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Case Study

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Use of green resources and designing of public spaces: The case of Nea Ionia city in Greece

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Abstract

This paper examines the case of designing the public space through the exploitation of green resources. The public space we meet is a result of both social conditions and institutional framework. In recent years, in many points of Attica, the lack of public spaces is intense. However, where the public space is adequate, it often fails to be used by residents in the best possible way. In this context, the causes of the “inactive” public space will be examined as well as the spatial dimension of the problem in conjunction with the socioeconomic and cultural mutations taking place. These resources will be studied as to whether they can derive from the use of green taxes that a Municipality may receive in order to spend on better use of public space. The Municipality of Nea Ionia will be selected as an example of public urban space. The Municipality has been affected like all other Municipalities of Attica due to the economic crisis and needs rejuvenation actions in terms of utilization of existing public spaces. In order to illustrate the current image of the aforesaid Municipality, a field survey will be carried out in which the uses in the area will be captured. The issue relating the Municipality with the public spaces of other Municipalities will also be approached from the point of view of spatial neighboring as well as the functional disintegration. Finally reference will be made to the upcoming regeneration of the area based on the Municipality's revenue resulting from green taxes.

Keywords: *Green resources, Public space, Local authorities, Nea Ionia city*

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, public space is the result of both social conditions and the institutional framework. In recent years, the phenomenon of limited public space has been intensified in some areas of Attica. However, when public space is sufficient, it is sometimes not possible to be used by residents and visitors in the best possible way. This raises question about the ‘inactive’ public space and connects it with the spatial dimension and the possible socioeconomic changes. One major reason why public space is not successfully exploited is the lack of financial resources. These resources will actually be studied in the present study: to what extent they can come from the use of green fees collected by a municipality in order to be spent on the better use of public space? The Municipality of Nea Ionia was selected as a case study of public urban space. This Municipality, like the most of Attica, was greatly affected by the economic crisis and

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needs revitalizing actions at the level of utilization of its public spaces. Moreover, it is a fact that the municipality has a lot of development potentials, as long as it ensures the necessary investment resources. All the above were actually the main reasons for exploring the issue of ‘vacancies’, without the operation of public spaces.

2. Public urban space-General facts

Public spaces constitute the urban grid of the city, which has a special meaning. The grid of public space identifies the city and its needs (Amin, 2008). The streets, the parks, the gardens and the squares make up the image of the city. This image is part of the inhabitant’s everyday life and plays an important role in the effort of a city to attract its visitors (Low, 2010). All the above frames a set of images and creates a particular view of the urban landscape (Modood, 2007). Public urban spaces are places to be ‘remembered’ (Alfoldy, 2017) and places where the aesthetics of an entire era are reflected.

Even from the antiquity, kings, emperors, prime ministers and officials in general paid specific attention to the design of public spaces in order to emphasize their importance. In particular, they focused on the artistic status and quality, the overall character, the style and the cultural profile trying to identify with the style of a particular time period by manifesting the style and way of citizens’ lives. Nowadays, public space is not represented only by the main square or the main street. Its form is expressed by a network of sites that are highly differentiated both in terms of use and form. Its present form manifests a place where people present useful acts and events (Alfoldy, 2017; Kypraios, 2018).

Public space has to be a part of social collectivity (Kypraios, 2018). It is developed in three dimensions, defined by the buildings surrounding it, the three-dimensional elements such as lighting, sculptures or trees, as well as the people who live daily in this place (Hubbard, 2017). Therefore, it can be concluded that the interaction between human-environment—public must be in a perfect balance. The environment provides people with housing and food and people in turn must protect the environment from any kind of disasters. As it turns out, the relationship between man and environment is interdependent. Unfortunately, the rapid development of technology is leading humans to exceed their limits, causing damage to the environment and consequently to their quality of life (Tsoumani, 2018). As the majority of world’s population lives in cities and residential areas, they are responsible for more than 70% of global energy-related greenhouse gas emissions and the need for cities to become central agents of climate change is undisputed (Meleti, 2018).

2.1. Redefining public urban space

Since the mid-1980s and especially after 2000, a wide range of sociological field research has been devoted to the shaping of a city. An important area of these approaches relates to the role of population groups in public urban space (Dines *et al.*, 2006). The interventions in the urban area were aimed at redefining it at an urban, architectural, environmental and transportation level (Gehl, 2003). Moreover, concerning to the public urban space, the primary objective has been the improvement of the quality of life in relation to the exploitation of these sites, guiding the needs of citizens. These include improving physical conditions, unifying spaces, removing polluting cars, strengthening the role of local government and finding resources for further investment (Mitchell, 2017). In particular, urban space is shaped, developed and exploited in accordance with the criteria relating to a country’s economy, political thought and geopolitical position (Kivelou, 2010). The dominant trend has to do with the shift from the governed to the multicultural and ecological city, with a particular emphasis to its residents (Adams, 1994).

Public space is also associated with modern planning (Andrikopoulou, 2014). This term is used in an effort to explore the possibility of state intervention, to clarify the role of the municipal authority and to seek solutions to redefine the urban environment for the benefit of the public (Bannister *et al.*, 2006). The exploration of public spaces should be achieved through ecological projects with the aim of improving citizens’ life, enhancing his standard of living and relocating his role to the city itself. In essence, the citizen has actually lost his place in the city and it is time to relocate to his surroundings so that he can live in a decent urban environment (Nikolopoulou, 2012).

The matter is of great concern to the Member States of the European Union. An investment development strategy is sought to support plans in order to enhance the environment, with the aim of reducing buildings, making better use of urban space, developing microclimate, thermal, visual and acoustic comfort and urban morphology (Sehidis, 2012). In particular, a variety of tools, such as grants, loans, insurance products and guarantees are needed to help local authorities improve solvency through the construction of better financing structures.

3. The role of local government in the development and financing of their policies

Thanks to the local government activities, local economic development is promoted as there are more investments and external economies are created in order to transform the local and broader market. As a result, isolation is eliminated, the

necessary infrastructure is created, jobs and new businesses are increased. These conditions offer a comparative advantage for the local society.

Furthermore, a local authority can raise the social, cultural and even educational level of its citizens as it offers them new ideas, it creates new standards and the citizens actually take personal initiative (Delitheou, 2018).

Nowadays, the role of local authorities is even more important as economic, political and technological developments have led to the internalization of society and economy but also to the empowerment of local communities. Among the changes brought about by globalization are the shrinking of the power of central administration at the national state level and the strengthening of the concept of local affairs.

Bearing all these new facts in mind, the main axes of the Greek local government policy should be the following:

- Better quality of life by offering new service that will improve the citizens' standard of living.
- Protecting and upgrading the environment, both natural and urban. Any action at local level should take into account the environmental aspect.
- Emphasis on education, continuing education and technology as new demands are emerging that are changing the priorities and the services provided by local authorities.
- Creating the necessary local infrastructure and building a social network that will truly meet the basic needs of the public.
- Turning to healthy businesses and investments by leveraging local resources and offering services that the private sector refuses to provide, while creating new jobs. It is noted that while in Europe local government has been characterized as the largest public investor (62% of total public investment), Greece is experiencing investment inactivity, with a more intense problem in small municipalities, island and mountain areas.

From all the above, it is obvious that local authorities need financial resources so that they can fulfill their multifunctional mission and exercise all the entrusted responsibilities.

The Constitution of Greece explicitly mentions that it is a state's obligation to assist the work of local authorities. More specifically, according to Article 102 § 6: "The state should ensure that the necessary resources to fulfill the mission of local authorities are provided. The law defines the reimbursement and distribution of taxes or fees that are collected by the state."

In order to achieve its goal, the local government of Greece draws its resources from three main sources:

- The public investment program and local government-funded resources.
- EU resources (Community Support Frameworks, Co-Financed European Programs).
- The loans from domestic and foreign sources (ministries or global agencies in special crisis situations, domestic and foreign commercial banks, European Investment Bank, Depositary and Loan Fund).

3.1. Local authorities and environmental policy

Environmental policy refers to a set of actions directed towards defined objective so as to tackle the ecological crisis as a whole or partly. In turn, the ecological crisis is about reducing the ability of the environment to act as a supplier of natural resources (Papaioannou, 1998).

The main objective of environmental policy is to achieve a balance between increasing protection and reducing environmental degradation, since it has become clear that as protection increases, the 'available' environment is reduced and vice versa. In addition, this policy explores the causes of the environmental problem, which is economically defines as the scarcity of natural environment and natural resources. The scarcity of the environment is caused by the gradual deterioration of environment that is due to its extensive pollution and depletion. The causes of the problem are related to the economic behavior of producer and consumer and to the institutional context. As far as the economic behavior of the producer and consumer is concerned, it can be inferred that the producer is trying to minimize the production cost using 'cheaper' production factor. For example, filters have a cost for the producer, while air pollutants have no cost, as air is perceived as a free good. On the other hand, the consumer is trying to maximize the state of well-being received by the goods. In this process, he uses 'free' goods. With regard to the institutional framework, the behavior of producers and consumers towards the environment is shaped according to the limits of an institutional framework. In particular, there is no clear form of ownership for the vast majority of environmental goods and natural resources. In turn, the lack of ownership does not create initiatives for the protection of the environment and the reduction of resource usage (Sbokos, 2011).

3.2. Europe's environmental policy

Historically, Europe's environmental policy has been characterized by an internal dynamic that has led to an institutional context where free competition, free movements and exchange of goods were basic principles. The confrontation between environmental protection and free market remains active, although it differs in form and targeting. Nowadays, the need for a European environmental policy is indisputable (Bithas, 2003). Critics focus on the limited effectiveness of legislative interventions, the formulation and enforcement of objectives without taking into account local environmental, economic and social specificities, reduced stakeholder and public participation, environmental decision-making, unequal cost due to the general application of environmental legislation and the reduction of economy's competitiveness (Knill and Lenschow, 2000).

European Union's environmental policy is an area of interest for the local authorities. First of all, the Union's basic concern is to reduce divergences between levels of development in different areas and to reduce the delay in less privileged areas or islands, including rural areas. More specifically, the Union's policy aims at 'high levels' of environmental protection and takes into account the diversity of the different countries in Europe. This point is considered as a minimum compromise in the Amsterdam Treaty, since the views of member states' for the environmental protection are totally different. In some countries, the standards are high while in others are comparatively low, making it rather difficult to formulate a common policy (Knill and Lenschow, 2000).

Environmental concerns cover a wide range of problems. This is due to climate change, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss and even air and water quality issues. Also, problems related with waste, access to urban green and water and the existence of local environmental indicators such as the number of trees and lakes are part of these concerns. The improper use of environment has a significant impact on the quality of people's lives in present, but also in the future, including the parameter of survival.

It is well-known that cities cannot be environmentally sustainable systems when they exceed specific size and population density. Consequently, they cannot achieve a sustainable economic and environmental development. In fact, cities rely on neighboring ecosystems to maintain the equilibrium and produce the necessary natural resources for financial transactions. A number of measure, such as gas emissions, the volume of municipal waste, the consumption of non-renewable energy resources and the inputs of non-renewable natural resources can contribute to the assess of local environmental problems and to the guidance of local authorities in taking specific measures (Andrikopoulou *et al.*, 2003).

The services aimed at controlling and improving the natural environment, are included in the environmental responsibilities of local authorities. In particular, the responsibility of Municipalities is to provide water, sewer and drainage systems. Law 1069/1980 was the first of municipalities and communities to set up municipal and community water and sewerage companies.

Also, one of the primary responsibilities of these local authorities is to clean the roads and collect the waste. Nowadays, all municipalities and large communities have organized cleaning services and they can deal with this kind of problems.

Other responsibilities of municipalities and communities include the construction, maintenance and operation of cemeteries and the regulation of parking in public areas. The local authority is responsible for regulating the parking of vehicles and checking compliance with regard to traffic and emission regulations. Consequently, regardless of the local police, local authorities have to regulate the above issues.

Moreover, the competencies of these local authorities include matters relating to the organization and operation of fairs and the construction of any project for the protection of natural and cultural environment as well as control over compliance with the provisions relating to cleanliness, building, water supply, sanitation and environmental pollution (tobacco, noise, etc.). Local authorities have not taken a lot of measures to deal with the environmental pollution so far and this is probably due to the confusion of responsibilities between the various factors.

Local authorities are also responsible for the local construction of roads, squares and bridges. It is a fact that municipalities and communities have fully realized the great environmental and economic importance of building roads. However, the lack of cooperation between municipalities and communities, the complete lack of technical support and the financial inability are some of the key factors that have a negative contribution to the problem.

Municipalities and communities are responsible for the study, management and implementation of residential and urban development programs in an area. This responsibility in conjunction with the implementation of town planning according to the approved general urban planning, Housing Control Zone, and the compliance to the land registry data

of their area, are the key guidelines to local government for proper urban development. These guidelines are not enough for the successful resolution of the problem by local authorities. The necessary infrastructure and the financial resources are key elements to meet these responsibilities.

Finally, the environmental responsibilities of local authorities include the repair and maintenance of traditional or historic buildings, which are given to municipalities and communities, and the maintenance of archaeological and historical sites in the area (Andrikopoulou *et al.*, 2003; Delitheou, 2011; Delitheou, 2008).

The 'acquis communautaire' for local authorities in the environmental field includes Directive 88/609/EEC on the limitation of air emissions from combustion plants, Directives 89/369/EEC and 89/249/EEC on the reduction and prevention of air pollution caused by existing and new waste incineration plants and Directive 91/271/EEC.

3.3. Connection of environmental taxation and green fees with local authorities

Sustainable development, that is, the sustainability of the community as a whole, refers to the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development, but also to the optimization of the institutional framework and the balanced relationship of people and the fulfillment of their ambitions (Delitheou, 2011). Development, at the level of sustainability, can be a responsibility of local government. The partial goal of development that local governments have will also help the broader objective of the overall functioning of society. Local authorities cannot find a way out of taxation, at the level of collecting and at the same time investing in projects and other actions (Delitheou, 2008). Therefore, there has been a sharp decline in the tax procedure from local authorities in conjunction with the prevailing view of the local development model, which is designed and supported by the central administration. Compared to Greece's Gross Domestic Product, local authorities' tax revenues present extremely low prices with a strong declining trend. It is important to note the difference between the tax revenues of central administration and the social administration as opposed to those of the local government. These revenues have an upward trend as opposed to the revenues of local government (Papadaki and Psycharis, 1996).

According to Law 1828/1989, the system of state grants was associated with the local authorities through the payment of certain taxes and fees. On the one hand, this reform results in improved control over the state budget, but on the other hand, the local authorities 'lost' their independence, as their finances were not managed on the basis of the objective criteria of local authorities but with the criteria set by the state (Delitheou, 2008; Psycharis and Simatou, 2003). The more decentralized a state is, the stronger the local authorities. The dimension of quality is assessed in conjunction with the degree of authority that is the ability of local government to intervene in decision making. The role of local government to the governance of a country does not only arise from the drop in its revenue to the revenue of the central administration. Thus, for example, when the revenue of a local government is higher than the revenue of a state, but most of it comes from state grants, then the local government is directly dependent on the central administration and is not able to influence decision making procedure. This is the case in Greece, where most municipalities are state-dependent (Kyriacou *et al.*, 2015; Delitheou *et al.*, 2015; Doumpou and Cohen, 2014).

From all the above, we can conclude that there is no intention to decentralize but to transform local authorities into agents of central administration. Therefore, the assessment of decentralization degree requires the consideration of other qualitative variables, such as the participation programming, the functioning of the institution as an executive that influences the decision-making process, the absence or strong presence of central administration in the actions of local government, including the tax sector (Psycharis and Simatou, 2003).

Economic theory teaches that taxes and the degree of their assignment by the state to local government depend on the degree of financial independence that central administration considers appropriate. They also depend on the responsibilities devolved on a decentralized basis, the size of local authorities and the level of administration. The controlled situation with local authorities leads to adverse results with regard to the decision-making process, as each government determines on the basis of its strategy and operation (Kyriacou *et al.*, 2015).

Local authorities cannot derive the same tax revenue because of different taxpayers' capacity, but neither do they have the same needs. Thus, with the transfer of tax authority to local government, other local authorities will present more revenues than they need and other with less. This financial inequality is a fact in Greece, as each municipality is not properly managed in terms of resources. So, for example, a country like Greece that is not based on industry could have had profits if properly managed (Delitheou *et al.*, 2015). Green fees can lead to a solution, since proper management of these fees would lead to improved environmental development, sustainability of municipalities and an inflow of money investment into their operation. In the next chapter, there is a discussion about the green fees, highlighting their importance for the future of local government in Greece (Meleti, 2018).

4. The case of Nea Ionia city

There are various studies that highlight the importance of green in citizens' mental well-being (Chiesura, 2004; Barton and Pretty, 2010; Lee and Maheswaran, 2011). More specifically, green helps citizens reduce stress by stimulating them in a variety of sports activities. It also helps people relax, socialize with others, limit the use of air conditioning, save energy and improve their mental and physical health while reducing health costs. Green is considered to be invaluable as it offers many benefits to people's quality of life (Chiesura, 2004).

The advantages in the City of Nea Ionia are the position of the Municipality in the capital city planning system the immediate movement of its residents to the center of Athens and other municipalities by using bus network and its fixed bus network. In detail, the municipality owns 84 municipal diesel and gasoline vehicles. Although it is a fact that fuel consumption cannot be limited only by municipal vehicles, the municipality takes measures to exemplify citizens. More specifically, it aims at the conversion of gasoline vehicles to dual-fuel vehicles, the replacement of the 50% of old refuse trucks and buses with natural gas vehicles and the training of drivers in and energy-efficient driving behavior. Also, the population growth trends and the balanced age composition, due to the influx of economic migrants in the last decade, the strong historical and cultural identity of the population and the existence of two green strips, those of Nea Phipadelphia and Veikou are among the advantages of the municipality (Papadaki and Psycharis, 1996; Psycharis and Simatou, 2003).

On the other hand, the main disadvantages of the area are the daily overloading of the local road network along with the degradation of the natural environment, the inability to meet the parking needs, both in shopping and housing areas and high population density combined with a low proportion of public and green spaces. To make matters worse, we have to refer to the inadequate space for walking and cycling, the crowded old buildings in combination with the existence of small plots and the creation of metropolitan areas, businesses in residential areas and shopping centers, which generate noise pollution (Papadaki and Psycharis, 1996; Psycharis and Simatou, 2003).

Having mentioned the advantages and disadvantages of the municipality, it is worth mentioning its opportunities and threats. The utilization of NSRF (Partnership for Growth Framework) for 2014-2020 programming period and the full absorption of funds offered by the program in the areas of social policy and sustainable development would be a great opportunity for the municipality. In addition, utilizing the institutional framework of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to carry out projects and establish partnerships with local bodies, working with neighboring municipalities to implement actions aimed at the development of surplus, exploiting the institution of 'twinning', exchange of views and transfer of experiences and participation in European programs are all possible opportunities for the municipality (Papadaki and Psycharis, 1996; Psycharis and Simatou, 2003). Actually, the municipality of Nea Ionia is a pioneer in the field of ecology as it is the first municipality in Attica to be selected and integrated into the European Financing Program of the project "Geothermal Telematic System and other RES Applications", which is part of the "Renewable Energy" Program. This program was created by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway for the period 2009-2014 to stimulate social and economic cohesion between the countries of the European Economic Area. The project involves 4 actors from the area: the Municipality of Nea Ionia, the Constantinople General Hospital of Nea Ionia, "Agia Olga", the Nea Ionia Juvenile Shelter that accommodates 20 young people and Family Care Center of the municipality. The above project relates to the exploitation of the geothermal potential that exists in the subsoil of the area. The benefits from this project would be the reduction of CO₂ emissions by 51%, the significant reduction in the cost of operating installations and buildings by 58% and the participation in achieving national targets regarding the environment and energy. Moreover, the Municipality of Nea Ionia implements a recycling program for paper, metal, glass and plastic in collaboration with the Hellenic Recycling Recovery Company, while it contributes to the collecting of electronic equipment, batteries and tires for its vehicles.

The current city of Nea Ionia (2014-2019) participates in initiatives and actions to combat climate change. Finally, new technologies can play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of green municipal actions to change consumer/public behavior towards a sustainable direction, a position that Mr Panagiotis Manouris, the main opposition leader, has supported.

As far as the threats to the municipality are concerned, we can refer to the adverse economic conditions, the high unemployment rate in the area, the constant influx of immigrants that creates additional pressures on the labor market, subsidy cuts and employment reduction policies. Based on the above, it is noted that the municipality has a great need to further invest in the utilization of urban space, to promote sustainability and environmental development and to use the environment as a means of social uplift (Papadaki and Psycharis, 1996; Psycharis and Simatou, 2003).

4.1. Proposals

There are great opportunities for the municipality of Nea Ionia. However, the authorities have not proceed to the appropriate moves in terms of environment, energy and waste management, utilization of the urban environment and

development of regeneration projects. There are various proposals that can be made in order to improve the functioning of the municipality.

To begin with, the municipality should invest in new garbage trucks for better collection and use of waste as raw material and recycling products. Also, more bins should be installed in more places in the city so as to harvest waste more efficiently.

Moreover, it is necessary for the municipality to educate citizens regarding their environmental awareness in order to protect their city from the waste. It is also essential to improve the transport routes and to promote the construction of bicycle lanes, better roads and promote projects to protect the green of the area.

Last but not least, urban renewals of bioclimatic character and renewable energy intervention would be really useful for the municipality.

5. Conclusion

The theoretical and practical approach that was previously discussed underlines the importance of public spaces in terms of urban green development, as well as the development of actions that will improve citizens' lives at social, economic and environmental level. This issue linked the importance of utilizing urban spaces to green resources, concluding that this kind of resources is important revenue for municipalities with the aim of improving the status of citizens and their lives. Green resources can give the municipality the opportunity to make better use of energy, undertake redevelopment projects at green level and at infrastructure level, such as the construction of bicycle lanes, stadiums and parks.

All the above actions can be developed with the support of the municipality from the citizens through green fees for renewable, especially for the environment. It goes without saying that green taxes should be managed in the context of an inspiring strategy and implementation of new taxes and fees, which are necessary to ensure a better life for the citizens in general. The key to success for this venture is the proper information to citizens in order to make them aware of the importance of these tax measures regarding better functioning of municipality in protecting environment and improving their standard of living.

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