro, or they support them by offering facilities or equipment to the network (e.g. the server for the network was donated by a private company).



TEM photo, courtesy of Georgios Makkas, [www.gmakkas.com](http://www.gmakkas.com)

When one of the founding members of this network was asked two years ago about the network's future perspectives and goals, he commented that "we want to see other similar initiatives emerge in other Greek cities in order to closely work with them. I mainly refer to cooperating with them because our aim is not to create a nationwide network but rather to initiate cooperation among autonomous networks in Greece"<sup>18</sup>. Two years later, we can affirm that the development of similar initiatives have been realised in different Greek cities. However, their collaboration in terms of ideas exchange, provision of assistance among them as well as the provision of opportunities to members to use any of the collaborating networks when visiting or staying in another city, remains to be seen.

In terms of impact, TEM has enormous benefits for the local community. Now that unemployment is rising and people cannot meet their everyday needs, the TEM network represents a radical solution as its members can purchase products and services without using traditional currencies. It should be emphasised that the network does not aim to substitute the official state currency, but rather to provide a supplement for people who cannot meet



Photo taken from [http://www.star.gr/Pages/Ellada\\_Kosmos.aspx?art=45271&artTitle=thema sto bbc i proti antallaktiki agora tou volou](http://www.star.gr/Pages/Ellada_Kosmos.aspx?art=45271&artTitle=thema%20sto%20bbc%20i%20proti%20antallaktiki%20agora%20tou%20volou)

<sup>18</sup> Kalimeri, T., Papageorgiou, T., TEM: Local Alternative Unit, 13 September 2011, retrieved 10 April 2013, < <http://reviews.in.gr/diafora/socialeconomy/article/?aid=1231128134>>

their own needs. Therefore, TEM is an alternative way of supplementing lost income or of satisfying the everyday needs for living.

In addition, for most of its members, such a barter system fosters a new sense of community. TEM presents a different way of building a stronger community and a more resilient local economy. People report feeling happier and having more control over their lives.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

In this section we will present the most crucial factors that will influence the further development of informal networks as well as the extent of their contribution in forming a new future for Greece.

### **5.1. Future trends**

It is generally acknowledged that one of the biggest challenges for Greece in the current crisis is the rebuilding of a strong civil society. As already mentioned, the role of the informal citizen networks towards this goal is seen to be important although the real impact of these networks cannot yet be measured. After a critical overview of the actions and impact of the informal citizen networks identified in Greece, the following thoughts can provide a further illustration of possible future trends.

Bottom up movements and networks can provide alternative solutions and present a way of breaking the cycle of crisis. The existence and growth of such networks in Greece may contribute to the development of a new economic model or system. This has already been achieved to some degree with the cost cutting networks where a new economic model enabling transactions without the involvement of intermediaries has already been adopted by many Greek citizens.

Another emerging trend concerns the redefinition of values and the gradual transformation of lifestyles. Greeks acknowledge that the social and political system has failed and by self-organising mechanisms they try to provide a response to their needs. The existence of a large number of networks aiming to transform the current way of thinking and the adoption of new values comes as a solution to the failure of the country's social and political system.

A third trend that can be identified concerns the development of smaller scale economies, encompassing principles such as self-sufficiency, solidarity and substantive democracy. This is especially the case with most of the solidarity and exchange networks which are developed on a local level and according to their members seem to have a positive impact in local employment rates as well as in boosting local economies through the mobilisation of transactions without the use of money.

Last but not least, there is a clear orientation towards collective action in the last few years. The increasing participation of citizens in networks and groups that through organised collective action manage to improve their lives shows that people acknowledge the power of acting together. Thus a growing trend towards the empowerment of individuals seems to be developing as part of the emergence of informal networks.

Aside from these initial thoughts, the development of the informal networks cannot be predicted. Their future will probably depend on several factors. Definitely, the financial crisis which is the main reason for their emergence will have a strong impact on them but it cannot help in the prediction of further trends regarding the future development of the networks. In this respect, the

results of a study conducted by Sotiropoulou<sup>19</sup> are indicative. According to her, there are several regions in Greece with high unemployment rates or sudden unemployment increases as a result of the economic downturn. However the participation of citizens in such networks in the specific regions is limited or does not even exist. So it is not possible to say that the deeper the crisis (e.g. higher unemployment rates), the more the development of the informal networks will be enhanced.

Other factors that will probably influence the further development of such networks concern the role of the state and the local public authorities as well as the support provided by private institutions and organisations. The case of TEM is indicative as the support from the local authorities and the local private business contributed significantly in the development and spreading of the network.

Among other factors that may influence the development of those networks is the use of information technology which has already facilitated the mobilisation of the Greek civil society and the spreading of the networks across Greece. Considering that Greece is not a particularly advanced information society, will future developments in ICT enable better networking and more engagement from all citizens? Are new technologies powerful enough to contribute towards a strong and robust civil society in Greece or is their role dependent on the support of a wider political environment and culture?<sup>20</sup>

History shows that such networks usually disappear after the end of a crisis. Whether or not they will remain and produce long-term effects by helping turn new ideas into innovative and concrete actions that will have a real impact for Greece is still to be determined. Whether or not these networks will have the same characteristics, dynamics and whether they will be underpinned by the same values also remains to be seen. Another important aspect that should also be examined in the long run is whether or not they will be transformed into formal structures, whereby the commercial exploitation of their services would be their first priority (and this applies particularly to those networks which are currently opposed to adopting principles of commercialisation and profit).

Overall, these networks could be seen as marking the beginning of a more solid and sustainable future for Greece but their real impact and evolution remains to be seen, especially after the end of the crisis.

## 5.2. Conclusion

Even though the Greek civil society is characterised as being weak, underdeveloped or even poorly organised, there is a growing acknowledgment during the last few years that a stronger and dynamic informal civil society has surfaced through the mobilisation and self organisation of several citizen networks. This form of civil society is now gaining considerable visibility.

The emergence of these networks can be attributed not only to the financial crisis and citizen needs which cannot be met by the state, but also to the desire for a redefinition of values and lifestyle.

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<sup>19</sup> Sotiropoulou I., "Exchange networks and parallel currencies: Theoretical approaches and the case of Greece", University of Crete, PhD Dissertation, November 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Tsaliki L., Technologies of Political Mobilization and Civil Society in Greece: The Wildfires of Summer 2007, The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, Vol 16, no 2, 2010, pp 151–161.

In contrast to the citizen collectives that existed prior to the crisis, the current citizen networks have a more structured form, and they are better organised. They focus on the promotion of principles such as solidarity, fair and equitable distribution of goods and services, self sufficiency, infusion of true democracy, etc.

For many they represent the first signs of a lifestyle transformation. For others, they are just alternative methods for dealing with the crisis. We think of them as the beginning of an era bearing great potential for both citizens and the country at large.

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