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Title: Lessons from investigating the Greek Third Sector: revealing and addressing the difficulties of examining the role of NGOs in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

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Abstract: This paper aims to present and analyze the conceptual and practical challenges associated with the empirical investigation of the role of NGOs operating in Greece in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and to provide suggestions on how to overcome them. It pinpoints challenges related to the concepts in use, such as how dealing with poverty and social exclusion is perceived by NGOs themselves, as well as the practical obstacles that a researcher encounters in their attempt to capture and evaluate the contribution of organizations in poverty alleviation. Towards this goal, we carefully examine the relevant programs developed by NGOs and evaluate them vis-à-vis their constructive capacity to address the problems of poverty and social exclusion as defined by the "Europe 2030" indicators. The findings shed light on a key area of the Greek third sector given that most NGOs develop programs against poverty and social exclusion according to the most recent empirical research in the country. Specifically, issues such as the uneven geographical distribution of NGOs in Greece and their ways of collaborating with the public sector in various programs against material deprivation are analyzed in depth. These findings can help us address the inefficiency of the methodological tools used so far.

Keywords: *third sector, poverty, material deprivation, social exclusion*

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Introduction

During the turbulent years of the Greek debt crisis in 2010 and its associated detrimental mismanagement (Argeitis et al., 2018), strong social movements emerged throughout the country in response to the economic and social crisis. At the same time, Greece experienced a dramatic increase in influx of migrants and refugees through the Greek islands in the north-eastern Aegean.

These two major parallel events led to a substantial increase in solidarity structures and social coops which aimed at relieving people experiencing poverty and/or social exclusion (Dedotsi et al., 2016, Teloni et al., 2020, Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021, Teloni et al., 2021).

The once-called "anemic" Greek Third Sector (Chrysakis et al, 2002, Adam & Papatheodorou, 2010) became a vast plain where organizations with diverse political aspirations, economic power and legal forms developed to take action, particularly in poverty and social exclusion. Researchers began to investigate the various fields of action more actively, where NGOs seemed to have an important, if not leading, role. The first significant attempt to build a structured database covering the whole field of the Greek third sector was made by the National Center of Social Research (EKKE in Greek) in 2012 (Afouxenidis & Gardiki, 2014), and almost ten years later, the first public database for "Civil Society Organisations - CSOs" was brought to light by the Greek Ministry of Internal Affairs.

This paper aims to highlight the practical obstacles a researcher faces when investigating the Greek third sector. This knowledge is drawn from a PhD research journey that started in late 2021 and is now near completion. Our goal is to assist researchers embarking on similar research trajectories with regard to the role of third sector in poverty alleviation by identifying existing difficulties with regard to data collection.

The first part of our analysis concentrates on NGOs' uneven geographical distribution and development in Greece. The next part concentrates on how poverty and social exclusion are perceived by the NGOs in practice in relation to their operationalization by the European policies. The third part sheds light on the historical evolution of the databases concerning the Greek third sector and provides a potential explanation for the motives behind NGO's participation in a relevant research program about the third sector. The fourth part proposes a new methodological approach suitable for investigating NGOs' contribution to the field of poverty and social exclusion alleviation and that of social welfare in general. The final section concludes the article by summarizing its key points. An appendix concerning the new methodological framework discussed in the fourth section of the article, follows the conclusions.

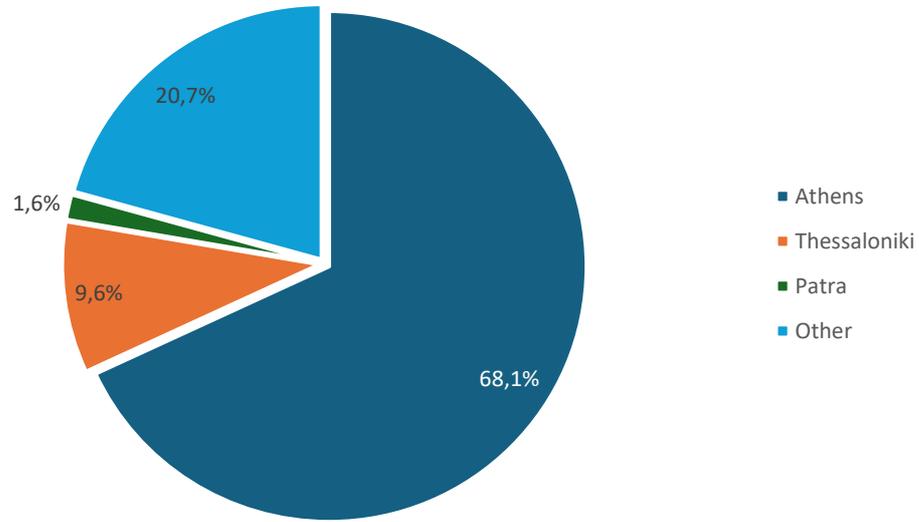
1. Uneven development and geographical distribution

The two main reasons for the dramatic boom of NGOs in Greece are a) the adverse living conditions of the people living in the country as a result of the so-called Greek debt crisis of 2010 and b) the vast and continuous influx of migrants and refugees through the Greek islands which led to the so-called "refugees' crisis". Despite the clear signals of those two upcoming crises, the Greek authorities were caught off guard (Zartaloudis, 2014; Heins & Porte, 2014), unprepared, and poorly organized. The reasons behind this unpreparedness are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, our analysis starts from the facts that the poor organization of the Greek state led to a) a policy gap and b) a social trust gap that many organizations of the third sector aimed to fill (Dedotsi et al., 2016).

The lack of an institutional backbone to support the harmonious development of the Greek Third Sector may have been a significant factor for their uneven geographical distribution. Figure 1.1. shows the distribution of CSOs' headquarters in Greece according to the sample collected by IOBE in 2022. Following, figure 1.2. demonstrates the distribution, by NUTS 2¹, of the total number of CSOs registered in the public database of the Greek government which have selected "Health, Social Solidarity, and Welfare" as their category of action.

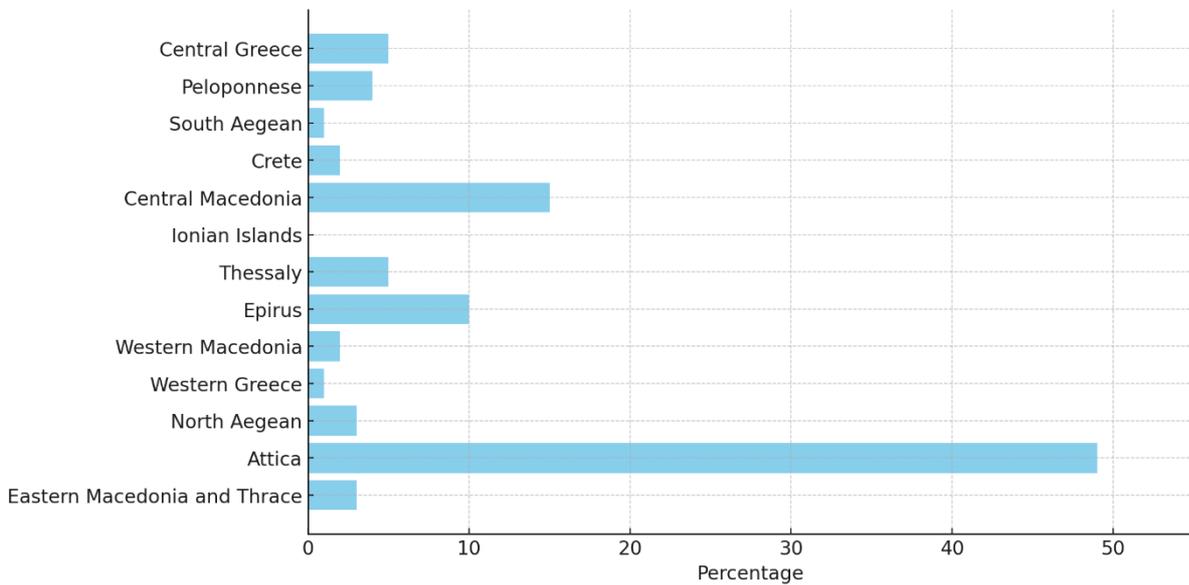
¹ NUTS 2 (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) refers to a level of regional classification used by the European Union for statistical and analytical purposes. Specifically, NUTS 2 represents the second level of territorial units, below the national level (NUTS 0) and above the local level (NUTS 3).

Figure 1.1. CSOs' headquarters, percentage of the sample



Source: Primary research by IOBE. Sample: 376 responses, 2022

Figure 1.2. Distribution of CSOs' headquarters in "Health, Social Solidarity, and Welfare" category of action in Greece.



Source: Author's calculations based on data available from the Ministry of the Interior. Number of organizations: 344. Date of data extraction: March of 2025

Both of those figures, suggest that the vast majority of the organizations have their headquarters located in Athens (the country's capital) or Thessaloniki the second largest

city (both economically and in terms of population) in Greece. This fact is consistent with older databases from various researchers (Afouxenidis & Gardiki, 2014; University of Peloponnese and HIGGS, 2020) who tried to map the Greek third sector.

The distribution of Greek NGOs seems to be heavily linked to centers of economic and political power rather than regions where the problems of poverty and social exclusion are more acute. As the following table demonstrates (Table 1.1.), the regions with the highest percentages of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion in Greece over the last years are not the ones with the highest concentration of NGOs' headquarters like Attica and Central Macedonia where the major cities of Athens and Thessaloniki are located respectively.

Table 1.1.: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by NUTS 2 region in Greece (as a % of the population)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Greece	30,3	29,0	27,4	28,3	26,3	26,1
Attica	27,0	24,5	21,8	21,6	21,8	22,7
North Aegean	31,9	30,7	28,5	28,1	27,8	30,4
South Aegean	31,6	30,1	23,3	23,2	22,6	20,5
Crete	34,8	30,5	26,5	28,8	17,8	18,5
Eastern Macedonia, Thrace	33,5	34,0	33,5	35,3	32,3	31,9
Central Macedonia	29,3	30,6	29,5	33,7	30,4	29,6
Western Macedonia	36,5	33,6	32,8	28,9	29,8	32,7
Epirus	31,1	26,8	26,2	28,0	19,7	20,1
Thessaly	32,9	28,3	28,5	26,1	24,2	24,7
Ionian Islands	26,2	22,3	15,7	29,4	31,8	27,7
Western Greece	41,1	39,8	43,7	42,0	37,2	35,2
Central Greece	28,7	28,3	28,3	30,8	31,8	22,8
Peloponnese	29,2	35,1	33,4	35,8	36,9	35,7

Data source: Eurostat

One could suppose that while most NGOs' headquarters are based in major cities, their operations would be targeted towards the regions most in need. In fact, the truth might be far from this hypothesis as most programs seem to target people living in major cities like Athens and Thessaloniki. Based on the data collected within the

framework of this research project for more than 180 active programs involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in Greece, nearly 90% of them are targeting areas in the region of Attica². The data for those programs were collected by tracing and registering their relevant official and verified websites.

Thus, we could argue that the country has an uneven development and distribution of NGOs. This finding is not new in the literature of the third sector. Several studies have found that communities with higher concentrations of NGOs do not necessarily reflect greater levels of unmet social needs (Koch, 2007; Koch et al., 2008); instead, the distribution of activities often aligns more closely with funding availability rather than with societal demands. For instance, Bolivia's NGO landscape showcases a lack of correlation between NGO presence and local health or education needs, suggesting inefficient use of resources and a need for improved coordination among NGOs (Galway et al., 2012).

2. Poverty and Social Exclusion in Theory and Practice

A crucial aspect of understanding the way Greek NGOs operate in the field of poverty and social exclusion alleviation is to study and understand how the organizations themselves perceive the very problems they try to fight. In our case, our primary concern is to define what the activity of these organizations indicates about their contribution to the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion.

By carefully examining the organizations participating in the "Social Attica"³ program, we located five main categories of programs and actions related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. These categories are:

1. Clothing and footwear
2. Food packages and ready meals

² The region of Attica includes the city of Athens, as well as the major cities of Piraeus, Peristeri and other smaller towns and municipalities which altogether concentrate nearly half of the country's population.

³ The program "Social Attica" is a regional program of the Greek government which concentrates resources exceeding 1.6 billion euros, within the framework of the new Programming Period 2021-2027, with 646.5 million euros of these for "strengthening social cohesion, improving healthcare & for the reconstruction of education & social welfare infrastructure", as claimed by its mission statement.

3. Housing/dormitory services
4. Access to personal hygiene facilities
5. Medicines and hygiene goods

While immediately related to the well-being of any human being, the categories above are inconsistent with what official guidelines and EU policy briefs describe as components of an indicator of poverty and/or social exclusion. Now, if someone takes a closer look at the policy briefs and texts of the European Union concerning the definitions of poverty and social exclusion, he or she will find that the relevant indexes have quite different approaches.

The "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" indicator (AROPE) is the primary tool used by the European Union to depict the problem of poverty and social exclusion among its country members. Over the last two decades, there have been two definitions concerning this indicator, one under the framework of the "Europe 2020" strategy (European Commission, 2010) and one under the framework of the "Europe 2030" strategy (European Commission, 2021).

The Europe 2020 strategy, initiated by the European Union, aimed to foster "smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth" across its member states. A key point of the strategy was the lifting of at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020, reflecting a commitment to addressing these pressing social issues at both the EU and national levels.

The AROPE indicator was designed to reflect the complex realities of poverty and social exclusion, moving beyond mere income measures to include aspects of material deprivation and employment status. Specifically, individuals are considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion if one of the following criteria is met:

1. They are at risk of poverty, meaning their equivalized disposable income is below 60 percent of the national equivalized median income (after social transfers).
2. They are materially deprived by lacking at least 4 of a list of 9 goods and services. The nine items concern the ability to (1) pay rent or utility bills; (2) keep the home adequately warm; (3) face unexpected expenses; (4) eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every other day; (5) afford a week's holiday away

from home once a year; (6) buy a car; (7) buy a washing machine; (8) buy a colour TV; or (9) buy a mobile phone.

3. They are living in households with low work intensity, which accounts for the persons aged 18–59 living in a household in which those eligible for the labor force worked under 20 percent of their potential over the course of the previous year.

The indicator of AROPE was redefined and enriched under the framework of the "Europe 2030" strategy, particularly regarding the criteria concerning material deprivation. For an individual to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion, they should meet one of the following criteria:

1. They are at risk of poverty, meaning their equivalized disposable income is below 60 percent of the national equivalized median income (after social transfers).
2. They are materially deprived by lacking at least 7 of a list of 13 goods and services. This index considers deprivations both at the level of the household and the level of the household member. In particular:

Deprivations at the household level

1. Difficulty meeting the payment of fixed bills such as rent or principal loan installment, electricity, water, gas etc. bills, credit card installments or loan installments for household goods, vacations, etc., or installment purchases.
2. Financial inability to pay for a week's vacation
3. Financial inability to eat a diet that includes every other day chicken, meat, fish or vegetables of equal nutritional value
4. Financial inability to deal with emergent but necessary expenses
5. Financial inability to own a passenger car
6. Financial inability for satisfactory heating in winter and coolness in summer.

Deprivations at the household member level

1. Financial inability to access the internet
2. Financial inability to replace worn clothes with new ones

3. Financial inability to have two pairs of shoes
4. Financial inability to spend money, almost every week, on himself
5. Financial inability to meet friends/relatives for one coffee/drink/meal at home at least once a month
6. Financial inability to regularly participate in paid recreational activities
7. Financial inability to replace furniture when it wears out or is damaged.
8. They are living in households with low work intensity. The index refers to the percentage of the population aged 0-64 living in households whose members worked less than 20% of usual employment during the previous year. Household work intensity is defined as the ratio between the number of months all members worked in the previous year and the total number of months they could theoretically have worked during the same period. Household members aged 18-64 are considered economically active members. Households consisting only of pupils or students, etc., under 25 years old, or 60-64 years old who are not economically active, or people aged 65 and over are excluded from the calculation of the index.

While AROPE is used in most relevant policy texts and documents, in practice, NGOs in Greece which participate in the field of poverty alleviation seem not to be involved in actions fighting the problems described by AROPE per se. By carefully examining the programs developed by the program of "Social Attica" we observed that the goods and services offered by these programs to their beneficiaries are limited to a short range and cover only a tiny percentage of the goods listed in the AROPE index in order for an individual not to be considered as one experiencing poverty and/or social exclusion. This finding highlights a new dynamic of the Greek third sector as it suggests that in practice, we should not talk about "NGOs against poverty and social exclusion" but about "NGOs against extreme material deprivation" as the goods and services they offer seem to cover only the bare necessities according to the indicator of "Severe material and social deprivation" adopted by the EU.

3. The historical evolution of Third Sector's Databases

The development of databases that record NGOs dealing with poverty and social exclusion in Greece and the Third Sector in general, might shed light to useful facades

of the Greek third sector for an early researcher. Among the first and more structured efforts, we find that of Afouxenidis and Gardiki in 2014. In this paper, the researchers recorded 263 NGOs, of which 201 were classified as "active." The vast majority of those (up to 65.8%) concentrate on the fight against poverty and social exclusion. At this point, it is important to note that Afouxenidis and Gardiki make a brave distinction between "NGOs" and "other organizations of broader civil society". This distinction is based mainly on the self-definition given by each organization, whether or not it is an NGO.

The main features implied by the researchers that these NGOs have are a) a clear and organized structure and b) the managerial ability to organize activities and actions. Thus, Afouxenidis and Gardiki claim that there are also about 6217 other organizations of the "broader civil society," which are small in size and are mainly concerned with humanitarian or cultural affairs. Nevertheless, with a closer look at their categorization, we can support that 46% of the organizations are actively involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

The next database concerning Greek NGOs came from the research project "THALES I" in 2015, which was followed by the research program "THALES II" in 2021. The THALES programs were developed by the University of Peloponnese and the HIGGS Institute, and their purpose was not only to map and categorize but also to evaluate the operation of the Greek NGOs. As the program mission states, the Thales II service is an evaluation platform for Greek Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), through which non-profit organizations can participate in an evaluation process and receive a relevant score based on specific criteria. Each organization can record its performance in 3 main areas: Effectiveness, Organization, and Transparency.

For the program "THALES I," 157 organizations provided sufficient data for the evaluation. For the first phase of the second program, "THALES II" (2015 – 2017), 107 organizations provided sufficient data, while for the second phase (2018 – 2020), only 95 organizations participated, with 71 of them actually completing the evaluation. Throughout the three stages of the THALES programs, the field of social inclusion, welfare, and solidarity was the dominant one among the organizations (70.7% in THALES I, 56.1% in THALES II.A, and 55.8% in THALES II.B).

The third attempt at mapping the Greek third sector came from the "Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research (IOBE)," which conducted the "Study on the Contribution of Civil Society to the Greek Economy" in collaboration with the

“Bodossaki Foundation” in 2023. In this primary research, 404 organizations responded regarding their field of activity, with 42.3% of them (the highest percentage of all categories) stating to support “vulnerable social groups actively”. In contrast, 28.5% of them are involved in the broader “social solidarity” field.

Last but not least, in 2023, the Ministry of Interior of the Greek Government launched the “Public Database and Special Registry for Civil Society Organizations”. As the official guideline published by the Greek government (Ministry of the Interior, 2023) states:

“Following the relevant Circular (3), which communicated the scope of application of Law 4873/2021, and given that:

a) As of 17-10-2023, the two (2) digital databases of the Ministry of Interior are already operational, namely the Public Database of Civil Society Organizations (O.Koi.P) and the Special Registry of O.Koi.P, which are accessible through the Unified Digital Portal of Public Administration (gov.gr EDP) at <http://okoip.gov.gr>.

b) From the provisions of Article 10 of Law 4873/2021 in conjunction with Article 6 of Joint Ministerial Decision No. 6216/07.04.2023, it follows that registration of all Civil Society Organizations (O.Koi.P) and charitable entities falling under the provisions of Article 4 of the aforementioned law is mandatory as a prerequisite for being eligible to claim financial support from public funding sources, and

c) Achieving the principle of process simplification is a shared objective of all Central Government bodies that continue to maintain special registries for charitable entities and non-governmental organizations, therefore, the immediate registration/entry of Civil Society Organizations (O.Koi.P) and charitable entities in the Ministry of Interior’s databases is deemed necessary.”

This database aims to provide public access to basic legal information (name, field of action, address) for every organization in Greece. While the official inauguration of the base was in 2023, it was not until late 2024 that most organizations proceeded with their registration. Up until now (April 2025), 1457 organizations have been registered, with almost 40% of them (544) indicating as their main category of action “Health, Social Solidarity, and Welfare.”

The following table (Table 4.1.) displays some basic information regarding the four databases developed during the last decade. What surprises us is the considerable gap between the six thousand or more organizations spotted by Afouxenidis and Gardiki in 2015 and the approximately 1500 organizations registered by the Public Database of the Greek government.

Table 4.1.: Databases for the Greek Third Sector (2010 – 2025)

Research program's title	Duration	Institution	Main Research Purpose	No of organisations enlisted
Database and Registration of NGOs and wider Civil Society bodies in Greece	2012-2015	EKKE	Mapping	6217
THALES ENGO - Evaluation of Greek NGOs	2011-2013	University of the Peloponnese &HIGGS	Evaluation	157
THALES II PHASE A	2015-2017	University of the Peloponnese &HIGGS	Evaluation	107
THALES II PHASE B	2018-2021	University of the Peloponnese &HIGGS	Evaluation	95
Study on the contribution of Civil Society to the Greek economy	2019-2023	IOBE & Bodossaki Foundation	Evaluation	404
Public Database and Special Registry for Civil Society Organizations	2023 - ongoing	Ministry of the Internal	Mapping	1457

Source: Author's calculations based on data available from EKKE, IOBE, HIGGS and the Ministry of The Interior

Further questions are raised if somebody considers the fact that in the THALES programs, no more than two hundred CSOs participated, while in the IOBE program, 404 CSOs agreed to provide data for their category of action, and even fewer provided enough data for the rest of the relevant questions posed by the researchers. These statistics present a reluctance of organizations to participate in research projects by

recognizable research institutions and universities. This reluctance arguably raises questions regarding the organizations' resources available in order to participate to research projects, but it could also be considered as a signal of transparency and ethics issues.

Furthermore, possible explanations for the relevant eagerness of CSOs to participate in the Greek government's public database (in contrast with the THALES programs and the study by IOBE) could be a) that it is a prerequisite for receiving public funding and b) that the public base's main purpose is not the evaluation of the organizations but their mapping (as was in the project of Afouxenidis and Gardiki).

4. A new methodological approach

From the analysis so far, it seems clear that evaluating and investigating the role of the Greek Third Sector in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is not a simple or easy task. The new database introduced by the Greek government may serve as one of the most valuable tools in our "research kit," as it will probably gather the basic and, at the same time, vital information regarding the active NGOs in Greece in the field of social inclusion and poverty alleviation. Based on the intel provided by this public database, we could proceed by reapproaching the organizations to extract valuable information but not with the intention of evaluating them as organizations. So far, the most "traditional approaches" to evaluating the third sector in Greece were to evaluate each organization separately (the THALES programs) or try to evaluate their contribution as a whole using an "Input–Output" analysis (the IOBE approach), which made brave initial assumptions in order to "run" the model. We propose a different approach that may be more robust and consistent with real-life practice.

The primary unit of analysis is the "program." As *a program*, we define the provision of material goods and services by an organization to beneficiaries systematically and consistently and with a frequency that keeps pace with their actual needs. We support the idea that if we focus on "active programs" rather than "active organizations," we will be able to better investigate and understand the contribution of Greek NGOs in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Of course, parameters such as duration, contributors to the programs, etc., should be considered. However, we gain a considerable methodological advantage by shifting our microscope from the entity of "CSO-NGO-TSO" and focusing on the "program"

itself. For a more detailed investigation of how the notion of the "program" can be used along with the introduction of a suitable set of indexes able to measure the third sector's involvement and its interaction with the state and other institutions, see Chrysostomou and Adam (2025 forthcoming)⁴. A researcher may address considerable methodological issues by utilizing the "program" instead of the "organization" as their basic units of analysis. The *program* has the ability, among others, to a) focus directly on the role that the organization has when trying to serve its goal (i.e., alleviate poverty), b) distinguish whether one or more NGOs collaborate in order to achieve a goal c) distinguish whether the state is involved in the process of designing, funding and running a program and what is its exact role as programs that involves the public sector in a way or another, they ought to have publicly available data regarding those programs. Thus, useful information about active or passed programs could be obtained not only through the organizations (which might be "reluctant") but also through other participants in the programs (if they exist), like the state (e.g., public official websites, like in the case of "Social Attica").

5. Conclusions

Investigating the third sector in Greece can be an adventurous and challenging task. Nevertheless, in contrast to investigating the public or private sector, where databases are more mature, complete, transparent, and accessible, researchers might find themselves lacking research tools and, thus, at a comparative disadvantage. The first step for aspiring third-sector researchers is to focus on the country's larger economic centers, as they concentrate the vast majority of the organizations.

When it comes to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, it is a relatively hard realization that probably most NGOs develop programs and actions that cover only a fraction of the umbrella of goods and services tackling poverty and/or social exclusion. This fact, in addition to the feeble social protection system in Greece, paints a rather bleak and discouraging picture of the future of social welfare in the country.

While the third sector's inertia in participating in research projects of independent researchers, universities, and institutions alike poses considerable difficulty to researchers, the introduction and establishment of a public database that "forces" the

⁴ In the appendix, we provide an overview of the "TSOs Involvement Indexes" based on our previous relevant research work.

organizations to enlist since their registration is pegged with financial motives, is a promising step towards a more "collaborative" third sector.

In addition, a researcher may overcome considerable methodological issues when evaluating the contribution of NGOs in the fight against poverty and social exclusion (or in any other field) by utilizing the notion of the "program" instead of the "organization" as their basic unit of analysis. This will help them navigate the existing challenges and improve their adaptability when searching for synergies between NGOs, the state, and other institutions.

Overall, while the challenges of studying and investigating the Greek Third Sector may be plenty, its considerable growth in Greece over the last two decades, in parallel with international and global trends, urges us to continue our efforts in understanding this third sphere of production and its dynamics, as we should continue to do with the state and the private sector.

Appendix: “Developing a new methodological framework for capturing the role of the third sector in the fight against poverty and social exclusion at the local level” (forthcoming, co-authored with Sofia Adam, in *Social Policy*, Journal of the Hellenic Association of Social Policy).

In this framework, we propose a new methodological framework able to capture in more detail the dynamics of the relationship between NGOs and the local authorities regarding poverty and social exclusion alleviation. Our stepping stones are the following observations:

1. In Greece, most NGO programs fighting poverty and social exclusion have a local focus.
2. Greek NGOs tend to support their beneficiaries with in-kind rather than cash transfers.
3. The Greek government uses cash and in-kind provisions, but local governments develop mainly in-kind programs.

Most NGOs in Greece organize their operations locally, meaning that their programs and actions target a specific city, town, village, or even “neighborhood.” In this light, we aim to construct an index that will depict, at the local level, the degree of involvement of the third sector in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Most actions and programs developed by various organizations addressing those experiencing poverty and/or social exclusion focus on providing a specific set of goods and giving access to certain services. Providing those goods and services helps support the immediate needs of the beneficiaries while preserving their human dignity.

Based on the reasoning above and by examining a plethora of programs planned by different types of organizations stemming from the local authorities and/or the third sector (Program Attica 2022), we have classified five categories of programs related to the direct fight against poverty and social exclusion:

1. Clothing and footwear
2. Food packages and ready meals
3. Housing/dormitory services
4. Access to personal hygiene facilities
5. Medicines and hygiene goods

The first category refers to providing packages of goods related to individuals' clothing and footwear. The second category is related to programs that aim either to offer ready-prepared meals to people in need or to provide food packages that aim to meet the nutritional needs of the beneficiaries. In the third category, we refer to the provision of housing services, such as the homeless accommodation entities (dormitories). In other words, all the places where the beneficiaries can spend the night safely are included. The fourth category includes all those entities offering the beneficiaries access to sanitary facilities, such as the ability for someone to take a bath and wash their clothes. The fifth category includes programs that provide primary pharmaceutical products that the beneficiaries may need. It consists of drugs and related pharmaceutical products that can be obtained from the respective stores without a doctor's prescription such as paracetamol, acetylsalicylic acid, ibuprofen, etc. It also includes programs that provide the beneficiaries with personal hygiene products, such as detergents and cleaners.

Essentially, the outline of these five categories denotes a rather minimum bundle of goods and services in order to address the most severe consequences of poverty and social exclusion. To a certain extent, this taxonomy presents the minimum subsistence thresholds associated with five items (items 3, 4, 6, 9, 10 in the following) included in the material deprivation index developed and monitored by the European Statistics Authority (under the framework of *Europe 2030 strategy*). More specifically, this index

intends to capture material deprivation by measuring the percentage of the population that lacks at least 7 of a list of 13 goods and services:

1. Capacity to being confronted with payment arrears (on mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, hire purchase installments, or other loan payments)
2. Capacity to afford to pay for one-week annual holiday away from home
3. Capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish, or vegetarian equivalent every second day
4. Capacity to face unexpected expenses
5. Have access to a car/van for personal use
6. Ability to keep home adequately warm
7. Replacing worn-out furniture
8. Having internet connection
9. Replacing worn-out clothes with some new ones
10. Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes)
11. Spending a small amount of money each week on him/herself
12. Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month
13. Having regular leisure activities

To construct our index, we record the number of programs active in each category within a municipality's administrative boundaries. That is, we record, regardless of the organization, how many distinct programs aim to provide goods or services to beneficiaries and fall into each of the categories we defined above.

Before we go any further, we first need to define more consistently what we mean by the term "program": *as a program, we define the provision of material goods and services by an organization to beneficiaries systematically and consistently and with a frequency that keeps pace with their actual needs.* For example, in the case of providing ready meals (rations), to consider this action a "program," it should be systematically developed daily to ensure the beneficiaries' daily food intake needs.

Then, the next crucial methodological step is identifying the program in terms of its sector of origin, establishing whether it is implemented by a third sector organization or by a public body. As seen empirically, this stage is more complex than it appears at first sight. This is because some programs are not entirely implemented by an organization that belongs to only one sector. To face this challenge, we divide the actors involved in a program into:

1. The planning body (planning stage of the program)

2. The funding body (funding stage of the program)
3. The implementing body (implementation stage of the program)

The planning body is concerned with the design and development of a program, from the initial idea to the final implementation design. The funding body refers to the body that provides the necessary funds to finance the project. Finally, the implementing body is related to the entity that undertakes to execute —*run*— the program. While we may encounter programs designed, financed, and implemented by a single actor, there is also the case of programs developed, funded, and implemented with the cooperation of several organizations.

The involvement of different actors in a program sets an essential parameter in the practical implementation of our index. For this reason, the index needs to be graded according to the level of involvement an organization holds in the program we examine.

Based on the above, we formulate the following graded indicators:

1. TSOS involvement level 1: This index captures the participation of third sector organizations in one of the stages of a program (planning – financing – implementation). Therefore, the index is formed as follows:

$$TSINV1_i = \frac{\alpha_i}{b_i} \quad eq. (1)$$

Where “ α ” represents the number of programs in which third sector organizations participate, “ b ” refers to the entire base of programs offered, and finally, “ i ” represents one of the five sectors of goods-service provision.

2. TSOs involvement level 2: This index depicts the involvement of third sector organizations in two of a program's stages.

$$TSINV2_i = \frac{\beta_i}{b_i} \quad eq. (2)$$

Where ' β ' represents the number of programs in which third sector organizations are 'involved,' ' b ' refers to the entire base of programs offered, and ' i ' represents one of the five sectors of goods-service provision.

3. TSOs involvement level 3: This index describes the proportion of programs designed, implemented, and financed entirely by third sector organizations.

$$TSINV3_i = \frac{\gamma_i}{b_i} \quad eq. (3)$$

Where ' γ ' represents the number of programs in which third sector organizations are 'involved' at all stages of the program, 'b' refers to the entire base of programs offered, and finally, 'i' represents one of the five sectors providing goods and services.

4. TSOs general contribution index: This index captures the percentage of programs that include a third sector organization in at least one of their stages. This indicator gives us the "big picture" of the third sector's contribution to the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the particular administrative jurisdiction. It is defined as follows:

$$TSOCON_i = \frac{\delta_i}{b_i} \quad eq. (4)$$

Where ' δ ' represents the number of programs in which third sector organizations are 'involved', 'b' refers to the entire base of programs offered, and 'i' represents one of the five categories of programs.

In total, we get a set of four indexes. The first three depict the different levels of involvement of the third sector in the provision of welfare services for each program category based on the number of stages a TSO is involved in a program. The last index shows "the big picture" as it demonstrates the volume of TSOs participating in the broader field of poverty and social exclusion alleviation.

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