15 Isolation, individualism and sharing

Mobility poverty in Naxos and Small Cyclades, Greece

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Abstract

This chapter presents the results of the fieldwork carried out in remote and secluded areas on Greek islands through stakeholders' interviews and focus groups with citizens. The main objective was to assess groups vulnerable to mobility poverty, in particular children and populations living in remote rural areas. This was implemented on the island of Naxos and on the much smaller one of Iraklia.

Interviews and focus groups show profound isolation, but also robust commitment to seeking collective solutions to mobility poverty, at least on Iraklia. While privately owned cars are the dominant means of transport, informal peer-to-peer car-pooling is very common in remote areas. However, there are weaker social strata, as children, the elderly and unemployed are more prone to suffer social exclusion.

Introduction

Big Sweet has this island, virtuous are the faces of people, piles are shaped by melons, peaches, figs and the sea is calm. I looked at the people – never this people have been frightened by earthquakes or by Turks, and their eyes did not burn out. Here freedom had extinguished the need for freedom, and life spread out as happy sleeping water. And if sometimes was discomposed, never rose tempest. Safety was the first gift of island that I felt as walking around Nàxos.

(Kazantzakis 1965)

The location: Naxos and small Cyclades

This chapter presents the results of fieldwork, as conducted in 2018 and 2019, in remote and secluded areas on Greek islands through stakeholders' interviews and focus groups with members of socially vulnerable groups.¹ Our main target groups were (i) people living in remote rural areas and (ii) children. The activities ranged from interviews with stakeholders to focus groups run on Naxos (a bigger island with considerable infrastructure

(health, education) and Iraklia (a smaller island). The fieldwork was conducted on the island of Naxos and on the much smaller one of Iraklia including the target groups mentioned above.

Fieldwork localisation

The Cyclades differ significantly in size, geography and historical background. The name Cyclades comes from the fact that the group is (roughly) the shape of a circle.

Naxos and Small Cyclades is a municipality in the Naxos regional unit, South Aegean region, consisting of the island of Naxos (the largest of the Cycladic islands) and the surrounding smaller islands of the Small Cyclades: Donousa, Iraklia, Koufonisia, Schoinoussa and several smaller islands. The municipality of Naxos covers an area of 495.76 square kilometres and has a permanent population of 18,904 inhabitants (7,070 of whom in Naxos town, also named Hora) (European Commission 2019). For the archipelago, the end of the Second World War was the beginning of migration – all in search of a better life – to Athens and other major Greek cities as well as other countries. It was during this period that the villages of Naxos lost a large part of their population, as did other islands (2019) (Figure 15.1).

Figure 15.1 Map indicating the island of Naxos.

Source: © The contributors of OpenStreetMap, openstreetmap.org

Naxos

Currently, the island of Naxos is predominantly a rural region with a dispersed settlement (22 villages, ranging from 10 to 2,000 permanent residents). The population also extends into the more mountainous locations as well, where people are mainly involved in agricultural activities. Hora (the main town) is the main harbour and administrative centre of the island, a town which has managed to maintain a sizeable population. The coastline is an important tourist destination during the summer (Figure 15.2).

By contrast, some of the mountain villages are uninhabited or may have very few inhabitants, mostly of the older generation. Other residents commute seasonally between the village and the central island. Other inland

Figure 15.2 Map of Naxos.

Source: Wikivoyage 2012

villages are bigger, with a population of up to 2,000 inhabitants, with a considerable number of children. Until a few years ago, Naxos' mountain areas were unknown to tourists, but more recently many villages are making efforts to attract tourists, especially during the high season, featuring local festivals, the production of local crafts and food specialties. The fieldwork addressed people living in the mountain areas, the most disadvantaged in terms of accessibility, considering the distance of up to 45 km to the main settlement of the island, i.e. Naxos town.

Transport conditions are difficult; transport and travel are often a strain on the energy and resources of the rural poor. Very high car use and ownership have been recorded both on Iraklia and inland Naxos. The end of the tourist season also means reduced public transport trips for residents, thus making it difficult for non-drivers to be transported. The road infrastructure is poorly maintained. Streets are fairly good around Naxos town and the seaside touristic areas, while they are much worse in the mountains.

Iraklia

As mentioned above, Iraklia is a small island, with merely 141 permanent inhabitants on its 17.8 square kilometres. Iraklia is positioned about 18 miles from Naxos town, equivalent to 1 hour and 15 minutes by ferry boat. Its population is split between two small hamlets: Agios Georgios (where the island port is located) and Panagia, located four kilometres from the port. The highest peak on Iraklia, Papas, is only 418 metres high. Most beaches on Iraklia are rocky and can be reached by boat. Iraklia has no public transport coverage (apart from the ferry boats and bus operating only in the summer to cover the needs of tourists) and poor social infrastructures. While Naxos, as the bigger island, has considerable infrastructure (health, education), the smaller ones depend on the bigger island for many services.

Some of Iraklia's background situation and fieldwork results can easily be replicated on other small islands with a similar geographical background (mountainous footpaths, varied coastline) and spatial and socio-demographic characteristics.

The isolation factor that characterises the islands (being areas surrounded by the sea) is often combined with land remoteness, factors that create a "double" isolation. This triggers mobility problems for different vulnerable social groups such as elderly people, children (due to limited educational, social, health service units and large distances, e.g. a long way to school), women and people with reduced mobility (inappropriate infrastructures, inadequate/non-existent public transport, long distances). The geographical restriction of the islands is also the main characteristic that differentiates them from the continental remote areas. In this vein, we found differences compared with similar continental areas, but also between big and small islands in the same island complex, and, naturally, within different areas on the same islands.

Why Naxos and Iraklia?

The running liaisons with CIVINET CY-EL (a network of around 120 local authorities) and its engagement in transport-related activities made it the perfect partner to conduct fieldwork in the Cyclades (Civitas 2019). After thorough discussions and desk research, the choice fell on the island of Naxos and on the smaller Iraklia, the latter being a very good example of a secluded case, affected by seasonal mobility disparities. Fieldwork was supported by the local authorities providing access to local stakeholders. The two islands display difficult access, geographically secluded areas and a remarkable seasonal difference in mobility needs due to the arrival of tourists in the summer.

The interest in the fieldwork by the Naxos and Small Cyclades local authority was also taken into consideration during the liaison phase when the municipality was briefed on the project. Naxos local authorities were also interested in the study in order to obtain additional information in elaborating their first Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan.

Naxos and Iraklia

The main income for the local population, before the rise of tourism, was derived from farming and animal husbandry, both of which are well developed. In the past, many of the villages used to have a leading financial role in the island's economy. In this regard, most of the island's population lived in the inland villages and Naxos town was not the dominant centre it is today. Both study areas present a rapid development of tourism which kicked off in Naxos around the 1980s, with the influx of tourists reaching around 500,000 visitors each year. Below, we present the main identified socio-economic characteristics of the wider region for which official statistics are available:

- Level of education (Regional Unit Naxos (Eurostat 2018)): university degree 11.4%, holders of a high school diploma or those who have completed vocational training 24.4%;
- Unemployment rate (Regional Unit Naxos): 15.2%;
- People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Aegean Islands and Crete): 37.5% in 2016 (in comparison, total for Greece: 35.5%);
- GDP per capita in PPS (EU28=100), South Aegean (including Naxos): 21,900 euro/year; and
- More than 90% of the GDP in South Aegean Islands comes from tourism-related activities.

Indeed, the tourism industry is the main source of income and development. According to the fieldwork findings, it seems that the quality of life has been improved due to this tourism development. An increase in the

number of permanent residents has also been openly reported, especially in the more touristic old seaside villages. On the negative side, this tourism is unsustainable. At the peak of arrivals, there are issues regarding pollution, car traffic and parking. A similar situation can be found on the Small Cyclades islands.

However, things are very different for the inland and mountain areas, which so far attract almost no tourism and, thus, do not benefit from similar economic growth. Agricultural activities, which characterise these regions, bring inadequate incomes and there are almost no other work opportunities. As highlighted by some of the interviewees, ad hoc initiatives to support local development, run by residents and local authorities, have so far not helped to improve the situation. Not surprisingly, many residents of the mountain areas leave their villages, shifting their professional activities from agriculture to tourism, which is concentrated on the coastline. With regards to the availability of infrastructure and services in the mountain regions, the villages usually have a mini market, a pharmacy and a rural doctor. Other services, supermarkets and banks are available either in a big village or in Naxos town. There is one ambulance on the island, but it has to cross long distances (up to 45 km) along bad mountain roads to reach the patients in the mountain areas.

Local actors and key stakeholders

The fieldwork started with selective consultation of key local players and inhabitants. The combination of desk research and in situ sessions preliminarily aimed to define the current situation, what remains unclear and what needs further analysis. The link between mobility poverty and social exclusion was evident and, ultimately, the fieldwork intended to assess the current challenges experienced by the inhabitants. The engagement of local stakeholders and discussion with them went beyond transport matters, covering a larger pool of topics: for example, the needs of pupils due to increasing school enrolment rates, access to health services by the inhabitants, female empowerment and improvements in agricultural productivity. According to this approach, the following stakeholders were reached and their opinions recorded:

- The Municipality of Naxos and Small Cyclades;
- Public Bus Company (KTEL);
- Taxi (companies) owners;
- Sea taxi owners;
- Local ferry boat line connecting Naxos with Small Cyclades islands (subsidised by the state to keep the Small Cyclades islands connected even in the seasons with very low influxes of passengers);
- School authorities (primary and high school principals); and
- The Centre for Creative Work for People with Disabilities.

Consolidated results

First, we can detect a causal link between poor transport services and the tourism industry, since per occasion and region the coverage of offerings is not satisfactory at all times and seasonally dependent as expressed by different individuals mentioned earlier. In addition, we encountered members of lower socio-economic strata that require special attention regarding service offers to be assisted and have equal opportunities with the rest of the islanders who reside in more central and populated areas of the islands.

We should also report a remarkable difference in mindset between Naxos and Iraklia. As discussed in the focus group talks, people living inland, and specifically in mountainous Naxos villages, are hindered from cooperating with each other and also reluctant to participate in collective actions since they are of a different mindset, but are also worried about the risks associated with new ideas and innovative solutions. By contrast, in Iraklia, residents act collectively and more as a team. Overall, it can be derived from the study that residents are eager to find collaborative and innovative solutions and are more driven by the value of the result than putting too much weight on the challenges and risks associated. The latter is not meant to undermine their responsible side, but they tend to be more decisive. Of course, it is easy to see how in Iraklia the community of permanent residents is really small: their profoundly isolated lifestyle, the long winter months and very limited number may explain the need to face challenges together and maintain strong social ties. This applies not only to native people, but also to those who moved to Iraklia in more recent years.

The difference in attitude was also observed in relation to those with a disability (especially people with a mental impairment): While on Naxos families often hide their (mentally) disabled relatives at home, in Iraklia people with disabilities tend to be part of society to a greater extent. However, both on Naxos and Iraklia, informal car-sharing and chauffeuring by friends, neighbours and relatives is popular and fills many transport gaps.

Populations living in remote rural areas

On Naxos, the population living in the remote mountain areas usually faces difficulties in their daily mobility since service offers are affected by seasonality. As public transport cannot meet their on-demand needs and schedules are not satisfactory, as they expressed, most of the adult population (both men and women) rely on car ownership, which is extensively used for their mobility needs and as a means to an end to assist their social inclusivity. Having said that, the problem is more severe for those who do not own or cannot drive a car (i.e. the elderly, young and those on low income) since they experience poor socialisation: their prospects are restricted to the

people and opportunities provided by their village. One way of overcoming this is informal car-sharing as practised especially in mountain regions. The peer-to-peer, informal service as stated during the discussions helps people with no car ownership and it is mainly offered by neighbours and relatives on a voluntary basis. However, apart from basic needs, other needs are left unmet. Job opportunities are also restricted by people's ability to be mobile. Thus, the combination of the remoteness of the location, insufficient coverage by public transport services and the high price of tickets are the main factors depriving many inhabitants of broader opportunities and socialisation.

Another category of people who can be considered socially excluded are disabled people, especially those with some sort of mental disabilities as we recorded during our visit. Being different is still stigmatised. Physically disabled people have difficulties in moving around the island due to the total absence of the necessary infrastructure, leading to their isolation from the rest of society, since their needs, which are more specific, are insufficiently met demonstrating a lack of specially designed services.

Although the whole population suffers from substantial isolation due to the topology and very limited design of the services offered by the state, permanent residents on Iraklia do not feel socially excluded. They happily support their decision to reside on the island knowing the limitations and difficulties involved with this decision. What was surprising was that the social and mutual support ties are strong and social gatherings and engagement are taken very seriously on the island.

Children

During our study, children in remote mountain areas expressed that they face the consequences of the remoteness of their villages. However, as the children noted during the focus groups, school buses are subsidised by the regional authority and are free of charge to the pupils. The bus passes through many villages collecting pupils, but these routes also include the most remote places often resulting in a rather time-consuming ride (up to one hour). School buses very frequently report delays and their schedule is aligned only with the school timings, making them not suitable enough to be a worthwhile choice to support their extracurricular activities. Children mentioned they need to cover even longer distances (up to 45 km) to reach their after-school activities, which in the majority are concentrated in Naxos town. The remoteness, the necessity to travel long distances and limited transport options result in tiredness, difficulties in joining after-school activities and, as a result, they frequently abandon their plans. This leads to a lack of socialising. Despite the difficulties they face, many of the residents of mountain regions do not want to permanently change their place of living. Only the youngest showed a willingness to abandon their village and even the island in order to follow their study and future carrier paths.

Conclusions

The main outcome of the fieldwork confirms that transport infrastructure and available services enable people to develop their social and daily life. Very high car use and ownership have been recorded both on Iraklia and inland Naxos. The road infrastructure is poorly maintained. Streets are fairly good around Naxos town and the seaside touristic areas, while they are much worse in the mountains.

However, other causal factors regarding the willingness to change and adopt new solutions are the mindset and attitudes of residents: strong individualism in inland Naxos and, on the contrary, a spirit of cooperation in the small community of Iraklia.

Overall, the results concerning the current situation recorded during the field study showed that:

- Travel and transport are an important part of the daily life of rural people to which considerable amounts of personal time are often devoted due to long distances to get access to services/work/extracurricular activities.
- Public transport services are poor or unavailable for remote areas (as in the case of Iraklia) and there is no basic infrastructure for the disabled and elderly.
- Private cars are the most popular mode of transport on Naxos, especially in the mountain areas.
- The only official on-demand service on the island is a taxi service, but the local people do not tend to use it very often, as it is too expensive for them.
- There is a strong dependency on the supply centre, i.e. Hora (on Naxos). Sea connections in the whole Small Cyclades are also an issue.
- Informal free-of-charge car-sharing is very popular covering people's basic needs, usually operated by neighbours or relatives.
- Cycling and walking are not popular transport modes due to the mountainous topography of the place, the lack of appropriate infrastructure and safety concerns (e.g. dangerous driving, no cycling culture). Motorbikes are used much more in comparison.

As focus groups stated, travel outside Naxos is necessary for all the residents to reach services that are not available on the island. This results in the residents being fully dependent on the maritime transport schedules and weather conditions. Ferry boats are quite frequent in the summer, but ticket prices are considered high by the residents. Flying is becoming more and more popular for travel outside Naxos (e.g. to Athens) due to the denser schedule and lower costs (sometimes even lower than ferry boats). Locals also use sea taxis to reach nearby islands to visit friends, to deal with legal issues (on the island of Syros, the capital of the Cyclades) as well as for

health reasons (to reach a bigger hospital). There are three medical boats for urgent health issues, but sometimes there is no driver. In some remote areas, there are serious safety issues with small ports that cannot be used, e.g. due to bad weather conditions.

Overall, the link between the economic situation of the islanders and transport disadvantages is also relevant to their ability to support their mobility via other means. Transport conditions are difficult. The location of residents influences the volume and quality of their mobility patterns and, depending on what is offered by their administration, transport and travel can often be a drain on the energy and resources of the rural poor and remote residents. On top of this, the end of the tourist season also means reduced trips for residents, thus making it difficult for non-drivers to be transported and mainly the less advantaged and low-income residents suffer the most.

Note

- 1 Please see the [introduction](#) to this volume regarding the contextualisation and methodology of this research.

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