Social work in Greece in the time of austerity: challenges and prospects for professionals and SW education

Vassilis Karagkounis,
Dept of Social Administration and Political Science,
Democritus University of Thrace, Greece.
The social impact of austerity

- the country has lost nearly one-fourth of its GDP, and its debt has become unsustainable (IMF, 2017).
- As of May 2017, Greece has a total debt of €344 billion.
- Between 2009 and 2016 real wages fell by a yearly average of 3.1%; pensions have been cut 11 times since 2010.
- **Poverty**: 22.2% of the population were "severely materially deprived" in 2015.
- more than one in three Greeks lives in a situation at risk of poverty or social exclusion (35.7 % in 2015, 3rd in EU-28).
The social impact of austerity

- the highest **unemployment** rate in the EU (23.2% in February 2017, up from 8.4% in 2007)
- and the highest **long-term unemployment** rate with one in five Greeks (18.2% up from 4.2% in 2007) having been unemployed for more than twelve months in 2015.
- Nearly half of the **young labour force** is unemployed (47.9% in February 2017 -16.7% in the EU28).
- youth unemployment reached an all-time high record of 60.80% in February 2013
- 427,000 Greeks have emigrated since 2008

The social impact of austerity

- a rise in:
  - infant mortality,
  - cardiovascular diseases,
  - drug users,
  - mental health problems (especially anxiety and depression)
  - and infection diseases (AIDS/HIV, tuberculosis).
- HIV outbreak among injecting drug users due to low or reduced levels of funding for preventive intervention (needle and syringe programmes)
- increase in suicide rate
The social impact of austerity

- Traditionally Greek family has been the main provider of social protection, care and support.
- However
- unstable working conditions,
- increased unemployment,
- poverty and relentless taxation
- have drastically reduced the capacity of family to consolidate, mobilise and redistribute resources.
Implications of austerity for social work

- Consequences of socioeconomic crisis →
  - expanded social workers’ client base
  - deepened existing clients’ dependency on social services
  - social workers find themselves under extreme pressure
  - scarce resources and available options
  - the abrupt dismantling of an already weak, poorly funded social protection system that has heavily relied on familialism.
Implications of austerity for social work

- the conditions for entitlement to many welfare benefits are stricter
- many public health and community care services have closed.
- public social spending in real terms plunged by approximately 18% from 2007–2008 to 2012–2013
- economic constraints +
- reduced staff and budgetary cuts
- challenge the ability of most publicly provided welfare services to continue offering the current level of services.
Implications of austerity for social work
Community care

- “Help at Home” Programme (Βοήθεια στο Σπίτι).
- «Before the crisis I was working with six or eight cases -the most- per day. Now it’s not unusual to see more than twenty people in a single day» (SW, 4).
- «Yes, there are much more people that apply to the programme now. Around 50% more since the beginning of the crisis... surely (their number) has been increased a lot» (SW, 1).
Implications of austerity for social work

Community care

- «A few years ago, our only job was the care of the elderly. It is surprising how the profile of the recipients have changed during the past few years ... people that now turn to us are not only the elderly but from a wide range of age groups, children, unemployed people, mostly unemployed ..» (SW, 9).

- «Now some of the cases that I work with are young children with disabilities and .. and some others are very old people with health problems ..." (SW, 10)
Implications of austerity for social work

Community care

- «Those who have taken their parents back home and live with their pensions they are not familiar with caring an old person or sometimes they are willing to take care of him and therefore they are extremely demanding ... They want us to do everything for them» (SW,4).

- «.. Families usually want shoes for their children, clothes for school... Sometimes they sent us cases where we have to deal with problems of children in school or issues of child care. There are no other social services around here and of course no other social worker apart from me here at “Help at Home” Programme. So, even I have no experience in working with young children I cannot close my eyes ... so now days I work with the whole range of ages and all kid of issues» (SW, 9).
Implications of austerity for social work

Community care

«... most of them they need food. They need money, financial support.... They are facing difficulties in paying their bills, heating their houses... So in most cases what we actually do these days is to listen to people’s urgent demands for material things, and collect the necessary documents that confirming the service user's right in order to bring him food from the church’s soup kitchen or woods, clothes, or whatever the local authorities can provide..» (SW, 10).
Implications of austerity for social work

Community care

- “I work in a programme that we used to have six professionals (social workers, nurses and family assistants) but now we are just three. Given the significant increase of the number of service-users you can understand that this has an enormous impact on the quality of our services. Now ... there is just not enough time and resources» (SW, 4).

- «A part from our responsibilities and our salaries that have been reduced by 40% nothing else has changed! The program still has one social worker, one nurse and one family assistant as it always had! And we are responsible for an area with more than 5,000 inhabitants! » (SW, 6).
Implications of austerity for social work education

- “Athena Plan” → temporary closure of the social work department of the Technological Institute of Patras.
- Significant problems in the operation of all social work departments due to
  - Limited resources of universities
  - And the closure of many social services
- Limited capacity of family to support their children’s studies away from their home town
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- weaknesses of the dominant SW methods and practices
- direct practice had not gone beyond the individual and the family
- little attention has been given to issues related to class, oppression or racism.
- community work and collective practices in general have always been subjects of a rather peripheral interest
- the collective activity and political campaigning of Greek social workers outside the workplace have not been so evident
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- for several decades social work curriculum primarily focused on practices closely associated with a “medical” model of SW.
- radical discourses, as well as anti-racism and critical social work were barely introduced in the 1990s
- individualized orientation of most welfare structures
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- Greek society: a deeply individualistic society.
- A statist-clientelistic mode of socio-political organization, which is associated with:
  - The limited development of social movements
  - And the hegemony of political parties in civil society
- The sharp transition of Greece from an agrarian economy to a partially industrialized economy and, more recently, to an economy that relies heavily on the tertiary sector has prevented the development of forms of social solidarity and has encouraged individualism
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- This mainstream social work practice model has prevailed for decades in Greece and has, more or less, “worked” in periods of relative prosperity.
- The numbers of those in need were not as high as they are today.
- The Greek family still had the means to play its traditional role as the main provider of social protection, care and support.
- This individualized model of SW practice seems to have reached its limits.
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- increasing levels of poverty and social harm caused by austerity policies
- dramatic consequences for social work
- provide grounds for a dialogue about the future of social work.

- which alternative approaches and practices may respond more effectively to the complexity and length of the current challenges and problems faced by social workers and their clients

- in a way that will enhance professionals’ abilities to reclaim the potential of social work as an agent of social change rather than merely a social rehabilitator?
Challenging mainstream social work methods and practices: towards a radical social work?

- A number of Greek scholars criticize the political neutrality of Greek social workers and the defensive role that social workers continue to play.
- Progressive approaches such as radical social work
- Community work practices, such as collective action are also considered appropriate in the present situation
- Similar trends in recent Anglo-Saxon social work literature that call for a revival of the radical tradition
- And in international social work organizations and other European countries
Is another social work possible in Greece?

- high levels of participation in multiple strikes in the public and private sectors and mass rallies against austerity policies
- sporadic self-organized initiatives and other acts of resistance developed across the country
- promising developments towards a more progressive direction also in social work:
  - a number of demonstrations and other forms of mobilization by social work students, members of the academic community and the Greek Association of Social Workers against the Ministry of Education’s “Athena Plan”
Is another social work possible in Greece?

- efforts aimed to adjust the social work curriculum and research to address emerging social needs
- Greek “Social Work Action Network” (Δίκτυο Δράσης Κοινωνικών Λειτουργών).
- After the 2010–2012 period general strikes and public demonstrations became not as regular or as large as at the beginning of the crisis
- disappointment, depression and struggle for survival.
Is another social work possible in Greece?

- January 2015 Syriza’s election → high expectations for leaving behind austerity
- failed to fulfil these expectations
- July 2015 3rd bailout programme → betrayed the hopes of Greek voters, sending a clear message not only to Greece but also to other countries grappling with austerity measures with similar aspirations to move past such measures, i.e., “There is no alternative”.
Is another social work possible in Greece?

- climate of fear and propaganda
- pessimism and disappointment
- new waves of austerity policies - even from a government that supposedly stands for radical-left ideas and values -
- the dialogue regarding a more progressive direction for social work in Greece generally remains weak and primarily on an academic level
- notable exception: the Greek “Social Work Action Network”
Is another social work possible in Greece?

- In Greece social work does not have any tradition of radicalism or activism
- the absence of a coherent social movement that could further boost radicalism among social workers
Challenges for SW education in Greece

- Syriza’s failure to offer an alternative and a true exit strategy from the current situation after cultivating so much hope over the past few years, has made restoring people’s confidence in the possibility of radical alternatives more difficult.

- If the role of SW education is, in the words of Lorenz (2017:319), “making a critical difference”

- More politically engaged social work education is needed now more than ever to overcome fear and disappointment.

- Critical reflection and reflective practice are some of the strongest antidotes to the risk of loss of social work core principles.
Challenges for SW education in Greece

- more emphasis should be given on holistic methods of assessment
- Seeing service-users both as unique in their own right and part of a broader web of social and political factors
- understanding people’s unique life situation - treating service–users as persons in their own right (the particular combination of needs, problems, concerns, strengths) with dignity and rights rather merely as numbers, representatives of broader categories (e.g. recipients of soup kitchen, etc.).
- At the same time seeing them in their wider context, particularly within the context of membership of oppressed groups