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Abstract

Recently, Greece has undergone substantive civil society and volunteering transformation. Although changes have been precipitated by various forces, including the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, the country's third sector organizations have been (re)generated through the creation of a productive urban commons. Notwithstanding a vibrant landscape of activity and opportunities, the environment continues to challenge sector entities. Utilizing interviews with 19 sector professionals, our research question focuses on examining current perceptions on the sector's development, contemporary status and challenges, and future potential. Accordingly, the paper aims to: 1) Account for some of the political, socio-economic, and ideological shifts in the evolution and priorities of Greece's Third sector; 2) Explore industry experiences in the pursuit of individual and collective civil society agendas; and 3) Establish some directions of, and challenges to, organizational continuity and change. Our findings suggest collaborative efforts illustrate the sector's progressive capacities, yet these are measured against enduring sustainability concerns.

Keywords: Greece, Civil Society Development, Urban Commons, Volunteering, Organizational Continuity

Introduction

Civil society embraces a plethora of actors, individuals, organizations, and institutions that sit within the family, community, state and the market in which people associate voluntarily, or otherwise, to advance common agendas. These may include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, labor unions, informal voluntary and broader political networks (Simiti, 2017). Within the development of Greece's civil society landscape and volunteer cultures (the focus of this paper), the Athens 2004 Olympic Games has been noted by the public, academics, the State and third sector as a landmark event (Georgiadis & Theodorikakos, 2016; Panagiotopoulou, 2014). While informal volunteerism was in evidence in Greece throughout much of 20th century, at the turn of the millennium there remained a lack of understanding of the existence or purpose of volunteer organizations, and a deep skepticism toward civil society activity (which were deemed be aligned to State and/or corporate misanthropy) (Huliaras, 2015; Simiti, 2017; Vathakou, 2015).¹

To recourse, since the Second World War, Greece's turbulent political system hindered the institutionalization of civil society as a recognized national priority within the government (Huliaras, 2015). Despite the lack of State attention, the country (and wider European region) faced strong political, socio-cultural, economic, and environmental challenges that necessitated substantive and sustained humanitarian response and collective action. Yet, State apathy and

¹ Corporate misanthropy entails an entrenched economic and political desire by corporate or State entities to maintain prevailing hegemonies that protect establishment interests, principles, and goals above all else (e.g., stated altruistic, or humanitarian, commitments). The term also comprises the deliberate (mis)use and abuse of philanthropy (and its corollary, corporate social responsibility) to obfuscate, deflect, ameliorate the deleterious consequences of corporate undertakings (e.g., Fair, 2021; Lecterman, 2021; Maniates, 2019). Relatedly tied to civil society are, also, tangible alignments here with the various discourses around organizational 'washing' (e.g., 'greenwashing', 'sportswashing', 'genderwashing'), in which commercial, State, and philanthropic stakeholders engage in various acts to masquerade misanthropic behaviours and actions (see, for example, Boykoff (2022), Fox-Kirk et al. (2020), and Miller & Maxwell (2017)).

deficiencies, and economic austerities, contributed in varied ways to inhibit establishment of citizen groups, NGOs, and efforts of community activists to address Greece's varied issues and development (Clarke, Huliaras & Sotiropoulos, 2016). Sector approaches, thus, remained ad hoc, diverse and centered around specific contexts and/or individual community needs and priorities (Lazoudi, 2019; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2017).

Notwithstanding the good work achieved within the space, towards the latter part of the 20th and into the 21st century, the sector in Greece has still experienced disparity and resource paucity. There remains, moreover, a need for greater recognition to help sustain and grow its capacities to service ever growing national needs (Lazoudi, 2019). In the 2003 European Social Survey, for example, only 20.5 percent of Greeks were found to contribute services to NGOs, at the time the lowest involvement of all European Union (EU) countries (Panagiotopoulou & Papliakou, 2005). Spurred, variously, by the 2004 Olympic Games and other events including the 2008-10 global financial crises, continued austerity, mass migrant transit, and natural disasters, more recently there has been a cultural shift in general attitudes toward volunteering and civil society, and an enhanced density of civil society organizations (Graikioti, Sdrali & Klimi Kaminari, 2022; Parsanoglou, 2020). This shift has come, invariably, from continued efforts by leading protagonists and sector organizations to challenge perceptions, build public and political legitimacy, share resources, transfer knowledge, and genuinely collaborate towards achieving greater and wider appreciation of the sector, its needs, and constituents (Chrysostomou, 2015; Clarke et al., 2016).

Despite this positive ethos and agency on the ground to promote increased sector investment, improve State and third-sector relations/collaborations, and the proliferation of organizations within the space, there currently remains sector fragmentation. Moreover, there still exists a need

for formal structures and unified approaches to organize, sustain, and grow the sector to promote local development. As scholars have noted (Shahin, Woodward & Terzis, 2013; Parsanoglou, 2020; Polyzoidis, 2015; Simiti, 2017), specific attention is still required on understanding the nature and scope of activity within Greece, providing centralized administrative structures to better network, resource and dialogue with organizations, and investment in public relations to ensure continued prioritization and positive portrayal of sector activity.

With reference to Greece, Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) have offered a useful conceptual way of understanding the complexities of stakeholder relationships within the public space. Specifically, their work has framed networks within the country in terms of an urban commons; a space in which ‘disparate and diffused initiatives contribute[d] to bring together a heterogeneous multitude and operate as spaces of negotiation’ (p.447). An urban commons, they note, encompasses not just beneficial ‘re-configurations of public space and urban citizenship’, but also ‘non-competitive forms of social cooperation’ (p.440). As we explore, the theorizing of civil society in this way is useful for understanding how third sector stakeholders are working, and what constraints and opportunities there are for sustaining and growing practices. Rehearsing this call, our primary research question is to identify and examine features and relationships within the current state of civil society work in Greece and interrogate experiences of some key sector stakeholders to understand priorities and the scope of activities to foster sustainable sector and community development. Bracketed by the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and the 2020-present Covid-19 pandemic, this paper aims to: 1) Provide sector accounts of some of the political, socio-economic, and ideological shifts in the evolution and priorities of Greece’s Third sector; 2) Explore industry experiences in the pursuit of individual and collective civil society agendas; and 3) Establish some directions of, and challenges to, organizational continuity and change. Furthering shared concerns

about sector precarity (Bourikos & Sotiropoulos, 2014; Simiti, 2017; Valvis et al., 2021), we argue that while the Athens 2004 Olympic Games afforded one catalyst, and the landscape remaining a space of opportunity and potential, it is not without challenges to maintain the momentum, goodwill, and activities. Notwithstanding meaningful work being done by many, there is still uncertainty and limited assurance regarding the sustainability of sector organizations, networks, and activities. Our work here, therefore, is of value in articulating the complexities of the space, evidencing challenges in organizational work, and offering voice to strategically situated individuals who have been, and are, best placed to argue for the sector's needs, desires, and futures.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding the national landscape of volunteering and civil society action

A brief historical context

Historically, Greece has a strategic geopolitical position within Europe from its Mediterranean position, relative proximity to Africa and the Middle East, and as founding member of the European Union. From this, the country has often been placed at the center of regional humanitarian, socio-political and economic development. However, the country has been dominated by fractious State politics with its powerful clientelist networks that have detrimentally affected wider sectors (e.g., education, finance, diplomacy), caused considerable upheaval and disruption to citizens' lives, and destabilized the country's internal structures, systems, and institutions (Huliaras, 2015; Polyzoidis, 2015; Sotiropoulos, 2014). In addition, Greece has also experienced an intensification and coalescence of humanitarian events and crises (e.g., economic, political, refugee, natural and epidemiological disasters). Whereas historically the provision of

humanitarian needs has predominately been catered for by the Greek Orthodox Church and ad-hoc philanthropy to cover emerging civil society needs and priorities (Lazoudi, 2019), increasingly sector support has extended to include wider formal and informal actors with varying degrees of power, formality, and autonomy (e.g., municipalities cooperating with NGOs in social welfare provision) (Lazoudi, 2019; Simiti, 2017). Engagement with the sector has also been evidenced by many organizations reporting marked increases in young, qualified, volunteers seeking to make civil society contributions (Bourikos & Sotiropoulos, 2014; Huliaras, 2015; Shahin et al., 2013). Similarly, since 2010, studies report the emergence of a “new wave of volunteering” in Greece that came to the fore due to feelings of solidarity, political activism or as a psychological response from those affected by the various crises (e.g., beneficiary volunteers) (Chrysostomou, 2015; Clarke, 2015; Vathakou, 2015). Nonetheless, Shahin et al (2013) suggest that individuals experiencing such crises are generally less likely to engage in associational life. It is of value here to acknowledge that public perceptions of volunteerism are innately shaped by the political, socio-cultural, and economic ether of the time, and individual/internalised psychological emotions, dispositions, and motivations (including those around national identity, moral responsibility, and citizenship) (Ringuet-Riot et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding individual predilections for volunteering, the growth of the civil society sector and volunteering in Greece has required a *mélange* of structural and organizational approaches to strengthen and extend the country’s under-developed volunteer cultures. The task, however, has been adversely affected by the weakened institutionalization of civil society and marginalized political prioritization. Specifically, scholars highlight, absence of political will at central government and metropolitan levels to establish appropriate legal and institutional frameworks to recognize and protect NGOs and provide the economic support to draw together the country’s

divergent and disconnected civil society resources (including acknowledging existing NGO services and human capital) (Clarke, 2015; Vathakou, 2015). In tandem, the efforts to attend to humanitarian crises, and at the most basic level draw in willing and appropriate volunteer resources, was made difficult by the long-standing negative assumptions about volunteering. As has been noted, there existed skepticism regarding what formal volunteering entailed, who it ‘served’, what individual outcomes there were, and what general benefits it brought. Intertwined within, there was enduring public mistrust and doubt toward rogue and corrupt civil society, corporate organizations, and the State (Polyzoidis, 2015; Simiti, 2017).

Athens 2004 Games volunteer infrastructure foundations and the post-Games ethos

Given the above context, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games (ATHOC) organizers were presented with a substantive challenge in meeting the event’s needs in volunteer personnel in a country that, by-in-large, did not value volunteer work and had limited volunteer ethos (particularly in relation to its Northern and Western European counterparts) (Eurobarometer, 2018; Panagiotopoulou & Papiakou, 2005). Such was the concern that the country’s current attitudes toward, and landscape of, volunteering would present a notable barrier to recruitment (and the overall important optics of a ‘successful’ Games), that ATHOC made the volunteer program a strategic logistical priority within Games management.

In the face of continued criticism, these plans came to fruition and led to a significant number of volunteers opting to assist in the Games (from 165,000 applications, approximately 50,000 individuals were engaged in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games with 25.5% of these being foreigners including 9.5% Greeks from abroad (Panagiotopoulou, 2014). In the immediate post-Games phase, there emerged a particular discourse among volunteers, media and the general

population about the positive effects of the Games on the collective national spirit, perceptions of volunteering, volunteering participation in other areas and sector development (Panagiotopoulou & Papliakou, 2005; Panagiotopoulou, 2014). One report, for example, noted that 68.4% of Greece's inhabitants perceived the 2004 Games as catalytic in the reinvigoration of the volunteer culture (Geordiadis & Theodorikakos, 2016).

Nonetheless, irrespective of immediate positive after-effects, volunteer interest dramatically declines in the longer term (Benson and Wise, 2017; Koutrou et al., 2016). This decline, in part, can also be explained in terms of cultural differences towards volunteering and civil society in Greece. For example, it has been reported that generally Greek citizens have low levels of trust in formal organizations and institutions, which are perceived to be corrupt, lacking transparency, accountability, and/or integrity (Lazoudi, 2019). The presence of tensions between public trust and organizational and State actions, as well as public trust in civil society more generally, has been well noted and profound (Passey & Tonkiss, 2000; Seligman, 2021). Research here has, variously, highlighted that whilst organizations and the State may rely upon gaining degrees of public trust to aid and legitimize their actions, such trust cannot be guaranteed. Rather, trust relies on varying degrees of moral consensus, the political mood, prevailing socio-cultural norms and the shared beliefs held among the population regarding how organizations behave and act, and whether *perceived* entities have individual, community, and collective interests at heart (Lundåsen, 2022; Seligman, 2021). Such underlying forces afford one way of understanding why, potentially, there appears to have been limited direct translation and national behavioral change regarding volunteering and creation of formalized structures for volunteering in the post-Games period.

Volunteering and civil society in contemporary Greece

In recent years, Greece has experienced positive waves in volunteer activity and civil society organization (Clarke, 2015; Polyzoidis, 2015; Simiti, 2017). Where initial efforts have been driven by humanitarian need, the sector has also been bolstered by the existence and implementation of more extensive EU priorities, policies and programs that have encouraged and fortified activities around a clearer set of collective imperatives, ensured effective funding distribution, and produced concerted and enduring efforts within key areas of the region (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2014; Sotiropoulos, 2004). While in many respects the Greek State has been ill equipped financially, politically, and practically to deal with the coalescence of issues it has faced in recent times, various positive sector developments have now been witnessed. These include, for example, an increase in new third-sector organizations, and significant developments in the institutionalization, bureaucratization, policy frameworks, and governance oversights to better support and capture the scope and nature of sector activities and organizations. Notable changes are evidenced by the establishment of the electronic Social Economy Registry of the Ministry of Labor to capture and legalize social cooperative enterprises in 2018 (Graikioti, Sdrali, & Klimi-Kaminari, 2022). A further step was the creation of the ‘Register of Civil Protection Volunteers’ by the General Secretariat for Civil Protection (GSCP). This register includes all forms of organizations and entities that broadly provide support for natural disasters, emergencies, humanitarian aid, social welfare, and general civic protection. (GSCP, 2021).

Beyond State and metropolitan measures, the increase in civil society organizations bridging the gap in social policy formation and resource provision has remained (Polyzoidis, 2015; Simiti, 2017). For example, to address the lack of programs related to wider social integration of

disadvantaged groups, and with increased attention on the situation by the EU, wider Europe, United Nations and other external entities, civil society organizations took a more prominent role in providing programs and initiatives in a wide variety of areas to aid local development (Parsanoglou, 2020; Simiti, 2017). Whereas in some cases of immediate-short term aid, efforts have also ensured continuities of delivery and support to individual and communities; with a particular emphasis developing more sustainable practices and capacity building to enhance quality service delivery and overall sector collaboration (Clarke, 2015; Van Dyck, 2017). Reflecting the changing dynamics and identity of civil society globally (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022; Van Dyck, 2017; Zeemering, 2018), and evidenced in this paper, organizations and organizational networks within Greece have also demonstrated abilities to negotiate, reshape and reposition effectively in response to ongoing political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental forces.

Positive sector shifts notwithstanding however, it is important to note that civil society development and activity has received noted scrutiny from academic and sector critics who have noted its politicization, entrenched power relations and hegemonies, inequitable practices, ideological and resource tensions, and persistent issues regarding public trust (Cabot, 2016; Kotronaki & Christou, 2019; Rozakou, 2017). While such concerns resonate in other sectors, and participants in this research have highlighted, discord about civil society may influence the effectiveness of the work organizations do (and in the case of this research, bring together volunteers to resource initiatives), and more widely sustain notion of a proactive urban commons (Rozakou, 2016).

Civil society, volunteerism, and the urban commons

Cognizant of the above context and debates, this paper examines experiences of key civil society informants within Greece who have played strategic roles in leading their organizations to build relationships, generate dialogue, formulate practices, and adopt new ways of ensuring the viability of their organizations and collective efforts. We are guided by Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) who demonstrate the value of an inter-disciplinary approach to understanding volunteer sector development within Greece as an interplay between an urban commons, resilience, and social innovation. Whereas the notion of a commons has historical origins as a means of conceptualizing collective sites of socio-cultural, and political allyship, action and activism, the ideal retains contemporary utility as an analytical tool and heuristic device to examine an array of sector landscapes and their constituents (e.g., community or regional development zones; educational, health or welfare collaborations, or transnational state ventures to address universal goals) (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Huron, 2015; Theobald, 2018).

As Huron (2015), Theobald (2018) and peers have stressed, urban commons manifest primarily at crisis points in which conditions force groups, individuals, agencies, and communities - who, hitherto, may be strangers or relatively unknown to each other – to unify to accomplish goals and meet resource deficiencies that fall between State and market provision. Yet, in understanding the commons, it is important to recognize the urban and city distinction. Specifically, that ‘the city’ reflects a particular geopolitical locale, whereas the ‘urban’ comprises an ideological schema of space that emphasizes *connectivity* of processes, spaces, people, and initiatives. Such a conceptualization of the urban also acknowledges that a commons forms, develops and thrives in the borderlands and shadows of the State and market’s gaze. That is, not fully beholden by one or

the other, but rather maintaining distance to ensure effective operation and action beyond full state regulation or capitalist commodification (Dellenabaugh, et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Huron, 2015). While this may be an idealistic (and in some cases unfeasible) notion, it remains central to the way civil society stakeholders understand and enact their work, networks, and objectives.

Within this research, the commons afford a valuable concept for interrogating civil society as a diverse space of action in which multifarious stakeholders find means and ways to unify around – and, importantly, direct resources, time and energy towards a broad spectrum of issues and challenges. However, the notion of a commons transcends being merely a site of transactional relationships and direct problem-solving, to being an empowering and emancipatory synergy of effort that is transformative. Thus, there is an entrenched *critical* aspect to the commons that goes beyond functioning as a site of interaction and exchange, towards being a space that confronts, challenges, and changes the status quo (arguably for the better). This conceptualization takes on gravitas within the Greek and Athens contexts and works to illustrate the nuances and intensities of localized partnerships toward key social and economic agendas. Moreover, such a theorizing enables an appreciation and interrogation in this paper of Athens not as a city *per se*, but rather as a distinct space of connectivity, collaboration and critical action whereby a melange of civil society stakeholders have established networks and partnerships, and new ways of doing, that fulfil a continuous suite of urban goals and transcend the metropolis' geopolitical confines. As we examine in this paper, Athens is an urban commons that has comprised resourceful organizations, adept individuals with wide-ranging professional expertise, political and social momentum, and degrees of social innovation that had led to stronger and more visible civil society sector.

Ultimately, urban commons theory provides a framework to recognize the wide variety and priorities of civil society partnerships (e.g., different organizational motives, priorities, and ideological contours), and note that partnerships and networks are vital for ensuring sustainable sector growth (particularly, in the continued absence of, or with limited, state, and municipal support and resource). However, as discussed later, sector growth is not guaranteed, but contingent upon favorable contextual conditions, human and organizational resources, and sector protagonists' goodwill and energies. Congruent with our research question to examine sector features and stakeholder perceptions, relationships and activities, we draw data from key civil society actors, and in so doing confirm Athens and Greece as a vibrant and productive urban commons, yet a space of negotiation and possibility.

Methodology

The project employed a dual stage qualitative mixed-method case study research design (Tracey, 2013; Yin, 2014), focusing on Greece's civil society and third sector culture and landscape development. Guided by our theoretical stance and post-Olympic Games context of urban and civil society development, we focus data collection on organizations primarily based in the capital city of Athens. As the largest population base and seat of central government, Athens is the home of many organizational headquarters and the basis of centralized coordination of metropolitan and nation-wide activities and networks. Whereas organizations engage in country-wide and transnational initiatives, Athens still provides a focal point of strategic planning, resource, policy development and implementation.

This study adopts a two-fold approach; Stage 1 comprised a comprehensive review of secondary policy documents, media reports, academic research, and empirical knowledge on the concepts of

volunteering, third sector and civil society in Greece. Documents included archival material on the conception and planning of the Athens 2004 Games organizing committee (ATHOC) volunteer program and strategies for volunteer attraction, training, and development to meet the Games' needs and beyond for wider social and volunteer legacies. In addition, relevant organization websites and their publicly available resources were also consulted. Comprehensive review of these materials informed the subsequent semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix I) by identifying key aspects, forces, moments, and agents within Greece's civil society evolution across an approximately 20-year period. The interview schedule comprised questions related to the pre-Games, immediate post-Games, and the current era and contextual forces and experiences that shape(d) the country's contemporary sector landscape.

Based on our objective to explore the civil society development in Greece since the Athens 2004 Games, Stage 2 involved semi-structured interviews with a purposively drawn sample of 19 key informants who held strategic positions in ATHOC before and during the Games and transitioned successively to civil society organizations beyond the Games. The sample also comprised representatives from NGOs, local government, sport event agencies, and well-known large civil society organizations and other similar entities that are primarily based in Athens but have a national remit. Referrals were also used to enhance the participant pool (see table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The combination of methods and data sources that were employed in this study aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2014). Data collection occurred between April to July 2021. Interviews were conducted online by using virtual platforms (including Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom). Ethical approval was obtained from the authors'

institution. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most interviews were conducted in Greek, which is the native language of one member of the research team. These interviews were cross translated by the Greek researcher and an independent professional translator. A range of the interviews were also conducted in English as both participants and other members of the research team were fluent/native-language speakers with experience in conducting interviews in English. Both Greek and English versions of the transcripts were cross-checked and confirmed by the research team to identify potential variances in the meaning to ensure intercoder reliability.

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, following transcription of the data, each researcher familiarized themselves with the data of the 19 interviews. This led to the independent generation of general codes across the transcripts and the collection of data relevant to each code. Codes represented small phrases or words that captured specific ideas. Memos were also utilized to reflect and interpret specific information. In the next step, we collated codes into potential themes by gathering relevant information to each potential theme, followed by an iterative process of reading the data to narrow down the number of codes and group them into relevant themes. This was followed by analyzing and categorizing codes into four key themes and subthemes. We then proceeded in reviewing themes and generating a thematic map of the analysis by initially checking whether each theme reflects the coded extracts in the first level and the entire dataset at the second level. Finally, we proceeded in defining and naming the themes by capturing the essence of each theme, and collating data extracts that reflected the participants accounts within. Finally, we identified how each theme reflects the broader ideas that were potentially meaningful in light of the aims of this study.

Extensive discussions then occurred comparing information units and language that might best describe the data and provide organizing concepts that most appropriately encapsulate sector complexities. These include: 1) Post-Games and civil society connections and growth; 2) Countering cultural assumptions; 3) Trust and rapport; and, 4) Cross-sector partnership and collaborative network management. While ascribing organizing concepts for the data, we appreciate that there exist limitations to our framing and reflections that inform our readings and interpretations, and alternative narratives and elucidations from the data are possible (; Tracey, 2013). Furthermore, since the interviews covered experiences over an approximate 20-year period, we are mindful participants' viewpoints presented in this paper are shaped by positionality, instances of subjective and selective recall, and potential desires to maintain an objective or formal organizational stance. Nonetheless, participants have all worked at-length within the sector, held long-standing positions in key sector organization, and have amassed substantial knowledge of the nuances and machinations of Greece's civil society over time that enriches and legitimizes the perspectives they are able to offer in this paper.

Discussion

In the following section we present the concepts that we consider pertinent to understanding sector nuances and how they reflect the dynamics within an Urban Commons.

Post-Games and civil society connections and growth

Cohering with sport and third-sector scholars (Georgiadis & Theodorikakos, 2016; Panagiotopoulou, 2014; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2017), one prevailing discourse in the immediate post-Games period was a belief the event precipitated a notable shift in the country's civil society

awareness and volunteer cultures. Specifically, participants reflected positively on the idea the Games altered momentum around volunteering and engagement in wider civil society projects. Moreover, among participants there was also a shared perception the Games had inspired an attitude and behavioral shift among the population that mobilized when the country faced subsequent civil society needs (e.g., the economic, refugee, natural disasters, and Covid-19 pandemic crises). “I think 2004 woke up volunteering among Greeks by a very large percentage’, one ATHOC volunteer manager noted, ‘...it still impresses me that some people, because seventeen years have passed since then, have reached 60-65 years old and really have such love and will to volunteer their work, wherever it is and as many hours”. From the outset there were discernible informal attempts by some Games volunteers to continue their service beyond the event (for example, by developing groups such as “Συνεχιστές Εθελοντές Αθήνα 2004”; roughly translated as “Continuators Athens 2004 Volunteers”). Complimentary developments occurred at the macro-levels with third-sector organizations forming, and/or developing new activities and priorities, and engaging in collaborative work to respond to the city and country’s civil society needs. Commenting on this perceived growth of the sector, various participants noted:

“...there has certainly been some influence [from the Games] and there has certainly been an increase in the voluntary potential. Through the economic and refugee crisis there is a very large offer of voluntary work in Greece greater than one would expect” (Senior Civil Society Organization Manager)

“I think we are still seeing new organizations that started during that period that have managed to kind of keep going, stay growing. So, certainly compared to 2004/2005 we’ve got a lot more of

civil society/NGOs active and I think that the whole concept of volunteering is a lot more mainstream that it used to be.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

This sector growth and investment was seen as advantageous by some participants who felt there was an enhanced familiarity and receptiveness towards volunteering that provided a useful bedrock upon which further civil society work, and volunteer promotion specifically, could take place. However, while it was recognized that there were new human resources and an enhanced social awareness to capitalize on, there were reservations about the sector’s ability to sustain its development and resources. Specifically, keeping volunteers within the system. Furthermore, participants evidenced concerns that more formalized sector structures to build resilience, capabilities and capacities were needed.

“The big question was whether the sector could kind of retain those volunteers, people who had really come in to help because of urgent humanitarian interests and whether they would keep an interest in the sector. I think there has been a mixed picture over the past few years. I think that some people certainly lost their interest after that real crisis passed.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

“Some attempts to institutionalize volunteering were made by the Ministry of Culture and Sports and even volunteers themselves self-organized on every occasion...But there was no such central umbrella organization.” (Senior Manager D, Athens 2004 Olympic Volunteer Program)

Participants’ thoughts here echo long-held concerns among other stakeholders in Greece (Clarke, 2015; Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022, Simiti, 2017; Trigkas, Partalidou & Lazaridou 2021) and the wider European community (Polyzoidis, 2015), regarding tensions between the improved

trajectory of civil society development since the turn of the millennium. This fractured landscape has also been a noted feature of the national urban commons described by Vaiou and Kalandides (2017). Efforts to develop the volunteer and civil society organization, however, have been complicated by the varied definition and criteria used by organizations, State and municipal authorities, financial institutions/regulators, and academics to classify what constitutes a volunteer organization and/or volunteering.

“...It’s a real big problem. And as I am sure the people have told you, there is no kind of single data base of civil society organizations in Greece. So different studies, depending on their criteria recorded completely different numbers of organizations...” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

Such definitions have also made it difficult to accurately capture the scope and nature of informal, casual, or sporadic sector activity.

Countering cultural assumptions

Participants collectively noted that prior to the Games (particularly across the late 1990s and early 2000s) Greece had developed a negative domestic, regional, and international reputation for its deficient State and municipal oversight of the third sector. This also extended to funding of private and corporate organizations engaged in corporate social responsibility (Parsanoglou, 2020; Polyzoidis, 2015; Simiti, 2017). High profile cases of corruption and mismanagement had precipitated a culture of public mistrust, skepticism, and general ambivalence toward sector activity (Graikioti et al., 2022; Trigkas et al., 2021).

“...NGOs were funded without clear purpose and had acquired bad connotations. NGOs push volunteering as a life opportunity, but too many NGOs were created, and this always becomes something crooked.” (Senior ATHOC Manager and Civil Society Organization Leader)

“It really is because non-profits have not got a good image in Greece. There was a kind of history of scandals because State funding wasn’t closely monitored. There were some fake organizations, which then developed a real bad name for the whole sector. That still lingers now.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

This confluence of criticism created a challenge for organizers to overcome.

Initially, and as noted elsewhere (Georgiadis & Theodorikakos, 2016), the Games brought to light a tranche of positivity for civil society engagement and volunteerism. Noting the community ideals that aided civil society work, participants noted:

“I think it started with the (Athens 2004) Olympic Games. It wasn’t like it was in the UK where people did it as a matter of course, you just volunteered, in a soup kitchen or something. People in Greece didn’t do that so much, or if they did it was through the church, always, and it was not something to be organized or advertized. It was something you did on your own, or maybe with your choice, or with some religious organization mainly. Or organizations that came from abroad.” (Senior Executive, Civil Society Organization)

Such conditions and factors were not necessarily unique to Greece or Athens. Yet, social and cultural ideas about community spirit, national pride and social altruism became important for municipal authorities and Games organizers for mitigating sector skepticism.

“I had colleagues that were not familiar with volunteering so they had a different understanding of the program...they were somehow afraid of the program...they did not have the confidence in volunteering and in how volunteers can really benefit a sport event, the Olympic Games in particular, and anything that could be supported through volunteer service.” (ATHOC Senior Manager A)

“Everywhere there was this negative feeling coming from some saying you’ll never make it, you won’t get all these volunteers you need...people will dropout, or they will never come...So, we had to fight against this to make sure...to prove them wrong.” (ATHOC Senior Manager B)

“We wanted to address the general public who had no voluntary experience until then. They might have been involved in charitable actions that we Greeks have to a large extent, but we did not have this systematic commitment and regular offering through volunteering.” (ATHOC Senior Manager C & Senior State Politician)

In the post-Olympic period, there have been improvements within the urban commons in sector resources, organizational momentum, and cross-stakeholder dialogue. As Panagiotopoulou (2014, p.185) notes, intangible developments included ‘the multiple co-operations among various public and private agencies’, and development of human capital through volunteers’ Games-related training on various security, administrative and technological customer service issues. Conversely, there remains entrenched and enduring skepticism, negativity, mistrust, and ambivalence among the public towards both civil society activities and civil society-state partnerships.

“After the Olympic Games, there was this huge rise of suspicion towards the volunteers...it wasn't for a lot of people...it wasn't resonating familiar with the reality to what they were experiencing in their lives at that moment.” (Senior Civil Society Organization Leader)

“There were constant challenges with [mediating perceptions of] civil society agendas, the role of NGOs in the sector...Yes, huge suspicion towards them and antagonism between the city officials and the people in the city that do things for free.” (Senior Municipal Politician, Civil society & Volunteer focus)

These cultural assumptions formed a difficult ideological bedrock upon which to develop a more productive urban commons. Yet, they also provided an impetus for some sector stakeholders to enhance the sector through collaborations, dialogue, fortifying governance, and improving the sector's overall optics among the public.

Trust and Rapport

Building upon existing work developed from the Games (Clarke et al., 2016; Trigkas et al., 2021), participants identified the necessity of continuing to build trust, respect, rapport and understanding across the commons. Trust and rapport appeared to be something that could not immediately be generated by one individual or organization and their actions alone. Rather, relations were forged slowly, patiently, and carefully over time as stakeholders have better understood their roles and plans evolved. Initially, Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) aided the grounds for relationships among civil society stakeholders and ATHOC representatives. These were supplemented by an array of tangible mechanisms (e.g., correspondences, seminars, workshops, meetings, training opportunities), as well as intangible and informal relationship building actions

(e.g., casual conversations, and social occasions). Given the relatively small nature of Greece and Athens, and the concentration of organizations within a small region, many individuals within the program already had a good pre-existing knowledge of stakeholder partners, either at the organizational or professional level. Existing connections enabled, in some cases, effective working relations to be established with relative ease and efficiency, and a firmer foundation to build partnerships and collaborations.

“Necessary work was done by knowledgeable and well-placed individuals within the Athens team and sector to forge the necessary cross-sector networks and relationships (e.g., Red Cross, Army, Universities, schools, health, and public services). I think that the Athens 2004 volunteer office did a very good job of colluding with all these organizations.” (Sport Event Professional and ATHOC Senior Manager D)

Within the wider volunteer and civil society sector, and in light of prevailing contextual conditions (e.g., Covid-19 and natural disasters), this ethos of trust has become fundamental to building relationships and sustaining partnerships. Many participants noted that this has become important for helping counter instances where groups, organizations, communities, or individuals may be reluctant to work together, share resources and ideas, or commit to large or lengthy projects.

“There is often quite a resistance among organizations to collaborate, there may be a fear that they will lose their slice of the pie, whereas we very much emphasize the opposite...So right from the start our foundation wanted to have quite a collaborative approach because we are not an enormous foundation ourselves, although we are one of the largest Greek ones certainly on kind of an international level, we have limited resources ourselves...we encourage the organizations we work

with to collaborate, so we wanted to kind of lead by example.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

Yet, there are no guarantees that trust built within collaborations may be sustained over time, and participants noted work is needed to establish common ground.

“We’ve got a great relationship with both municipalities. But very much it involves kind of personal relationships with people in individual positions. And the problem that we found is that before and after the municipal elections, everything is on hold and you end up losing time, while you wait for new organizational structures, and until you can re-establish or build relationships with the new people afterwards. So, it can be difficult to progress with initiatives/projects...” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

As participants additionally noted on trying to establish Higher Education and municipal partnerships,

“We met, we were stonewalled, it was quite interesting. Because they thought, ‘oh yes, it is a good idea, “we know everything”, very condescending...it has changed. We are now working with most universities. It started with the Athens University of Economic and Business. Somebody in my organization knew one of the professors and we did a pilot, and it went extremely well. Since then, they have all these competitions for start-up ideas and innovations, which we help. Once we had one university we tried to go to others.” (Senior Executive, Civil Society Organization)

“When I went to the municipality and said we have to work on this culture of collaboration between some of them (NGOs) saw me that way [involved in politics]. The thing was that a lot of these people were very, let's say, not resistant in words saying that they don't want to collaborate with

the municipality because politicians are corrupt.” (Senior Metropolitan Politician & Civil Society Organization Leader)

Reflections above suggest that in recent years there has been positive expansion of individual agency towards collaborations and social innovation within the sector. Nonetheless, participants appear cognizant of the fragility of these arrangements and the need for more proactive and strategic network management.

Towards stronger collaborative coalition

The coalescence of the contemporary context, shifting cultural assumptions, and consolidation of trust and rapport among sector stakeholders provided positive space and momentum to generate a raft of civil society initiatives and creative projects. As many participants expressed, from around 2010 there had been a more notable public willingness to respond to the ongoing and emerging societal needs. This progress had, in part, been aided by municipal and State elections in 2015 and in 2019. Political change brought direct central recognition and support for the sector that led to internal/domestic prioritization of civil society agendas and helped facilitate the sector’s external visibility at the regional and international levels. This transpired into funding opportunities, knowledge transfer and further network and capacity building (Graikioti et al., 2022).

“One of the other things Kaminis (Athens Mayor 2011-2019) did, and it is remarkable. He needed money to do a lot of things. Instead of going to the Greek government and asking for money, he went to other European Mayors - to Barcelona, to Norway, to various places. He created this program of transnational development and knowledge exchange...he would get ideas and money

from abroad and I think that helped” (Senior Metropolitan Political and Civil Society Organization Leader)

From the new political environment came an array of individual and organizational protagonists well-resourced to contribute and lead civil society growth.

Landmark programs emerged from the municipal quarter, philanthropic organization’s (e.g., *The Bodossaki Foundation’s Social Dynamo*, *Stavros Niarchos Foundation*, *Kemel*), and other NGOs and networks including *Ethelon*, *Arsis*, and *Let’s do it* (Greece). One innovative initiative from the Athens municipality was SynAthina; a structured civil society development program that focuses on community issues and provides a platform to bring together and engage citizens to improve the quality of life in the city (<https://www.synathina.gr/>). Supported by the Mayor’s office, SynAthina was created in 2013 by then-Deputy Mayor (a former political activist, social campaigner, and documentary campaigner). Ventures included restoration of degenerated civic spaces establishment of community action groups, and small-scale social events. SynAthina continues to operate today and has achieved notable recognition by winning the prestigious global Bloomberg Mayor’s Challenge award that provided £1million (Approx 1.2million Euros) for project implementation. In partnership with city of Athens and SynAthina, the *Bodossaki Foundation* launched Social Dynamo in 2016 (<https://www.socialdynamo.gr/>). The program provides practical leadership, management, education and training, and resource support for volunteer and civil society organizations across Greece, with a focus on NGO capacity building and sustainability through collaboration, knowledge exchange and enhancing social and professional networks (Clarke, 2015).

“The organization developed the capacity mapping tool, is also completed by organizations at the end of the project. So, [the organization] can actually measure if they’ve made specific changes at the end of the project, then again 12 months later. Because of the relatively short duration of Social Dynamo, [the organization] has done one of these post-12months surveys so far, and again, the results were very positive. [The organization]...found a lot of the organizations had actually increased the number of volunteers they were working with. A lot of them had managed to gain new sources of funding. Several of them had even managed to create new within their organizations as well.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

“Earlier this year [the organization] started a cycle to support environmental organizations. And this seems to be a very successful model because [the organization] aims to promote collaboration between similar organizations who work in the sector.” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization)

Either through Social Dynamo or Synathina, or on their own accord, many other organizations have realized the advantage of working together, sharing resources, ideas, and visions. Ethelon (<http://www.ethelon.org/>), for instance, was borne out of a merger between two existing organizations (Glovo and volunteer4greece) in 2016; each of whom had a similar focus and overlapping activities related to the promotion of volunteerism in the country. As one respondent noted, in 2010 they were approached by a bunch of enthusiastic university students who wanted to register Greece into the framework of Let’s do it (World) (a global non-governmental environmental network (<https://letsdoitworld.org/>)).

“I helped them with all the strategic planning; with the experience I had and with my great love of the environment. Before COVID, we had 19-25 thousand volunteers all over Greece...and we have

toured Greece, meeting with mayors, regional governors, municipalities, and local bodies. I had to make a very specific plan for how this will develop in Greece by collaborating with environmental organizations and with schools through the Environmental Education Directorate of schools.” (Senior ATHOC Volunteer Manager & Present Civil Society Organization Leader).

Currently, organizations such as Ethelon and Let’s do it (Greece) have continued to develop their remit, extend network connections and collaborations, and professionalize their governance.

This ethos of an urban commons has also spread into other spaces. One example is in delivery of one of the country’s major events, the Athens Marathon (<https://www.athensauthenticmarathon.gr/>). In addition to supporting mass and professional athletic participation, the Athens Marathon has become a focal point and supporter of civil society growth and development. Activities here include providing financial aid and a public platform for charities and NGOs to promote themselves and wider volunteer opportunities. Since its redevelopment and professionalization in the early 2000s, the event has gone from having 200- volunteers and raising a few 1000 Euros, to having in 2019 approximately 3500 volunteers and raising more than 2million Euros. Several of this study’s participants also noted their active participation in supporting the Athens Marathon organization throughout the years and since the Athens Games.

“At the time, the Athens Olympic Games contributed to educate Greeks how to develop general interest in volunteering...then, after the Olympics it kept going, and I think that (the marathon) was one of the very successful projects to promote the Games’ success. In terms of volunteering legacy, the Athens marathon is the only continuous annual volunteer program project.” (ATHOC Volunteer Manager & Senior Sport Sector Professional)

As stakeholders have reflected upon, many civil society organizations now transcend the conventional provision of financial or human resources to support the sector and have further agendas towards building better practices. Efforts here include: democratizing/sharing organizational resources; providing good governance and other associated business training; offering professional mentoring schemes for volunteer organizations and charities; providing sponsorship and training in-kind; and, enabling smaller organizations to provide feedback about local needs and resource aid (Parsanoglou, 2020; Valvis et al., 2021).

Ultimately, cohering with work elsewhere (Graikioti et al., 2022; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2017; Valvis et al., 2021), it is evident that the civil society commons in Greece and Athens comprises an organic structure that is constantly evolving, and has a wide remit of activities. Furthermore, it is comprised of well-positioned individuals and networks that have been adept at reacting to contextual forces and proactive in demonstrating sector leadership, innovation, strategic vision, and solidarity in the formation of a meaningful urban commons. Yet, the space is crowded. As some participants remarked, there are too many organizations, and this presents new challenges. “The great majority are still very small, very informal, and of course there is nothing wrong with that, but the scale of the work is limited”, one participant noted, “And, if you want to support organizations to increase their impact and outreach and things, then you have to support them if they are to achieve this kind of financial sustainability and things as well” (Senior Executive, Primary Civil Society Organization).

Conclusion

Since the Athens 2004 Games, it is evident among some civil society organizations in Greece that there are desires for an urban commons whose democratic, progressive, innovative, and organic

nature may strengthen the sector, enable better resource management and protection, and provide mechanisms to lead community priorities. Our findings cohere with research on Greece's civil society sector that has identified shifting social attitudes and the importance of strengthened relationships to a more sustainable sector, yet concomitantly noted the need to improve institutional structures and processes, governance, and resources (Clarke et al., 2015; Graikioti et al., 2022; Huliaras, 2015; Simiti, 2017; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2017). While there is now an improved context in the city and country for activity, there remains scope for improvement. With the growth of sector organizations, nonetheless, comes also new questions to be explored regarding the inevitable tensions between capacity building and sustainability (particularly in terms of competition for resources, attention, and power).

Our stakeholder conversations draw us to suggest several recommendations. Foremost of which is to continue projects designed to establish what the sector might need and, from there, identify stakeholders who can provide expertise. Within this, to also identify and encourage appropriately equipped individuals/groups who can provide leadership, strategic vision, and investment in a collective ambition. Furthermore, there is the necessity of having appropriate infrastructure (e.g., information technologies, physical and digital spaces, and communication and data management platforms) that connect stakeholders more easily. Physical and technological spaces are vital to not only facilitating day-to-day work and interaction, but also aiding social innovation within the commons. While it is evident that large and well-resourced entities may be best positioned to drive network formation and sustainability ventures, work suggests civil society sustainability may benefit from being community-led (Koutrou & Kohe, 2021; Purdy et al., 2021; Zeemering, 2018). Localized approaches to involve local communities, groups, and stakeholders more effectively into the design and delivery of third-sector programs may be advantageous since communities hold

vital local knowledge and understandings nuances of their distinct contexts. There are notable synergies here with work in other international settings underscoring the values of community-driven civil society development that are carefully framed by the specifics of the contextual forces, stakeholder capacities, and strategic priorities (Antlöv et al., 2010; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Our findings, thus, form part of a collective advocacy for greater attention to, resourcing for, and critical evaluation of civil society sustainability and capacity building.

Amid continued research advocating for civil society development in Greece and wider Europe (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022; Valvis et al., 2021), a priority is to establish a more accurate conceptualization of sector work. Better landscape assessment needs to work concomitantly with augmented political and legal frameworks that develop more effective regulation and governance mechanisms within the sector. There are positive signs within Greece that legal and political sector frameworks are changing (Graikioti et al., 2022). Such oversight would, we hope, further aid the credibility of the sector and organizations therein and, potentially, lead to growing public and state confidence and support that would enhance the sector's future viability and capacities.

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