
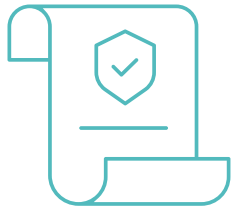




COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation
dynamics Research and Modelling



**COVID-19
Governmental
responses and
challenges: The case study
of low socio-economic status
citizens in Greece**

Policy Brief: 1
October 2023

Authors

Ioannis Bagkatzounis, Ioannis Konstantopoulos, Anna Tsekoura
(KEMEA)

To cite this report: Bagkatzounis I., Konstantopoulos I. & Tsekoura A. (2023) COVID-19 Governmental responses and challenges: The case study of low socio-economic status citizens in Greece, Policy Report 1, October 2023. COVINFORM H2020 Project No. 101016247.

Disclaimer

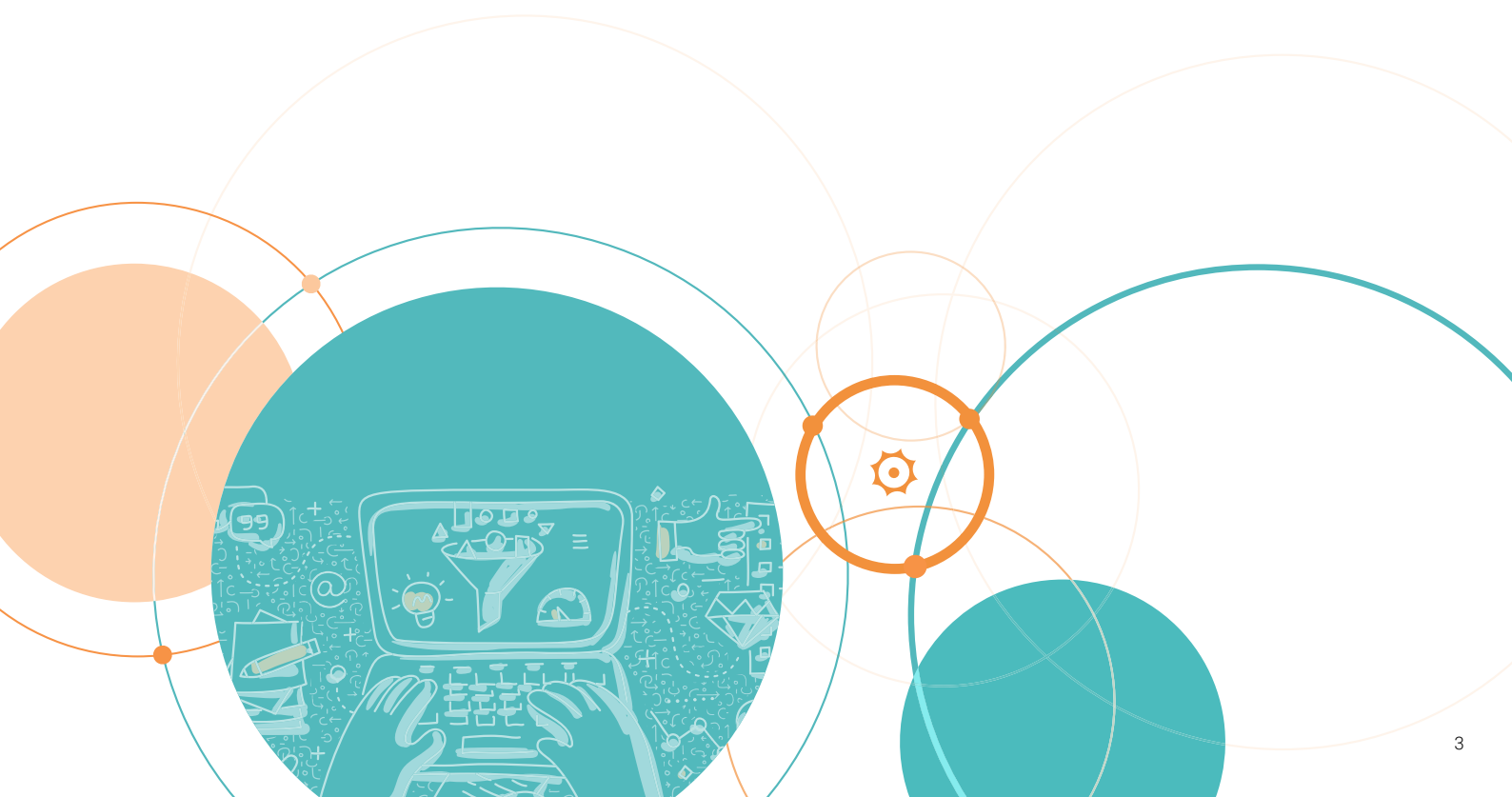
Disclaimer: The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the authors, and in no way represents the view of the European Commission or its services.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 101016247.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
COVID-19 Governmental responses and challenges: The case study of low socio-economic status citizens in Greece	5
Governmental responses: effectiveness, impact, challenges and critique – Low SES citizens struggle to making meets end during COVID-19, Welfare system during crises should be more encompassing, Lack of adequate governmental support - a by-product of a long-term social issue	6
Governmental Support: effective and ineffective measures, desired support, bureaucratic challenges and a substitute approach to overcome systemic weaknesses	8
Vulnerability: A multidimensional issue that has been exuberated by COVID-19 and systemic weaknesses, lack of welfare protocols may increase the vulnerabilities of low SES citizens, movement restriction policies can lead to severe unintended outcomes such as mental and physical health deterioration	10
Summary of key findings	12
List of Policy Recommendations	12
References	15
The COVINFORM project	16



Executive Summary

The COVINFORM project has thoroughly examined the multiple socio-economic, cultural and legal, dynamics within the status quo of contemporary EU target social contexts, governance systems, resource units and their responses in social areas of interaction which subsequently led to outcomes generated during and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy brief will examine these events, as well as the vulnerable groups that were severely impacted by the multiple negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEMEA engaged in qualitative research to shed light on the daily challenges that low socio-economic status citizens faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main themes of research revolve around their perception and critique of the effectiveness and efficiency of governmental responses, as well as vulnerability and the ways COVID-19 impacted their quality of life.

Introduction

The COVINFORM project aims to conduct comprehensive research to identify and thoroughly examine the impact of COVID-19 on socio-political, legal, economic, and cultural levels. The project's intended outcomes include identifying the subsequent consequences resulting from implemented responses and mitigation policies, while simultaneously unravelling the methods and means of societal interactions among social units and stakeholders within European governance systems.

Low socio-economic status citizens are part of the vulnerable groups umbrella; therefore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe and multidimensional. Even before the crisis, vulnerable citizens were exposed to daily socio-economic challenges due to their status or unique characteristics, often being overlooked or lacking society's support.

This policy brief holds particular importance and relevance for decision-makers, policy experts, scholars, and the general public. It aims to

- Were the implemented policies effective and efficient?
- What was their impact on low socio-economic status citizens and what could be improved?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its measures is encouraged to be researched further, particularly in relation to these residents and their coping mechanisms, as well as the post-pandemic impact in their quality of life. Concluding, this brief will examine the effectiveness of policies as well as challenges. Twelve interviews took place with low socio-economic status citizens, based on open ended questions and generated subsequent recommendations for policy and decision makers.

thoroughly examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implemented policies on the daily lives of vulnerable citizens, especially those with low socio-economic status in Greece. This brief can also serve as a starting point, encouraging the academic community to conduct additional research. It also urges decision-makers and policy experts to evaluate and tailor implemented measures while considering the challenges and characteristics of citizens who may be socially marginalized. This approach can lead to the development of more comprehensive social policies during and beyond health crises.

This brief allows decision-makers and policy experts to examine the primary challenges faced by low SES citizens, analyze the main findings, and consider the generated recommendations for incorporation into national response mechanisms. This will contribute to the development of more holistic and encompassing EU strategies for crisis response. The policy brief aims to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of national crisis management, as decision and policy makers are expected to gain

a deeper understanding of the most vulnerable groups, such as low SES citizens, during a long-term widespread pandemic.

The key questions presented in this brief are as follows: How has COVID-19 impacted the daily lives of vulnerable groups, particularly those with low socio-economic status? What are the mismatches or inconsistencies between crisis management policies, the implementation of regulations, and their impact on low socio-economic citizens? What are the main findings, lessons learned, and recommendations derived from this policy brief?

Governmental mechanisms have interpreted vulnerability without adhering to a pan-European approach during the various pandemic phases. Therefore, particularly during the first COVID-19 phase, many vulnerable citizens potentially did not receive adequate socio-economic support from the governmental response mechanism, while systemic governmental weaknesses became more apparent. What are the main findings, and what lessons can be learned from the lived experiences of low socio-economic status citizens in Greece during COVID-19?

COVID-19 Governmental responses and challenges: The case study of low socio-economic status citizens in Greece

The COVINFORM project examines the multidimensional impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the project, consortium partners engaged in in-depth research, particularly examining the vulnerability of groups that were more exposed to the impact and consequences of COVID-19. The Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) conducted research on the effectiveness and efficiency rate of governmental responses as well as vulnerability indicators in relation to low socio-economic status citizens that reside in Greece during COVID-19. Data of this report was acquired via qualitative research, which included the participation of 12 low socio-economic status citizens that reside in Greece who were inquired to answer a series of relevant open-ended questions. This policy brief will focus on the following thematic areas, part of the aforementioned interviews:

- 1.** What is the impact and relevant consequences of governmental responses during COVID-19? What were the challenges that low socio-economic citizens faced during COVID-19?
- 2.** What is the perceived effectiveness and efficiency rate of governmental support?
- 3.** How low socio-economic citizens perceive vulnerability and in what ways has their vulnerability been impacted by COVID-19?

Governmental responses: effectiveness, impact, challenges and critique – Low SES citizens struggle to making meets end during COVID-19, Welfare system during crises should be more encompassing, Lack of adequate governmental support - a by-product of a long-term social issue

The primary finding in this section is that all participants in this study expressed a negative opinion of governmental responses, especially during the initial phase. In some cases, interviewees even suggested a complete absence of governmental support for their families, a situation they had grown accustomed to even before the pandemic. The impact and negative consequences of COVID-19 and governmental responses were experienced in the early phases of the pandemic from both socio-economic and health perspectives. Specifically:

“I haven’t received any support from organizations or the government. Even when I called the school administration when I realized that there are 25 young children attending the class, they would say that it is perfectly fine, what kind of support can I expect?...I was really afraid when I heard that a classmate of my child died. They could have let very young children home, they could have operated at different times of the day, and separated children in classes. All of these things can be done without further expenses, I am most frustrated with the neglect and indifference that was demonstrated by the school...Nobody reached out to us, even though we didn’t go outside to the city center which is more crowded. We could go and get a free rapid test but there would be a lot of people waiting so instead we preferred to just go to the pharmacy. The local government doesn’t really do much so it has been expected.... When we got infected, our local hospital did not accept more patients. I had no other choice but to take my child who was vomiting to Athens, after I signed a consent form while snowing and on my personal expenses. I’ve spent a lot of money and never received any assistance. The local hospital would not accept us, even though they could have told us what the doctors in Athens told us. They wouldn’t even examine us.” (Resident_Interview_10_GR)

Another significant finding is that several participants criticized governmental measures that hindered their opportunities to secure stable employment status during COVID-19. They highlighted the challenges they faced in ensuring their social and financial survival, as well as the perceived negative impact of the implemented movement restriction policies.

“A single-parent family and a traditional family, when being through all these hardships, particularly the electrical bills should have been less expensive but due to all these challenges, we received very pricey electrical bills and gas taxes, it’s like rubbing salt on an open wound for every family in our country.” (Resident_Interview_11_GR)

Another key finding regarding governmental responses and implemented measures is the severe consequences and impact on the well-being of low socio-economic citizens, especially single-parent families, who struggle on a daily basis and are simultaneously affected by the lack of substantial welfare assistance. The socially "translucent" state that low SES citizens, particularly single-parent families, find themselves in, has been a long-standing socio-economic issue in Greek society. This highlights the fact that the pandemic has exacerbated systemic weaknesses and socio-economic vulnerabilities. According to respondents, the criteria for securing financial benefits are perceived to be very strict, leaving many citizens in dire need excluded from the support process. This finding holds particular importance, and decision-makers, as well as policy experts, should take it into consideration during the re-evaluation of welfare policies.

“We need more economic assistance, particularly for single-parent families, we are in dire need and we can’t take it anymore. There are people with healthcare issues that limit our working opportunities. The measures and criteria for these benefits are very strict so we cannot work or get the essential needed items or even some benefits that can help us survive. Can’t they do something about the people who are natives so we can find a job? I understand that migrants need work too but daily I see a lot of Greeks that are unemployed while all migrants have jobs. The government can’t request what we owe if there are no jobs or we cannot work or find work.”
(Resident_Interview_4_GR)

“I really wonder how come there are no specialized conditions or facilities that can provide employment opportunities for single-parent families? In the private sector, 90% of the employment opportunities are on a shift basis system, I’ve already experienced what it’s like to be forced to leave or be late at my work so I can take my child for his scheduled therapy in the hospital, while my family cannot assist me with this case, it’s like the State forces us to be left unemployed. My mother encountered the same issues, she told me that there are no benefits for single parents and I remember her talking me to about her work back then, from one area to another so she could work in order to survive. Single parents who want to work, are indeed practically invisible in this State.” (Resident_Interview_11_GR)

Based on the aforementioned findings and testimonies, it is reasonable to conclude that concerning low SES citizens in Greece, governmental responses to COVID-19 had a negative direct and indirect impact on their daily lives. Furthermore, there is an observed lack of substantial support for single-parent families, a phenomenon that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Governmental Support: effective and ineffective measures, desired support, bureaucratic challenges and a substitute approach to overcome systemic weaknesses

The primary finding regarding governmental support for low socio-economic status citizens is the perceived absence of desired support at the local level through information dissemination and community engagement, especially at the municipal level. It is evident that community engagement, particularly by municipalities, is significantly underdeveloped. According to respondents, while in some cases municipalities have engaged to some extent, community interactions have generally been unsatisfactory and ineffective, leading to widespread fear and insecurity due to the lack of guidance over the long term. Participants suggest that they would prefer governmental support through tailored initiatives, transparent information dissemination, and engagement at the municipal level.

“They could have been more systematic and clear in the information they disseminate. I understand that we need to abide by what scientists tell us but if they need time to disseminate that something needs to be done, in the meantime insecurity is generated among us citizens who are clueless about medical science. As a citizen, I would have liked to see a more systematic dissemination of concrete information that wouldn’t change from one day to the other.” (Resident_Interview_11_GR)

“I would like to see municipalities implement meetings between schools, parents, and families. People would benefit greatly from community initiatives, parent meetings, and research. There is a need for psychological support and evaluation for people nowadays more than anything. There are many factors on an individual level that would influence how effective that will be but I assume psychological evaluation, support, and community engagement will be very positive.” (Resident_Interview_3_GR)

“The municipality could certainly do more. They could share information through a local newspaper or leaflets, hold a public speech in a town square and talk about COVID-19 and protective measures, and distribute and conduct PCRs at affordable prices or even free of charge. The financial aspect of testing is very important, particularly for people that had to do two tests per week or even a daily rapid test...I’ve seen that in other municipalities there were some entities that would conduct free-of-charge tests. In our municipality, we would also conduct some tests free of charge, cooperation of EODY and the municipality, but that was only two times during the pandemic. The municipality was non-existent.” (Resident_Interview_6_GR)

Another significant finding, pertaining to governmental support, concerns the substantial number of interviewees who did not receive welfare in the form of emergency benefits to alleviate employment suspensions and ensure their survival. In cases where such support was provided, it was subject to specific rules and conditions that were deemed ineffective and posed challenges. Consequently, several vulnerable citizens were excluded due to bureaucratic issues. This gap in the system is observed to be filled by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), such as the NGO Aggalia, which, according to respondents, plays a significant role in their well-being by providing essential necessities and support.

“As a single parent during the pandemic and prior to this I haven’t received any benefits which are adequate and ensure our survival...I would like to have economic assistance mainly that ensures our survival so that I can raise my children.” (Resident_Interview_4_GR)

“Since you have an income, the government considers that you are doing fine. You must be starving to death so that they can help you otherwise they think that you don’t need support... Both materialistic and psychological support is necessary, due to the fact that the living expenses get much higher as time goes by. They need to support far more families who have a lot of children. Even when I tried to apply for additional economic support, they told me that my income should have been far lower so that I can be a beneficiary. They have very low income-related criteria they need to increase them, particularly when we talk about single-parent families with three and four children who need to have additional classes, pay the rent, and food... we need to have more support.” (Resident_Interview_9_GR)

“Even though I was entitled to COVID-19 economic assistance, due to bureaucratic issues I did not meet all the necessary criteria thus I didn’t receive any governmental assistance. In my case due to the fact that I didn’t register my credit card for the income of my business, it would appear that I didn’t have any income in the system, therefore the government did not give me any economic assistance.” (Resident_Interview_8_GR)

Specifically, participants are seen to emphasize the importance of support provided by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as an alternative source of assistance in the absence or insufficiency of governmental support, encompassing both services and material products.

“We received assistance from the social food ban, which is community-based but apart from that we didn’t receive any support from the public sector. Moreover, we received support, psychological and materialistic support from Aggalia, which tended to the immediate needs of my son such as food. There was also psychological support from our local community a few times, in a form of consultation with a psychologist, which was important but it didn’t have the frequency we needed.” (Resident_interview_11_GR)

Vulnerability: A multidimensional issue that has been exuberated by COVID-19 and systemic weaknesses, lack of welfare protocols may increase the vulnerabilities of low SES citizens, movement restriction policies can lead to severe unintended outcomes such as mental and physical health deterioration

The primary finding in this section underscores that vulnerability is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing socio-economic, legal, cultural, and health factors. Furthermore, it is evident that COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, which were magnified by systemic weaknesses, and has also given rise to new vulnerabilities related to the consequences of COVID-19 policies. An important issue highlighted is the absence of a protective mechanism for low socio-economic status citizens, particularly in securing accommodation during the pandemic. This is significant because many individuals were unable to retain employment due to governmental policies and inadequate mitigation measures.

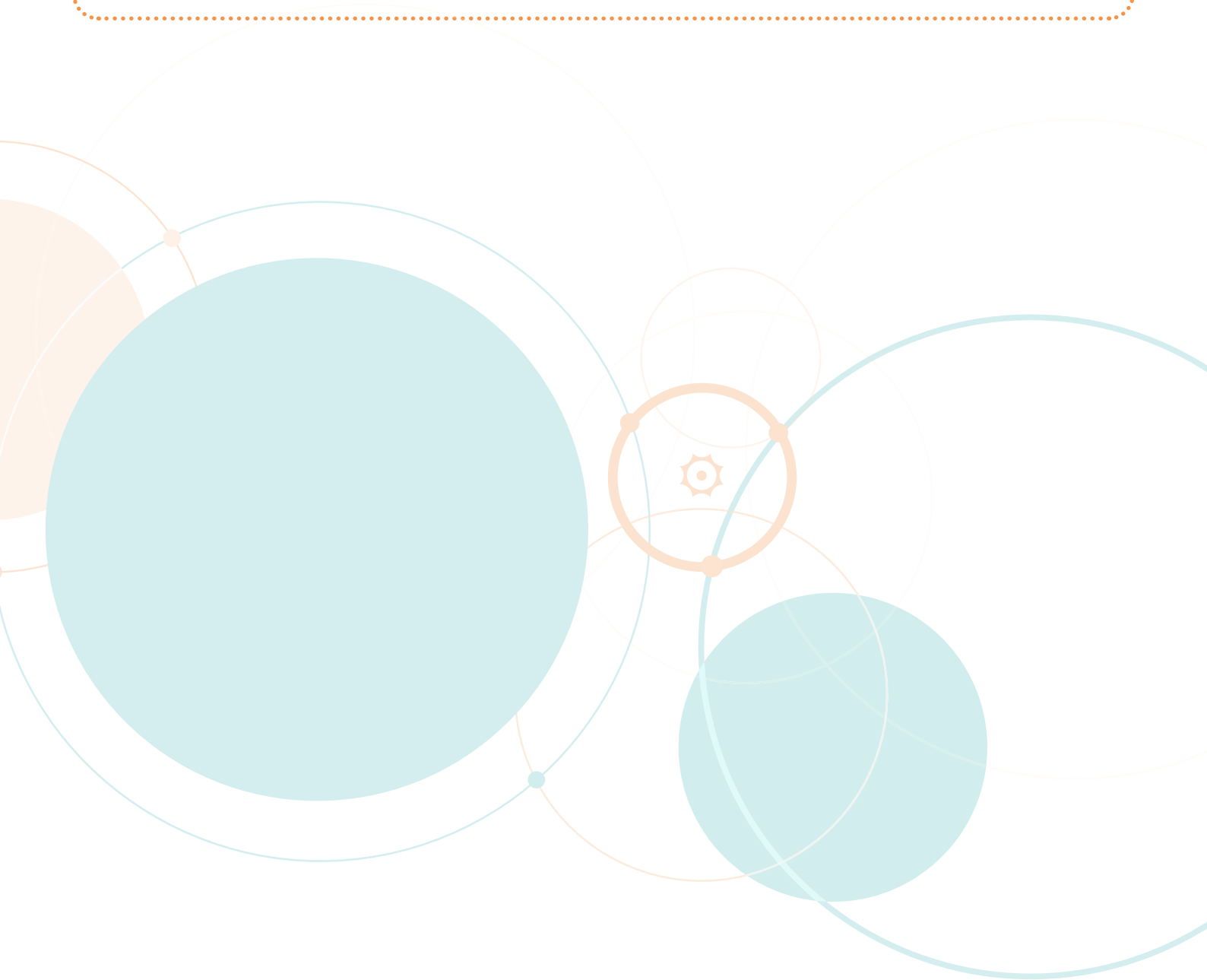
“My former landlord demanded I give him the rent which was due but since the State suspends my employment activities, they should offer me legal protection for the whole year just as they demand I stop working and not just the first few months. There was a legal gap and if u have observed society has been made poorer, we have an energy crisis nowadays, what should we be expecting from now on?” (Resident _interview_11_GR)

The social vulnerability of low SES citizens was further exacerbated by the drastic shift in societal interactions, even with individuals in their immediate environment. This was a result of widespread fear, the absence of clear information, and the consequences of movement restriction policies. These living conditions contributed to the deterioration of the mental and physical well-being of several participants.

“This sudden change really influenced me in a negative way, particularly the suspension of my work as it was the main income and that’s all I had in order to survive with my kids. We coped with the situation by listening to music, and playing with my children nevertheless, I realized that the first phase had its toll on my mental and physical state during and after the second lockdown which was much more relaxed. I also had to go to a physiotherapist and realized how tense I really was. I had very intense symptoms of prolonged stress and anxiety and came to realize it when I relaxed. I could not collapse, either mentally or psychically, due to the fact that my family need to survive.” (Resident _interview_11_GR)

“I felt a widespread fear from a healthcare perspective which turned into fear about our economy because when you see that all businesses close and the business that you tried to start simply ceases to operate due to a factor that is beyond your power or simply because it doesn’t depend on how well you do your job, I’ve felt a great injustice as I’ve been gathering funds for a long time so I can start something on my own, I felt that someone comes and destroys my efforts.” (Resident_interview_1_GR)

“You feel lonely...I won’t let it negatively influence me but it’s sad to see that there is no governmental agency that will support us. Some elderly people need support much more than me.” (Resident_interview_6_GR)



Summary of key findings



- **Governmental Responses: impact, challenges, and critique:** Low SES citizens are struggling to make ends meet during COVID-19 due to the lack of accessible welfare policies. The welfare system during crises should be more comprehensive, as the absence of adequate governmental support can be a consequence of a long-standing social issue for single-parent families among low SES citizens.
- **Governmental Support: effective and ineffective measures:** A grassroots collection of opinions regarding desired support can yield valuable insights for policy development. Bureaucratic challenges can leave socio-economically vulnerable citizens stranded in times of need. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can serve as an alternative approach to address systemic weaknesses.
- **Vulnerability:** Vulnerability is a complex issue magnified by COVID-19 and systemic deficiencies. The absence of welfare protocols may heighten the vulnerabilities of low SES citizens, while movement restriction policies can lead to unintended consequences such as deteriorating mental and physical health.

List of Policy Recommendations



In this section, we will present the main lessons learned and recommendations:

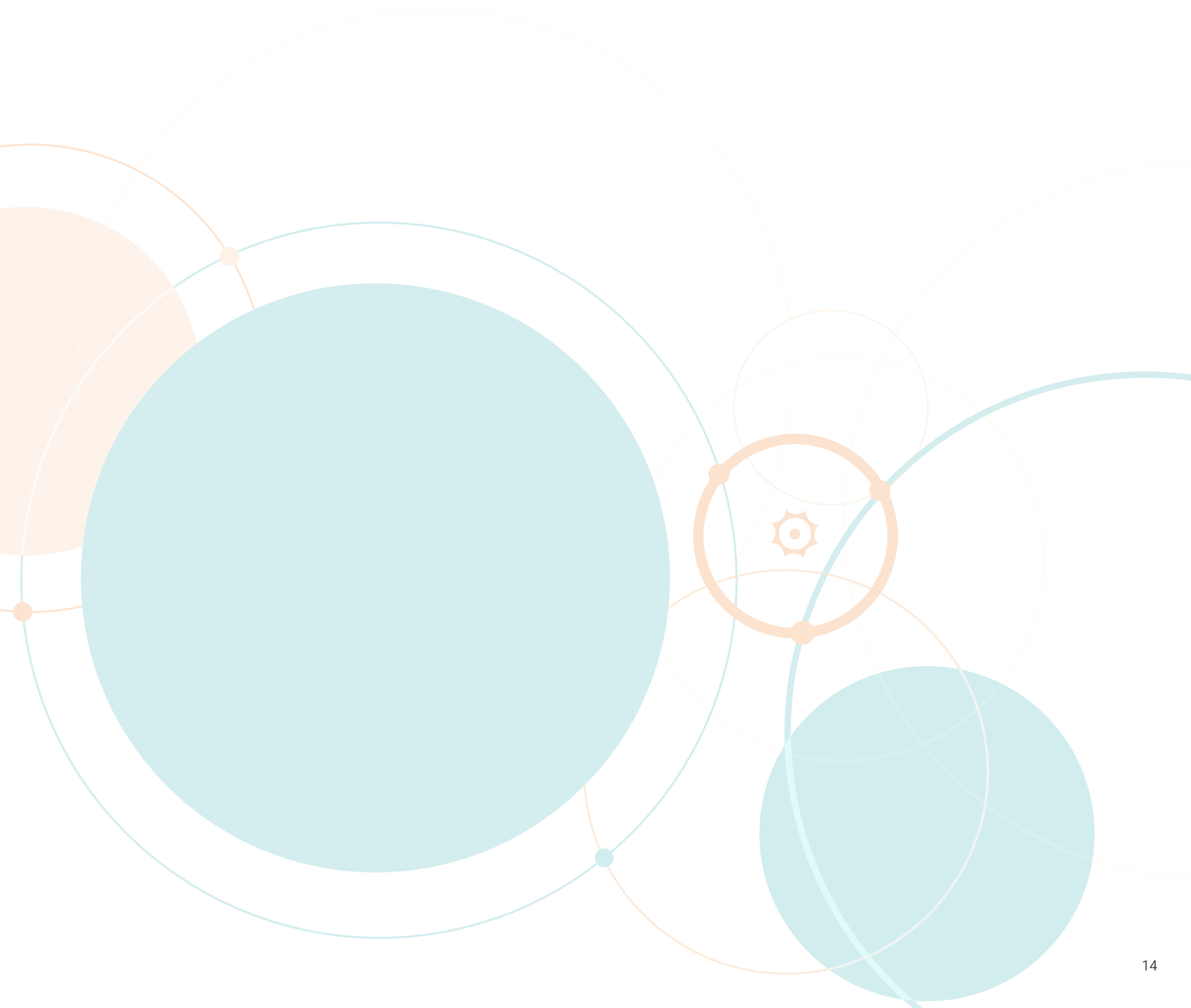
Lessons Learned:

- Vulnerability is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing socio-economic, health, legal, and cultural indicators. It has been exacerbated by COVID-19, systemic weaknesses, and inefficient policies, resulting in both expected and unexpected outcomes.
- Low SES citizens constitute a subset of the broader vulnerable population. In Greece, they are often considered "societally translucent," meaning they are frequently neglected or unintentionally overlooked during policy implementation. This group faces vulnerability and well-being challenges in their daily lives, even before the onset of COVID-19, leading to a lingering feeling of abandonment by the state.
- The impact of COVID-19, policies, and implemented measures on low socio-economic citizens is predominantly viewed as ineffective, inefficient, and negative due to the absence of a comprehensive welfare strategy.

Recommendations:

- Decision makers and policy experts are strongly advised to conduct a thorough re-evaluation of welfare policies and mitigation measures for health crises. This evaluation should take into account the unique characteristics of vulnerable groups, including low SES citizens, such as single-parent families. Stakeholders should develop more comprehensive welfare strategies and re-examine inclusion criteria for potential beneficiaries.
- Stakeholders should engage with communities through frequent initiatives and should disseminate relevant information in a clear and understandable manner to overcome educational challenges. Recognizing that many single-parent families have limited available time, information should be concise, precise, and not subject to frequent changes.
- Government mechanisms should consider the employment challenges faced by low SES citizens, particularly single parents who may be the sole providers for their families. They should provide substantial materialistic support in the form of benefits and essential items, as well as psychological support if employment is suspended. Moreover, a post-pandemic socio-economic strategy should include a re-introduction to employment plan. This could involve governmental mechanisms partially covering the monthly wages of beneficiaries and encouraging business owners to employ them, potentially through tax incentives.
- Stakeholders are encouraged to establish partnerships with strategic partners, such as NGOs, that played a significant role in supplementing governmental efforts during the pandemic. Collaboration between the public and private sectors can lead to more effective and efficient mitigation of socio-economic, health, legal, and cultural impacts during health crises.

- National legislative bodies, policy experts, and decision makers should examine and develop a legal framework to protect citizens during periods of widespread fear and crisis. Weaknesses in the current legal framework, such as respondents experiencing additional emotional stress due to financial uncertainty and landlord pressure, should be addressed. The government should implement welfare safety measures to ensure the survival of vulnerable citizens, especially regarding accommodation, healthcare, and the provision of essential items.
- Decision makers and policy experts should exercise caution when implementing movement restriction policies, such as curfews, due to their unforeseen negative consequences on the socio-economic status and physical and mental well-being of vulnerable citizens. Stakeholders should avoid prolonged curfews and instead develop de-escalation mechanisms to protect citizens while simultaneously limiting the spread of contagious viruses like COVID-19.



References

a. Websites

<https://www.covinform.eu/>

b. Deliverables

WP4 – D4.1 Baseline report: Governmental responses

WP4 – D4.2 Research design: Governmental responses

WP4 – D4.3 Analysis: Government responses to COVID-19 and impact assessment

WP4 – D4.4 Synthesis and lessons learnt on governmental responses and impacts

WP4 – D4.5 Baseline report: Governmental responses – updated M22

WP4 – D4.6 Research design: Governmental responses - update M26

WP4 – D4.7 Analysis: Government responses to COVID-19 and impact assessment - update M32

WP4 – D4.8 Synthesis and lessons learnt on governmental responses and impacts - update M33

c. Contact

office@covinform.eu

Ioannis Bagkatzounis (KEMEA) - i.bagkatzounis@kemea-research.gr

Ioannis Konstantopoulos (KEMEA) - i.konstantopoulos@kemea-research.gr

Anna Tsekoura (KEMEA) - a.tsekoura@kemea-research.gr

The COVINFORM project

Acronym	COVINFORM
Title	COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation dynamics Research and Modelling
Coordinator	SYNYO GmbH
Reference	101016247
Type	Research and Innovation Action (RIA)
Programme	HORIZON 2020
Topic	SC1-PHE-CORONAVIRUS-2020-2C Behavioural, social and economic impacts of the outbreak response
Start	01 November 2020
Duration	36 months

Contact

Consortium	SYNYO GmbH (SYNYO) , Austria Magen David Adom in Israel (MDA) , Israel Samur Proteccion Civil (SAMUR) , Spain Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) , Italy SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH (SINUS) , Germany Trilateral Research LTD (TRI UK) , UK Trilateral Research LTD (TRI IE) , Ireland Kentro Meleton Asfaleias – Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) , Greece Factor Social Consultoria em Psicossociologia e Ambiente LDA (FS) , Portugal Austrian Red Cross (AUTRC) , Austria Media Diversity Institute (MDI) , UK Societatea Națională de Cruce Rosie Din România – Romanian Red Cross (SNCR) , Romania University of Antwerp (UANTWERPEN) , Belgium Sapienza University of Rome (SAPIENZA) , Italy University Rey Juan Carlos (URJC) , Spain Swansea University (SU) , UK Gotenborg University (UGOT) , Sweden
-------------------	--

