

Greece—the cost of recovery

The worst wildfires in a decade have engulfed parts of Greece, leaving scores of people dead and injured. “We will do whatever is humanly possible”, said Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Emergency services across the country have been mobilised. A national state of emergency has been declared. European nations are urgently coming to Greece’s assistance. These immediate actions are welcome, appropriate, and proportionate. But they are in stark contrast to the international response to Greece’s long-term health crisis.

On August 20, Greece will exit its third and final international bailout programme; a long and painful odyssey during which the country was plunged into an unprecedented recession. Since 2010, wages have fallen by nearly 20%, and unemployment remains high, with an alarming 43% youth unemployment. In its latest Economic Survey of Greece, published in April, 2018, the OECD notes the reform efforts with GDP growth projected to strengthen to above 2% in 2018 and 2019. But, importantly, the report also warns that poverty in Greece has risen dramatically, especially among children: “The long crisis combined with an ineffective social protection system caused a surge in poverty, especially among families with children, the young and unemployed. In-work poverty is also high.” According to Eurostats, the severe material deprivation rate is now at 22.4% (compared with 7.5% across the EU). Worryingly, 14.5% of the population reports unmet medical need, more than three times the EU average (4.5%). While the (fragile) economic recovery in Greece is certainly good news, the health and wellbeing of its population cannot be complacently disregarded.

To understand the potential health consequences of Greece’s austerity programme, in this issue of *The Lancet Public Health*, Georgios Kotsakis and the Global Burden of Disease 2016 Greece Collaborators report an evaluation of mortality, risks factors, and health financing in Greece from 2000 to 2016. The authors compare trends in health outcomes and health expenditures from 2000–10 (pre-austerity) and 2010–16 (post-austerity). Mortality in Greece increased from 944.5 deaths per 100 000 in 2000 to 997.8 in 2010 and 1174.9 in 2016. Age-standardised mortality showed reduced improvement after 2010 and the onset of the financial crisis, in line with the findings from Ioannis Laliotis and colleagues’ 2016 study that also reported slowing of mortality reduction in Greece after

the crisis. The proportion of older people has increased, probably reflecting the fact that half a million Greeks left the country during the crisis. Importantly, the Global Burden of Disease 2016 Greece Collaborators go beyond mortality, and also look at years lived with disability and risk factors. They also investigate the relation between health outcomes and government expenditure on health. For the authors, “there is evidence of a disproportionate decrement in the health of Greeks compared with regional populations, which parallels the course of the economic crisis... and suggest that an effect of the abruptly reduced government health expenditure on population health is likely.”

Greece’s health system had been in need of reform well before its economic crisis. Founded in 1983, the Greek national health system (NHS) had been unable to allocate and control spending efficiently. In particular, there had been over-prescription of drugs and services, absence of health technology assessment, and chronic weaknesses in the primary care system. The pressure from the Troika to reduce Greek public health expenditure to 6% of GDP forced the government to put in place effective cost-containment measures, such as a new unified public health organisation merging the NHS and the four main social health insurance funds. For Martin McKee and David Stuckler, writing in *The Lancet Public Health*, “Major cuts to health care cost lives.” Indeed, the implementation of large and indiscriminate cuts, short-term responses to a crisis in the country’s finances with little consideration for long-term effects on quality of care and health equity, might well have harmed the population to an extent we still have yet to understand.

The Greek government will need to find a fine balance. Greece’s people have endured and suffered enormous sacrifices during the past decade. They have shown courageous resilience. Greek democracy has been challenged. It has survived. As the country faces yet another national crisis, with fires threatening already vulnerable communities, the government, together with its European neighbours, now owes the Greek people not only a commitment to immediate protection, but also a promise to invest in the health of the nation for a sustainable long-term recovery. If Europe stands for anything, it must stand for solidarity. ■ *The Lancet Public Health*

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For the **OECD Greece report** see <http://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Greece-2018-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>