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Factors for Effectiveness of Social Innovation in Urban Agriculture: An Analysis of a Negative Case

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Abstract. The paper offers an analysis of an urban agriculture case in Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria, where the municipality is clearing more than 2 hectares of allotments that have been tolerated on public land for more than 30 years in order to extend the neighbouring park, without involving the evicted allotment users in a discussion about the future of urban agriculture. At the same time, a number of non-governmental organizations are promoting urban agriculture practices as a social innovation that can alleviate pressing urban problems such as poverty and social exclusion. Using two theoretical viewpoints, the text presents this case as an example of the barriers that hinder a social practice that displays all the prerequisites to fully empower its members and be implemented as a meaningful social innovation. The first viewpoint is based on the writings of Moulaert and co-authors, and explores the factors that make social innovations capable of changing social relations in regard to governance, thus enabling satisfaction of the needs and increasing the level of participation of deprived groups in society by boosting the civic capability to access required resources (Moulaert et al., 2005). The second viewpoint gives grounds for analysing public space as a common good that exists in three interrelated but distinct forms: perceived, conceived and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991, 1996). Borrowing from Lefebvre's model, the paper analyses the social processes that characterise the development of urban agriculture practices as a manifestation of "the right to the city" in the sense of civic engagement in the creation of urban space and its physical use.

1. Introduction

Citizen participation is a popular issue in local governance discourse and of long-standing interest to social researchers who analyse a hypothesised declining civic enfranchisement in cities (Sassen, 1996; Wirth, 2005). This disenfranchisement is explained by global restructuring and rescaling of governance leading to (1) more responsibilities being devolved to local institutions but power being taken on by supranational agents that are not accountable to local residents (Purcell, 2002), as well as (2) a growing political apathy among citizens due to political systems that have entrenched the political influence of economic elites at the expense of the empowerment of social groups that are less well-off (Bartels, 2008; Levinson, 2010). The growing burden and difficulties of local governance to provide public services has led to a weakening of the social safety net, including municipalities' resignation from a number of food-related services such as providing food for schools and kindergartens, hospitals, etc. and devolving them to private companies or discontinuing them completely and withdrawing from any public responsibility that is not absolutely necessary, such as planning and implementing long-term food security policies, dedicating public land for urban gardening, etc. (Purcell, 2002; Pickard, 2016).

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In this context of widening gaps in local service provision and growing interest on behalf of the non-governmental sector towards innovative ways to address the problems of disadvantaged and excluded social groups, urban agriculture (UA) has attracted attention as a strategy to tackle urban hunger and improve the quality of life of the urban poor (Dubelling et al., 2010). It is often hailed as a multifunctional tool to help not only with food security and environmental challenges the cities are facing, but also to solve a range of socio-economic issues of people at risk of poverty, especially when they collaborate, form alliances and organize bottom-up initiatives (Walliman, 2015; Lohrberg et al., 2016). The social innovation potential of urban agriculture practices is often referred to in policy documents and the civil sector agenda (Allen, 2007; Krikser et al. 2016; Cunk et al., 2017). While there are many examples of positive effects of urban agriculture on the well-being of social groups in crises, such as the unemployed, disabled, single parent households etc. (Bakker et al., 2000; Partalidou and Anthopoulou, 2017), it is far from self-evident that such practices lead directly to improved economic standing and social integration. On the contrary – in-depth studies often reveal that the novelty of urban agriculture attracts predominantly the wealthier, more educated and socially secure urban dwellers while the ones with less financial and social resources face greater difficulties in accessing the benefits of urban farming (Bünger, 2014). While urban agriculture is thought to be able to offer a wide variety of opportunities to the disadvantaged citizens, a growing body of research shows they often face insurmountable difficulties to access land and resources to produce food, let alone build a business. Such difficulties include lack of time due to multiple job engagements and too little financial buffers to allow for investment in food that will take time to grow (SACN, 2015). Exclusion, therefore, is multidimensional: the exclusion in one sphere of life often snowballs into exclusion from other social processes (Madanipour, 2007). This also applies to UA practices which are considered to be socially innovative but are not linked to improved quality of life of local communities as a whole (Pickard et al., 2017). Therefore, it is very important to study those characteristics of UA initiatives that do not only improve individual people and households' conditions, but bring about wider social benefits and alleviate systemic problems such as social inequalities and civic disenfranchisement. When the civil sector looks towards urban agriculture as a possible tool to empower citizens and bring about positive change in local social cohesion, inclusiveness and participation, a number of factors need to be taken into account that can turn food production on urban land into true social innovation with wider effects. These factors will be discussed by analysing a negative example of a unique Bulgarian allotment site that provided locals with food, leisure and recreational outdoor activities for about 30 years. Given the increased interest of the civil sector in developing similar UA practices as a social innovation in Bulgaria, it is important to study what makes them sustainable and worthy of the description “social innovation”.

Motivated by ongoing research on the social effects of grassroots UA practices in a number of communities in Bulgaria, this paper aims to present a case that demonstrates some enabling and disabling factors for social innovations in UA. While a common practice such as urban agriculture may provide a number of benefits to the individuals who engage in it, I will investigate the conditions needed for it to be recognized as having an impact on the wider community and ultimately – as a social innovation. This will be done by shedding light on the relations between local citizens and local authorities in terms of distribution of power in the decision-making process of how public resources are managed, accessed and utilized. How these processes evolve, what are some of the deficits of social practices that prevent them from developing empowered and resilient communities through urban agriculture, and how to overcome them so that genuine social

innovations are fostered, are the questions that the article aims to answer by analysing the case of UA activities in the Trakia neighbourhood in Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria.

2. Context: A history of civic disenfranchisement in food production and urban governance

When it comes to the agri-food system, Bulgarian history exhibits a time-compressed agricultural reform – starting from the collectivisation of private land and productive animals after 1945, through the restitution of land in the 1990s, to the present consolidation of agricultural areas, cultivated by large farmers renting land from multiple heirs who have settled in the cities, many of them struggling financially and having access to lower quality of food compared to their rural counterparts. The process of collectivisation, although coercing landowners into joining the so-called *labour-cooperative agricultural holdings*,¹ preserved the ownership status of farmers and did not disenfranchise them from the management process of the agricultural work. This changed when these holdings were consolidated into the so-called *agro-industrial complexes* in the 1960s, when the status of the farmers changed from cooperative members to hired workers (Central Cooperative Union, 1986; Creed, 2005). The traditional social fabric of cohesion, solidarity and mutual help started to unravel with the villagers' loss of their traditional commitment to their land; its management was being taken away from them and substituted by a more bureaucratic, top-down system of governance that isolated people from the decisions that affected their communities (Whitaker, 1979; Pickard, 2013). The gradual depopulation of villages continues up to the present day, but unlike many other countries where the social development of cities took place over a longer period of time and to an extent cushioned the social and economic stress that agricultural modernisation had on the agricultural smallholders, this process happened too fast for Bulgarian cities to adopt their new dwellers who did not have the opportunity to set up alternative, resilient urban communities (Dobрева and Kozuharova, 2008). The period described is characterised not only by isolating rural inhabitants from their land and from food production, but also by setting up a model of urban planning and development that isolated citizens from the decision-making processes of local governance in urban settlements.² Thus, when one of the largest waves of rural people left the villages in the 1970s, cut off from the governance of their communities, they settled in urban areas where citizens were just as disenfranchised from local governance. This continued until the fall of the socialist regime, but the transition period did not see a significant rise in civic participation, although formal mechanisms that allowed it were broadened (Dimitrova, 2005). In fact, the European Social Survey has shown that since 2006, the gap between the citizens and local and national governance in the country has been not only gradually widening, but it is the worst in the whole of Europe (Tilkidjiev and Dimova, 2010). At present, this over 70-year history of excluding citizens from urban community development, has led to civic and political apathy (ibid.), lack of community identity and ability to identify and solve social problems from the bottom up, and absence of civic mobilization and collective action (Pickard, 2016). Thus, when individuals and households are faced with socially significant problems, such as poverty, food provision, social exclusion, they manage on their own, instead of cooperating to claim public aid

1 A process that was predominantly enforced by the socialist regime but presented as being entirely voluntary (Gruev, 2009).

2 Central planning was not only applied to the socialist economy, but to local development as well, whereby a council of experts designed urban spaces to fit into a one-size-fits-all development plans that included everything that was deemed needed in a neighbourhood – accommodation, education and health facilities, sports and recreation, as well as cultural buildings (Dandolova, 2005; Dimitrova, 2005).

resources. While poverty is affecting a growing number of Bulgarians, a lot of them still rely on food supplies from relatives from the countryside, but they rarely view the cities fit for producing food. On the other hand, when some citizens do, and areas of underused public spaces and wasteland are recognised by locals as an alternative for food production, urban authorities have been consistently ignoring the opportunities to support local food security initiatives (Koleva and Pickard, 2015). Food is only starting to become recognised as a political and civil issue (Dubelling et al., 2010; Stock et al., 2015), and civic participation in food regulation is only at an early stage of development.

In this article I explore this phenomenon by looking at the case of the Trakia neighbourhood in Plovdiv. Here, there are both productive public spaces³ and the need for them by social groups that could improve their access to food and social inclusion by making use of those spaces. I analyse who the actors are who can transform the public space, and what the required attributes of social action are in order to bring about change in governance and the use of public space from the bottom up. I also explore the role of social innovations in driving change by asking: *what are the factors that make social innovation a key process in changing governance and public space from the bottom up?* UA practices are hailed as a socially innovative approach to solving a number of problems that the urban disadvantaged groups face. In order to understand this claim, the next section presents a theoretical overview of what constitutes a social innovation together with a conceptual framing of the modes of social constructions and use of space.

3. Theoretical framework

Having in mind the multitude of definitions of innovations (most of them focusing on the economic and technical efficiency of businesses and industries),⁴ it is important to underline the inherent focus the term “social innovations” has on the processes that lead to social change (Gerometta et al. 2005; Moulaert et al., 2007; Franz et al., 2012; Mieg and Töpfer, 2013; Schubert, 2014). The main theoretical and empirical interest of this paper will be this focus on the mechanisms of social actions to bring about desired systemic transformations in social relations and structures. It scrutinizes the characteristics that classify a social action as a social innovation in the light of a growing number of initiatives calling themselves by that name in order to qualify for funds and subsidies fostering social innovations. What makes an initiative a true social innovation is that it leads to desired changes in the ways people act, in their roles, expectations, achievements, rights and duties and in the norms they follow (Franz et al., 2012). “An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it... is socially accepted and diffused widely throughout society or in certain societal sub-areas... and ultimately institutionalized as new social practice or made routine” (ibid., p. 47).

While in his seminal work on the theoretical differentiation between technical (material) and social (cultural) innovations, William Ogburn defines them both as drivers of social change – whereby material innovations precede cultural innovations – it is specifically the cultural, or social innovations that are needed to adapt societies to the material and technological changes (Ogburn, 1964). As Schubert points out, this is an early conceptualising of innovations that does not focus on defining and categorizing them, but on studying the processes that they entail, especially in their complexity and integrity (Schubert, 2014, p. 3). This seeming neglect of a strict differentiation of social from technical innovations and further avoiding the specific definitions of social innovations, is dictated by the diverse research needs that the concept is used for.

3 Using the term based on Axel Timpe’s understanding of productive parks, where agriculture is an integral land-use (Timpe, 2017:7).

4 Schumpeter 1949; Zapf 1989; Mumford 2002, etc.

Additionally, it highlights the importance of recognising that a social innovation is any practice that “can create social value beyond the capability of existing systems”. It should therefore not be so much a question of definition, but recognition and understanding that through bottom-up as well as top-down actions, positive social change can be brought about that cannot be achieved by other means (Adams and Hess, 2010).

From this starting point, the paper needs to define a theoretical framework that allows the analysis of social innovations as processes of social change.

Apart from Ogburn, who sees social innovations (or inventions) as the collective knowledge and know-how achieved by a society in order to achieve some form of cultural or technical change (Neumeier, 2012), Wolfgang Zapf also sees them as practices that direct social change through a “concentration of changes of attitude” that is related to a superiority of the new ways “in comparison to traditional methods so that the imitation of the new method or solution seems to make sense” (Neumeier, 2012, p.51). This might happen by generating and implementing new strategies about improved social relations and organisation (Mumford, 2002), facilitated by factors which are internal or external to the innovating community (Neumeier, 2012), and which are rooted in specific local contexts (Innobasque, 2013, p. 2).

Bearing in mind the broad and diverse literature on social innovations, it is evident that the shared scholarly understanding of the term, includes novelty, deliberate action⁵ in the direction of social change, and collectivity as inherent characteristics of social innovations. Therefore, one could conclude that social innovations entail a change of attitude of a critical mass of involved actors, who consciously relate to a common goal that results in a positive change in the current social status quo, including the structure and function of social relations and local governance mechanisms and principles.

In studying the urban agriculture practices in Trakia, it is important to track the precise mechanisms, relations and social context of these practices that can answer the question if they can truly be categorized as social innovations, despite media coverage that presents similar initiatives as such. To this end, a theoretical perspective is needed that provides the analytical tools to answer the questions: How does gardening in an urban area provide a new approach to social problems? Are these problems identified as common social concern by the community? And, what types of changes can it bring about? These indicate the way the community can function and participate in the local decision-making processes.

Moulaert et al. (2005) offer a suitable frame for such a discussion. It sets the analysis in the context of the potential of a social innovation to satisfy currently unsatisfied social and human needs (how it can bring about socially significant change that would address current deficits), what are the factors that enable social innovations to change social relations in regards to governance, thus enabling the needs to be satisfied and increasing the level of participation of deprived groups in society by boosting the civic capability to access resources that are needed in a new way. The approach of Moulaert et al. is of particular benefit for this analysis, as it aims to provide an analytical tool for empirical research of local community development and governance in an urban setting. Furthermore, it proposes a theoretical basis for analysis of social inclusion, giving a voice to politically excluded groups on different levels, including a spatial one (p. 1970). This approach is very well suited to analysing the local, spatial manifestation of a process of local development that goes in two directions (on the one hand, initiated by the citizens addressing their everyday household problems; on the other, a top-down process of local spatial development initiated by

5 They are not “teleological” but are a result of focused collective action (Neumeier, 2012)

local authorities on the basis of experts' decisions on how to plan public space without consulting the citizens).

According to this theoretical frame, social innovations are contextual and refer "to those changes in agendas, agency and institutions that lead to a better inclusion of excluded groups and individuals in various spheres of society at various spatial scales" (Moulaert et al. 2005, p. 1973). This concept is explained by a further focus on the cleavages between old and new social orders, specifically when the change involves the fighting for rights of disadvantaged groups: "Social innovation is very strongly a matter of process innovation, i.e. changes in the dynamics of social relations, including power relations. As social innovation is about social inclusion, it is also about countering or overcoming conservative forces that are eager to strengthen or preserve social exclusion situations." (Moulaert et al. 2005, p. 1978). Moulaert and co-authors stress that after the comeback of social exclusion and the deepening rifts between community initiatives and the central state, the interest of academics and community development practitioners has been re-focusing on the endogenous resources of local communities that can help them find a way out of social disintegration. Social innovations, in contrast to institutionalized means of addressing urban communities' problems, harness the ability of local groups to act in solidarity and unite their resources in the struggle to reclaim their right to participate in local governance (ibid.).

The understanding of Moulaert et al. of social innovations therefore explicitly refers to a tool for achieving social justice as a multidimensional process of social change (Neumeier, 2012), which gives grounds to conclude that social innovations in their interpretation are not only novel forms of social action, aiming to bring about satisfaction of unmet social needs, but they contribute to the participation, inclusion and satisfying the needs of excluded, disadvantaged social groups. In accordance with this approach, the text will adhere to the understanding of social innovations as: processes driven from below that bring about change in social relations and networks, so that previously unmet social needs are satisfied; the civil participation in governance of deprived social groups is boosted; and governance itself is improved. It has been widely accepted that the participation of those whose needs are to be met is crucial if the desired social change is to be sustainable (Mieg and Töpfer, 2013; Walliman, 2015). This may be difficult for those who have no experience with holding power or resources to drive change and often they do not have the skills required to "shake loose" the constraints imposed by the status quo (Moore and Westley, 2014). This is why it is considered that networks can be the means to overcome the resource scarcity of the disadvantaged groups – as a pool of shared resources that can be harnessed from below. Based on Moulaert et al.'s presumption that it is the grassroots that need to initiate and push through the social changes, and that rarely a single individual possesses the various qualities needed to achieve all the elements of the social innovation (to identify the unmet need, to raise awareness about it, to offer knowledge brokering, to establish relationships and networks, and not least – to prepare the broader context to accept and diffuse the innovation) (ibid.), we must propose that a social innovative practice must be characterized by a network of interrelated practitioners who share a common goal to transform a non-desired situation they share by challenging the existing socio-economic and cultural order of the community.

Choosing to base the analysis on Moulaert's definition of social innovations is also dictated by the subject of the analysis, which is closely related to territorial development. As research has shown, social innovation is very closely linked to integrated area development as an alternative to sectoral top-down strategies in local development and a strategy against poverty in the European community (Moulaert et al. 2005, p. 1973). It is specifically social innovations that contribute to integrating diverse domains of social life (economy, housing, education and training, local

democracy, culture, etc.) by articulating the agencies of social action within the social networks themselves. In this way, the previously mentioned unmet needs are defined and transformation in the social relations of the localities become possible (ibid.).

This framing of social innovations marks a logical theoretical path for studying a local community's actions towards better quality of life. However, an operational difficulty arises when attempting to define community boundaries, specific social actors, and determine if what is good for one community is also good for another one. This is why it is very important to follow the process of achieving a consensus between different actors on what would be a positive change. Here Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1996) offers a very discerning tool to distinguish different approaches to public space that are related to different interests and social positions. His presumption is that public space is a common good that exists in three interrelated but distinct forms: perceived, conceived and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991, 1996). Lefebvre's understanding of the social construction of space helps to analyse the social structure of the system that supports social innovations as understood by Moulaert et al. (2005): Who are the actors? How do they interact? And, what are the factors that enable and disable the socially beneficial use of space so that a social innovation in using urban spaces can produce sustainable and beneficial results?

Lefebvre established a critique of modern cities stating that urban development is a product of the capitalist system (Lefebvre, 1996). According to Lefebvre, every urban space is subjected to planning that is driven by profit-seeking, which has taken away "the right to the city" that belongs not with planners, developers and local governments and administrations, but to those who inhabit and enliven urban space on a daily basis and they are the ones who need to be the main architects of social life. This means they are the ones that should exercise control over public space. As this is not currently the situation in most cities, to organize a reclaiming of the right to the city is a change that fully qualifies as a social innovation in Moulaert et al.'s terms (driven from below, transforming social relations and improving local governance, and ultimately - satisfying unmet social needs of just utilization of public urban space).

Lefebvre sees public space as experienced and created by diverse social agents and in a context of conflicting interests. In this sense, space is created by different actors and in different ways. What he calls 'perceived' space (*le perçu*), is closest to everyday life and the material mode of accepting and utilising space by those who inhabit it daily. The perceived space, according to Lefebvre, is often ignored when creating the so called 'conceived' space (*le conçu*), which is theoretical, distanced from everyday practices and imposed as an approach to using public spaces by cartographers, architects or urbanists. It is this creation of public space where "the practices of social and political power" come alive (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222). In Lefebvre's model, there is a third category of space creation, which is linked to the imagination, collective memory and art, which together preserve and develop the images and models of space. This category of 'lived' space combines the 'perceived' and the 'conceived' space, but it also has the potential of transforming the balance between the two (Shields, 2001). 'Lived' space is not a result, but a process of social construction of space, it is the arena where social actors become conscious of their roles and actions and enter relations and interactions of creating new models of design, purpose and use of social spaces (Pickard, 2016). It is precisely the lived space that incorporates the civic "right to the city", when it is implemented.

Borrowing from Lefebvre's model of a three-way interpretation of social space, urban agriculture in Trakia can be analysed as a potential manifestation of "the right to the city" in the sense of empowering its citizens to create the urban space that fits their needs. It is specifically the conscious and applied "right to the city" that, according to Lefebvre, expresses civic and

democratic construction of space. Using empirical studies of civic participation models in Trakia neighbourhood (One Foundation, 2016; Murad, 2016; Pickard et al. 2017), the analysis can follow how citizens, municipal experts and non-governmental organizations perceive their roles and responsibilities towards shared public space, how they interact and very importantly – what is the place of social innovations in developing urban spaces through urban agriculture in a bottom-up fashion by means of endogenous civil initiatives.

In this way, looking through the prism of civic involvement in using urban green spaces and through the models of the ‘perceived’, ‘conceived’ and ‘lived’ space, the analysis will look for the answers of the questions posed at the beginning of the text: Who are the actors who have the potential to transform public space? How are social needs defined and change elicited? And, to what extent can the UA practices be classified as social innovation?

4. Methodology and results

The text uses primary empirical data and secondary resources on the urban agricultural practices in Trakia. The bulk of information that the analysis is based on was collected as part of research on the modes of interaction between the urban agriculture practising community and local authorities in Trakia. Four in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of Trakia municipality (from the Department of Ecology, the Mayor’s administrative team and the municipal company “Gardens and parks”), eight interviews with gardeners who keep vegetable gardens in the semi-illegal allotments in the periphery of the neighbourhood, three focus groups and group interviews with people living in the neighbourhood, as well as quantitative data from a survey on civic inclusion in the creation of public space, conducted by One Foundation. The survey served the purposes of the festival “ACTION! Useful practices from the panel neighbourhoods”⁶ 2016, and it included 477 people.

In Plovdiv, the second largest city in the country, the Trakia local municipality cleared more than 2 hectares of allotments in order to extend the neighbouring park. During the socialist regime, urban planning of new city areas followed a strict order of completing the functional elements of residential areas. First the residential buildings were constructed, then the health and educational infrastructure was built, followed by shops and other public buildings. In many cases the last elements of the residential puzzles – cultural and recreational spaces, were still unfinished by 1989, although the land they were planned to occupy could not be built up for other purposes (Dandolova, 2005). One such half-completed park is the Lauta Park in the Trakia neighbourhood in Plovdiv. About a third of the planned park space was never landscaped and remained undeveloped. It is on about 2 hectares of this land that local residents started setting up allotment gardens more than 30 years ago. Although they did not have permission to do so from the municipality, they were tolerated and were never troubled by official institutions. The gardeners fenced more than 100 plots, dug wells to provide the plants with water, built sheds and other makeshift facilities and felt they were there to stay; they set up apiaries, planted and grew fruit trees and invested in long-term development of their plots. In 2015 though, the local municipality initiated a landscaping project for the remaining area of the unfinished park and informed the gardeners that their plots would be cleared. By the spring of 2016, half of the urban gardens had been cleared by the municipality’s bulldozers, and some of the gardeners had set up new plots further from the clearing lines, although they knew that this was not a sustainable solution.

⁶ The socialist-style concrete residential buildings are called “panel” blocks, as they are constructed from pre-fabricated wall, floor and ceiling panels that are then only welded together on the construction site.

The eviction of the gardeners is happening without involving them in a dialogue, without discussion about the future of urban agriculture, and without an expert assessment of the comparative social, economic and ecological benefits of garden allotments and a park with three types of trees. While this is happening, a number of non-governmental organizations are attempting to set up new, more “legal” forms of urban agriculture, both in Plovdiv and in other cities in the country, promoting these initiatives as socially innovative projects to help tackle urban food security and community development (Koleva and Pickard, 2015).

4.1. Top-down socio-political context of unmet social needs

Starting to analyse the top-down/bottom-up dynamics of the processes of urban agriculture practices in the Trakia allotments from a social innovation viewpoint, the first step would be to portray the socio-political and historic context it is set in, which creates deficits for certain social groups. As described in the introduction, the lack of civic participation in local governance is broad, pervasive, and has its genesis in the distant past of the country. Additionally, after 1989, the process of democratization did not bring about strengthened citizen participation. Quite the contrary – the perceived freedom of expression and participation was only utilized by commercial actors and businesses who appropriated the right to shape the city through welcome investments that legitimized their disproportionate influence on the decision-making processes in urban planning (Dimitrova, 2005). Although the municipality of Plovdiv has based its 2014–2020 Municipal Development Plan on the idea of sustainable development (Plovdiv Municipality, 2014), this dedication has remained largely a facade, behind which the public good and the interests of a growing share of citizens are being systematically ignored and their chances of taking an active role in shaping the public spaces are constantly shrinking at the expense of newly emerging elites.

The empirical study of the top-down/bottom-up dynamics of public urban space use in Trakia is very telling of the institutional position on the real and desired models of space use, and the interviews with the municipality representatives are very illustrative of the ‘conceived’ space in the neighbourhood. The aforementioned municipal abdication from inclusion of broad civic interests in the planning processes in the city can be easily explained by means of the prolific research in social geography and social science on the global transformation of local governance. This is characterised by growing responsibilities of local authorities following the decentralization of state policies, but without reciprocal provision of funding to implement the actions these new responsibilities entail. Because of this shift in municipal functions from traditionally distributing resources according to the needs of the population, towards financial competition, local governance institutions increasingly adopt business-like models and functions (Purcell, 2002). This leads to a preoccupation with economic efficiency through budget cuts. Economic efficiency often leads to sub-contracting municipal services to private companies that are not accountable to local communities. This is related to a weakening of the influence of local communities, especially disadvantaged ones, on the decision-making process at the local municipal level (*ibid.*, p. 101). In the case of park Lauta in Trakia, the cultivation of the wasteland into vegetable plots, orchards and apiaries was ignored as a possible landscaping reference point – the users of the park (both gardeners and non-gardeners) were not consulted as to what they find aesthetically pleasing and the decision to do away with the existing allotments and substitute them with unproductive space was not one discussed with them. While the greening of the area could have been a decision taken with the participation of the local community, the latter might have also been more active in maintaining it in the long term, instead of a contracted company.

The construction of social space has been fully monopolized by municipality officials, so that Lefebvre's 'conceived' space has literally bulldozed the 'perceived' space out of the neighbourhood's green area. Without discussion with the everyday users of the gardening plots, the space has been designed and landscaped without even a formal evaluation of how it will meet the social, cultural and ecological needs of the local community. This signifies the non-existence of the 'lived' space, and what is more – the disregard of its importance. The interviews with the local environmental and landscaping officials reveal a firm belief that they know and understand well the local community's needs, but the information from the talks with members from this community points otherwise.

This is the context that underlines the exclusion of certain social groups from chances they may have to improve their quality of life – not only by socially inclusive greening of public spaces in the process of food production and sharing, but also in providing food security for households at risk of poverty. Such is the case of an elderly retired man who moved to Plovdiv 15 years ago with his wife to help his daughter who lost her husband in a work accident and was struggling to care for her two young children. This man took an allotment to help produce food for his granddaughters and had been doing so until 2015 when the bulldozers destroyed his garden. He picked up the materials he had used for his old shed and fence and moved them to a new location on the periphery of the allotment gardens where he set up a new garden in the spring of 2016, but he has accepted the fact that the new garden will not last long. The other gardeners are also mostly retired people whose main reason to keep up an allotment is to provide themselves with seasonal and preserved food for the winter, as their incomes are often too low to allow enough nutritious and good quality food. Some of the gardeners keep up their allotments because of the outdoor physical activity it involves, which keeps them active and in good physical condition. Interestingly, as it will be discussed further below, the allotment gardeners do not usually socialize among themselves and their urban agriculture actions are not motivated by a collective spirit, despite the fact that they share a common socio-economic status and local residence.

Although the municipality's development plan acknowledges the deepening deficits in providing an inclusive social environment for disadvantaged groups and the need for improvement of recreational services in the region (Plovdiv municipality, 2014), it does not envisage civic engagement in providing for those needs. Moreover, when it comes to food insecurity, this concept is not recognised at all in the official documents.

While a number of local, national and international non-governmental organizations support urban agriculture as social innovation that has the potential to improve the quality of life of local communities, and the same organizations view the practices in big Bulgarian cities as such innovations, the study shows that there are significant barriers for such activities to flourish fully as social innovations – not only because of top-down suffocating of grassroots initiatives, but also because of social capital deficits at the community level. Here the potential of bottom-up socially innovative practices would be determined by the capability of disadvantaged social groups to identify their common needs and, through collective action, to create novel practices of civic engagement and inclusive local governance.

4.2. The importance of bottom-up capacity to create social change

Following the outlined theoretical understanding of a social innovation, to be considered as such, urban food production in the case of Trakia needs to demonstrate that, apart from providing for the unmet needs of local households, it possesses endogenous qualities of novelty, collectivity and the potential to bring about change in existing social relations and local governance. So far, advocates of urban agriculture in Bulgaria have been pointing only to the first two characteristics

– that it is a new phenomenon⁷ and that it creates conditions for compensating a number of social deficits of local communities, ranging from food insecurity to social inclusion of marginalised social groups (Koleva and Pickard, 2015).

The practice of urban agriculture in Trakia has an evident potential to mobilize local communities around a common goal – not only to provide basic subsistence for their families, but also to combine their efforts in an attempt to obtain the legal rights over the land that they have illegally appropriated decades ago, but have invested in, cultivated and improved. Still, a closer analysis of the relationships between Trakia gardeners shows that the ‘perceived’ space, from their point of view, is not one that is a source of a consolidated and shared communal identity, let alone of cooperativeness and solidarity.

The exclusion of local citizens from the decision-making process in the municipality and the lack of connection between the local green space policy and the proclaimed social goals of the administration⁸ are an emanation of the marginalisation of local communities from influencing the ‘conceived’ space. As explained above, this might be interpreted as a natural consequence of the global processes of disenfranchising citizens from empowerment in local governance. What is curious in the case of Trakia, though, is that the urban gardeners do not seem to identify this as a problem and do not in any way organize collective actions against it – there has not been an articulation of the interests of the ‘perceived’ space at all, neither in personal talks, nor in the public discourse. They are unhappy with the prospect of losing their allotments, but they do not problematize it, do not think of negotiating with the municipality to keep their gardens or have them relocated and do not even contemplate the possible arguments that they have in their favour of preserving the gardens. An explanation of this phenomenon is that this civic disenfranchisement has continued for so long, that people have lost the social sensitivity and the impetus to cooperate and fight for their civil rights in a democratic way (Hjöllund and Svendsen, 2000, p. 3; Fotev, 2009;). An alternative explanation is that there is no congruence between the ‘conceived’ and ‘perceived’ social space: while the municipality does recognise the activities of the allotment gardeners, it is very important to highlight the fact that the latter do not trust the authorities and do not feel they are their legitimate representatives. A few gardeners express their beliefs that the municipality’s budget is not spent well and in the interest of the majority of people, but they do not envisage the option of undertaking collective action to demand a more efficient financial policy of the municipality, or to defend their plots in the name of the public goods they provide such as improved biodiversity, or could provide, such as green infrastructure, attractive walks and educational activities. The lack of common ground between the ‘conceived’ and the ‘perceived’ space and the total shut-down of top-down/bottom-up communication in the municipality of Trakia regarding the role and the future of the urban gardens and the right to food of the local citizens, choke the ‘lived’ space and take the life out of it. This means that the process of communication and community development through collective construction of public spaces is entirely disabled

7 Here it needs to be noted that, although growing food on private land within the territory of cities has a long tradition in Bulgaria, the socially-oriented practices are very new and still unrecognised by local government or the general urban population (Koleva and Pickard, 2015).

8 Such goals are listed in the Development plan of Plovdiv municipality (Plovdiv municipality, 2014) but were not considered when planning the expansion of the park and the allotment gardens were not considered as having a potential social, economic or environmental value. The local municipality did not consider involving local communities in deciding the future of their green spaces and opening a discussion about what would be of greater benefit for them – a uniformly planted park with only three types of trees or developing the existing urban agriculture area into a centre of social inclusion, educational activities, entertainment and green infrastructure development.

and could only be unlocked by active two-way communication: in a bottom-up direction (civic formulation of the modes of green space use, or the perceived space), and in a top-down direction (setting a regulatory frame of the possibilities for planning and management of public spaces, or the ‘conceived’ space). It is in the process of this dialogue that the lived ‘space’ is created, and which gives the citizens their “right to the city”, which empowers them and motivates them to cooperate and identify with the community.

The sociological analysis from the perspective of the three levels of construction of public space leads to the assumption that the incongruence between the content of the ‘perceived’ and the ‘conceived’ space may lead to a vacuum in the ‘lived’ space: in other words, lack of identification of the individuals with other citizens that co-inhabit a space, and a distancing from responsibility for it. This presumption is supported by the answers to one of the questions in the survey in Trakia “In your opinion, whose responsibility are the problems related to the public spaces of your neighbourhood?” – 59.3% answered that they are entirely the responsibility of the municipality or mostly its responsibility, whereas only 15% think they are entirely or mostly a responsibility of the citizens. 19.5% believe they are a common responsibility. This reflects directly on the socially innovative character of the urban agriculture practices in Trakia – meeting otherwise unsatisfied needs but without a collective and deliberate aiming at social change. It could be said that the alienation of citizens from shared public spaces in the ‘lived’ space leads to an interesting phenomenon: the activities they perform in them, even if they are common for a larger group, are not charged with a communal spirit. Growing food on a territory that is not perceived as socially significant (and it could only be perceived as such if it is created and defended by the users of the space and not by the institutions), cannot have social value. In short, the eroded social fabric finds its territorial mirror-image in those urban spaces which are planned as shared, but remain a location for strictly individual activities, which do not bring the community together, and do not create social connections, solidarity and mutual help (Pickard, 2016). This explains why the gardeners do not socialize; they do not have shared meals, do not organize events (like collecting the crops or celebrating the beginning or the end of a season, which is a common practice among other communal gardeners in Europe). Most of all, they do not identify themselves as a community with common interests and goals, and they do not plan any resistance to the municipal plan of destroying their plots. This social phenomenon, apart from being a symptom of civic isolation from the democratic process of urban governance, shows a waste of potential for social innovation among disadvantaged groups.

5. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that regardless of how original an urban agricultural activity is and whether it manages to satisfy the needs of a group of individuals, the key feature that makes a socially innovative practice sustainable is its potential to bring about change in the social relations of those engaged in it and to improve the general institutional setting. This is important to be stated in the wake of numerous non-governmental efforts to start projects that aim to boost urban agriculture as a social innovation in a top-down manner and are tempted into invest organizational and financial resources into dressing up similar practices in social innovation ‘attire’ when it comes to utilizing urban space and food production for poverty alleviation, leisure and education. In view of ever more contested rights on shrinking undeveloped urban land, no such efforts could have high chances of achieving sustainable long-term results if they do not offer mechanisms for changing the current social structure and dynamics, so citizens become more involved in local governance. This now seems to have been taken up as a message by civic groups who are engaging with the local municipalities in new urban agriculture projects that aim not only to alleviate the

pressing problems of disadvantaged groups, but also foster their capacity for collective action and reshape the local governance models.

The destruction of the allotment gardens in Trakia symbolise wide gaps between bottom-up civil participation and top-down institutional planning of public space for the common good. The users of these allotments, even though they co-inhabit these spaces, strive to satisfy their unmet needs individually and do not cooperate with each other or with the local authorities. This is an example of a social practice that has all it takes to be an influential social innovation apart from one crucial element – the collective goal of systemic change, which, in the long run, turned out to be the weakest link compared to its other functions to satisfy unmet needs in an innovative way, created and driven from below.

It can be stated that the capacity to bring about change (in this case in public space planning and urban food policy) is the factor that determines the viability of a social innovation. Furthermore, the only actors who have the potential to transform public space and urban food governance are the local citizens who most need that change. They are the ones that need to define their social needs and to elicit change, but this could only happen if the local community shares social capital, if they have already identified a common problem and goal and if they are mobilized to take action. From this point of view, it cannot be expected that a social innovation can contribute to developing empowered and resilient communities but it is the other way round – a community needs to have reached a certain level of civic empowerment to initiate and carry out a process of social innovation. This argument resonates with Isidor Walliman's belief that, in order for social innovations to function as a basis for social and solidarity food economy through contributing to social, local and ecological sustainability, their growth needs to be kept at an "organic" level and not to depend on external support (Walliman, 2015). This is an important point for the wider NGO sector to take note of as they strive to engage disadvantaged groups in social innovation projects. While for Moulaert and colleagues, it is expected that, with the weakening of the welfare state safety nets the traditions of the social economy, mutual aid and civic or religious associations will make a comeback, in the case of Trakia and Bulgaria as a whole this has not been the case. In Bulgaria, where the level of interpersonal and institutional trust is the lowest in Europe (Tilkidjiev and Dimova, 2010), social capital in local communities is a great barrier to initiating and realising social innovations that bring change in the local community. This is understood more easily through Lefebvre's three-way analysis of the construction of social space which clearly separates the institutional from the civic domain and places greater responsibility on the local communities for achieving social change and improving governance models through active bottom-up involvement. While food production in the Trakia allotments present a full set of activities that may address a number of social, environmental and educational problems in the area, as well as service provision thought by Moulaert et al. (2005, p. 1972) to be a growing tendency for the goals of modern social movements, it is the lack of empowerment and coordinated collective social action that makes it fall short of achieving tangible effects on the local community.

6. Conclusion

The article set out to investigate the potential of an urban agriculture practice in a Bulgarian city to offer a solution to a range of social and environmental problems through social innovation. It was based on the assumption that social innovation driven by active local communities can compensate for the loosening safety nets of central municipal and national social service programmes, and that the nature of social innovation allows citizens to bring about change in the dominating social and political paradigm (Moore and Westley, 2011; Pickard, 2016). By using Moulaert et al.'s (2005) decomposition of what truly constitutes social innovation (namely

deliberate bottom-up efforts to transform the status quo and achieve meaningful change in the way a society sets its agenda and is governed), the text shows that what makes a social innovation viable and sustainable is the identification of a deficit to be addressed by the very communities that suffer from that deficit. The failure to articulate these deficits as problematic and to bring about a systemic change in the way they are addressed by the communities themselves cannot be compensated by external influences. Additionally, based on Lefebvre's model of social construction of space, I demonstrated the necessary inclusion of all stakeholders in the dialogue between local authorities and local communities if any transformation in social life is to ensue. Specifically, in this case, the way public space is conceptualized, planned and utilized. This multi-stakeholder approach is crucial if social innovations are to be conceived and implemented. If these conditions are not met, practices with even the best potential to solve wide social, economic and environmental problems will easily follow the path of the urban gardens in Trakia – they will be bulldozed by more potent initiatives sponsored by governments, corporations or other communities.

As the study is limited to a small group of citizens in a neighbourhood of a large city, and only discusses one practice of food production and consumption, these results need to be verified in other cases. Nevertheless, this study raises the important question of what makes a practice with socially innovative potential successful and sustainable in the long run.

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