Crisis, transformation, and agency: Why are people going back-to-the-land in Greece?

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Abstract

Transformations are fundamentally about agency: human intention, motivation, and power to influence and to resist. Most studies focus on deliberate system-level transformations, usually guided by a set of influential actors. However, system-level transformations may also occur as the result of the cascading effects of multiple individual transformations in response or in anticipation to various crises. Little is known about how crises foster these individual transformations, and how these may relate to different types of system-level change. This article fills this gap by looking at how crisis fosters two different types of agencies—internal and external—and how these link to individual transformations in the case of Greece’s back-to-the-land movement whereby urbanites sought to reconnect with land-based livelihoods during the economic crisis (2008 onwards). The article draws on the qualitative analysis of 76 interviews of back-to-the-landers to further understand why people are going back-to-the-land (their motivations), how these relate to the concept of agency and individual transformation, and what implications might there be for system-level social-ecological transformations. This article makes three key points. First, crises create different opportunity contexts that may lead to rapid changes in what is valued in the broader social discourse. While social values and discourses are usually considered to be “deep levers” and slow to change, we found that they can rapidly shift in times of crises, challenging notions of the role of fast vs. slow variables in system transformations. Second, agency is needed to respond to crises but is also further catalyzed and enhanced through crisis; activating one’s internal agency leads to personal transformations as well as collective transformations (linked to external agency), which are mutually co-constitutive. And third, systemic-level transformation emerges through multiple pathways including through the aggregation of multiple individual transformations that may lead to emergent system-level changes.

Keywords Economic crisis · Social-ecological transformations · Agency · Sustainability · Back-to-the-land · Food systems · Prefigurative politics

Introduction

Unprecedented levels of anthropogenic changes undermine the prosperity of human societies and the functioning of the Earth’s system to such an extent that adapting might not be

enough, highlighting the need for sustainable transformations (O’Brien 2012; Raworth 2017). Agency is a key feature of humans’ ability to navigate social–ecological transformations, and is linked to human intentions, motivations, and power to influence and resist these new pathways of change (Davidson 2010; Brown and Westaway 2011). Agency—or the ability to act in hopes of changing one’s life circumstances—is particularly necessary when crises emerge that necessitate people to mobilize to deal with change (Brown and Westaway 2011). This mobilization is linked to people’s agency, associated with their cognitive and affective abilities to make sense of changing contexts to enable action, as well as their capacities, the resources and support that they have access to. Thus, agency and capacity are closely related, in so far as that one needs agency, to believe that change is possible, reframe changing circumstances and to individually

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and collectively imagine and act upon new futures, which in turn relies upon and sometimes expands existing capacity. This point is important because capacity cannot be put into action without agency (Brown and Westaway 2011), and vice versa, agency can be limited by overwhelming constraints to people's capacities (Ribot 2013; Blythe et al. 2018). Marginalized individuals and communities often have their agency limited by structural barriers that prevent them from mobilize for change. Nonetheless, understanding agency remains fundamental because given equal capacity, some people manage to mobilize to imagine and seek to shape new futures while others do not (Moore and Milkoreit 2020).

While crises often constitute windows of opportunity for change, more research is needed to understand when crises lead to transformational change vs. maintaining the status quo, and the role played by different forms of agencies in this process (Birkmann et al. 2010; Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al. 2020; Novalia and Malekpour 2020; Schipper et al. 2021). Much remains unknown as to how crises and agency are related to shape new opportunity contexts for sustainable pathways. Most studies of social–ecological transformations focus on deliberate system-level transformations, those that are strategically guided by a set of influential actors (Westley et al. 2011, 2013; Moore et al. 2014; Werbeloff et al. 2016). Others point out that transformations are messy and contested (Temper et al. 2018; Schipper et al. 2021), emerging from multiple agencies that have differing abilities to influence existing pathways (Ribot 2013; Nightingale et al. 2020; Scoones et al. 2020). These system-level transformations are often thought to be facilitated by major crises, whether ecological, political or social, that open windows of opportunity for change (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al. 2020). These visions of transformations do not pay enough attention to the agency of other actors—that are often less powerful—that may, however, shape, under certain conditions, how future pathways unfold through their everyday actions (Temper et al. 2018). Indeed, system-level transformations may also occur when multiple individual transformations scale up (Kates et al. 2012; Feola 2015). This requires digging deeper into our understanding of individual transformations, defined here as deep changes in how a person understands their world that is linked to changes in their sense of self and identity and the ways that they reframe their relations to others, including human and more-than-human entities, in the present and the future (Manuel-navarrete and Buzinde 2010; Ives et al. 2020). Little is known about how crises foster these emergent individual transformations, and how these may relate to different types of system-level change (deliberate vs. uncoordinated) (Grenni et al. 2020; Ives et al. 2020).

This article seeks to fill this gap by looking at how crisis fosters agency and how such agency is linked to sustainability transformations in the case of Greece's back-to-the-land

movement, whereby urbanites sought to reconnect with land-based livelihoods during the economic crisis (2008-onwards). We draw on the qualitative analysis of 76 interviews of back-to-the-landers to understand why people are going back-to-the-land (their motivations), how this relates to agency and individual transformations, and what the potential implications are for system-level social–ecological transformations.

This article makes three key points. First, crises create different opportunity contexts that may lead to rapid changes in what is valued in the broader social discourse. Social values and discourses are usually considered to be “deep levers” and slow to change (Meadows 1999; Abson et al. 2017), yet we found that they can rapidly shift in times of crises, challenging notions of the role of fast vs. slow variables in system transformations. Crises open up spaces for alternative ways of framing and knowing to permeate the broader social discourse (Wittmayer et al. 2019). Second, agency is needed to respond to crises but is also further catalyzed and enhanced through crisis; activating one's internal agency leads to personal transformations as well as collective transformations (linked to external agency), which are mutually co-constitutive. These ‘inner’ transformations are often neglected in our understanding of pathways to sustainability (Ives et al. 2020), and can be related to the emergence of new forms of praxis involved in prefigurative politics, that is the experimentation with new forms of social (and ecological) relations in niche spaces (Leach 2013; Trott 2016). And third, system-level transformation may emerge through multiple pathways, including through the aggregation of multiple individual transformations that are difficult to predict and yet fundamental to understand the deep drivers of sustainability transformations (Temper et al. 2018; O'Brien 2021).

Crises, agency and sustainability transformations

Crisis and transformation

Crises are defined in a broad sense as “collective stress situations” (Quarantelli and Dynes 1977: 23) which change “dominant understandings, values, institutions, and social relationships through which society is organized and defined” (Loorbach et al. 2016: 19). While crises often contribute to dispossession and inequality (Klein 2007; Pelling and Dill 2010), they might also create windows of opportunity for sustainability transformations (Westley et al. 2011, 2013; Pelling et al. 2012; Loorbach and Huffenreuter 2013; Brundiers and Eakin 2018). Sustainability transformations are broadly defined here as significant changes in human–environment interactions that help sustain the earth's

biophysical systems while meeting human needs (Kates et al. 2001; Walker et al. 2004). Such transformations range from changes in perceptions, norms and values to changes in behavior, practices and policies (O'Brien 2012; O'Brien and Sygna 2013) that foster sustainability-oriented social–ecological outcomes (Moore et al. 2014). System-level transformation implies a process of structural change (i.e., changes in fundamental patterns and interactions in the social–ecological system), which require social, symbolic, physical and material changes including alterations of sense-making, worldviews, power relations, social networks, ecosystems, physical infrastructure and technology (Feola 2015; Pelling et al. 2015). O'Brien and Sygna (2013) relate broader system-level transformations to three interrelated spheres: the practical sphere (i.e., behaviors and technical responses), the political sphere (i.e., institutions and laws) and the personal sphere (i.e., individual and collective beliefs, values and worldviews). In their view, the personal sphere—worldviews and values people hold—ultimately shapes how structures and systems (i.e., the political sphere) are viewed as well as what possible solutions are identified (i.e., the practical sphere). Changes in the personal sphere are usually viewed to be slower yet critical for addressing the root causes of unsustainability and enacting deeper changes (Fischer and Riechers 2019). Values and attitudes are often considered to be slow variables, meaning slow to change but constituting deep leverage points to drive change (Meadows 1999).

While much has been theorized regarding the links between agency and structure, much remains unknown as to how agent-level changes scale up to system-level sustainability transformations (Pesch 2015; Scoones et al. 2020). Most research on transformations focus on specific types of deliberate transformations—usually targeting institutional or technological fixes—driven by the agency of influential actors (e.g., leaders, entrepreneurs) (Olsson et al. 2006; Westley et al. 2011, 2013; Werbeloff et al. 2016). Why and how are crises mobilizing the agencies of other, often less powerful, actors? An emerging scholarship emphasizes the affective, cognitive, harder to measure subjective dimensions involved when rapid change is experienced that trigger personal transformations that affect ordinary people's agencies through changes in how they value, understand and imagine the world (O'Brien and Hochachka 2010; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling 2015; Ives et al. 2020). Understanding how people's 'inner worlds' (i.e., their beliefs, values, identities) change in relation to crises, and how that relate to broader sustainability pathways, constitutes an understudied aspect of transformations (O'Brien and Hochachka 2010; Ives et al. 2020). Yet these are key to explain why people choose to engage in collective action and new forms of experimentation—what has been called prefigurative politics—that aim to create the roots of another world in the present to prepare for more radical system change (Leach 2013; Yates 2015).

The focus on particular types of deliberate transformations, driven by the agency of powerful actors who most often opt for technological or regulatory fixes, underplays other potential transformational pathways, especially those of the most marginalized (Gibson-Graham 2008; O'Brien 2021). Transformations often are chaotic and contested, deeply personal as well as collective, emerging from a multiplicity of individual transformations that are intertwined with new forms of political consciousness and social movements (Temper et al. 2018). The neglect of 'inner worlds' leads to a dearth of understanding on how crises foster different agencies and their linkages to system-level transformations (Pelling et al. 2015; Ives et al. 2020). This paper unpacks the linkages between crisis, the mobilization of different forms of agency for individual transformations and how these may relate to deliberate and uncoordinated (emergent) system-level transformations.

Agency

Resolving social and ecological issues and steering societies towards desirable transformations requires a greater understanding of human agency (Davidson 2010; Brown and Westaway 2011). Agency refers to the ability to act, to make one's own free choices in hopes of changing one's life circumstances (Bandura 2006; Brown and Westaway 2011; Coulthard 2012). An agency-oriented approach recognizes that humans have intentions, motivations, inner lives that shape how they view risks and opportunities and make decisions. The ability to seize windows of opportunities during times of crises is intrinsically tied to agency (Brown and Westaway 2011; Westley et al. 2013; Werbeloff et al. 2016). Before acting one needs to identify that there is an issue, assess potential ideas or solutions about what to do, and believe that one's actions, individually and collectively, can lead to change (self-efficacy) (Bandura 2000, 2006). Agency is intrinsically tied to capacity (i.e. the ability to respond to change) and relates to the intangibles that explains why some people act while others do not (Eakin 2014). Having resources and assets are often necessary yet not sufficient conditions for action.

Agency tends to be approached in terms of two broad dimensions. The first, or what we call "internal" agency relates to cognitive and psychosocial processes and their interplay with the social-ecological context, which enable people to influence their own life circumstances. Internal agency refers to the cognitive and affective processes involved to act, such as forethought (i.e., the ability to anticipate the future) and self-efficacy (i.e., belief that their actions can lead to change), which in combination with available resources and social and environmental context, affects how goals and aspirations, perceptions of risk and opportunity are formed (Mitchell 1982; Bandura 2000,

2006). Self-efficacy is given particular weight because it is critical to how risk and opportunities are assessed, and it influences what motivates people to choose particular actions (Bandura 1982, 2000; Mitchell 1982). Internal agency can thus be broadly characterized as processes involved in changing one's self that involve creating inner lives, identities, dreams and aspirations. Creativity and imagination are key elements of internal agency, essential to exercise forethought and foster self-efficacy (Bandura 2006). Internal agency has been extensively discussed in psychology (Bandura 1982, 2000, 2006; Mitchell 1982) and applied in climate change and natural hazards vulnerability and adaptation studies that seek to understand the subjective dimensions of adaptive capacity (i.e., how people perceive risk and opportunity differently based on differing cognitive and psychosocial attributes) (Grothmann and Patt 2005; Frank et al. 2011; Kuruppu and Liverman 2011; Fresque-Baxter and Armitage 2012; Eakin et al. 2016). In transformations research, the emphasis is on the role of imagination and affect in shaping how people interpret and act in light of rapid social–ecological changes that shape anew their sense of place, identities and relationships with human and non-human others (Eakin et al. 2019; Moore and Milkoreit 2020).

The second or “external” agency relates to the ability to influence and mobilize others to determine collectively life's conditions, and as such is closely related to the concept of power (i.e., the ability to mobilize people and resources to achieve a goal) (Bandura 2000; Avelino and Rotmans 2009; Avelino 2021). Most resilience and sustainability transition studies tend to focus on the external agency of particular kinds of agents (i.e., social innovators, leaders) that have the power to influence mainstream development pathways (Smith et al. 2005; Westley et al. 2011; Loorbach et al. 2017). Social movement studies examine the external agency of more marginalized actors by focusing on the everyday actions of collectives involved in the creation of spaces—often found at the interstices of mainstream society—where new forms of social (and ecological) relations can be experimented with in hopes of creating a new world; what has been called prefigurative politics (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008; Leach 2013; Yates 2015). The literature on prefigurative politics has put considerable weight on discussing the effectiveness of these experiments for broader social change, emphasizing the tensions and paradoxes involved when navigating efforts to create new ways of being and doing (without radical revolutionary action) while also existing within a mainstream capitalistic system that still structure most of people's lives (Monticelli 2018; Yates 2020; Törnberg 2021). While less studied, prefigurative politics also touch upon the interplay between internal and external agency since most of these struggles relate to the attempts of individuals to recreate new values, identities and beliefs—how

they make sense of the world around them—usually through engagement in collective action (Trott 2016).

These two dimensions of agency are interrelated. To be able to influence others (external agency) one has to have a strong sense of internal agency, meaning that one has to have the desire to act and believe that their actions will lead to change (Coulthard 2012). Manuel-Navarrete (2010) argues that social and political struggles require both people with external agency, and the existence of emancipated individuals that have undergone internal transformations, calling for more attention to internal agency. Both internal and external agencies are deeply intertwined with existing social-ecological contexts which may catalyze or limit agency (Sewell 1992; Manuel-navarrete and Buzinde 2010). Understanding the interplay between internal and external agency is particularly important because both represent fundamental aspects of agency. By focusing on both dimensions of agency, actor-level actions can be connected to transformations at the system level (Coulthard 2012; Trott 2016; Ives et al. 2020; Scoones et al. 2020).

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the framework we created to explain how agency (internal and external) relates to different transformation pathways (Fig. 1). Individual transformation refers to important changes in self-identity, values, perceptions that partially determine how risk and opportunity are appraised, and that can result in a radical change in the way an individual perceives their self and their relations to the world, makes decisions and acts (internal agency). In this framework, subjective internal cognitive and affective dimensions of agency (e.g. perceptions, values, experiences, identities) are related to broader social discourses and context as well as other more tangible capacities (e.g. different resources including financial, physical, human and social capitals) (Grothmann and Patt 2005; Eakin et al. 2016). The interplay between internal agency and broader context shapes the risk and appraisal process leading to different responses to crisis.

Individuals' subjective experiences of shocks and abrupt shifts in their opportunities and abilities to achieve aspirations can alter their sense of self and place, the narratives they construct about their pasts and futures, as well as their motivations for engaging in collective action (Tschakert et al. 2017). For some, individual affective and cognitive transformation results in an expression of “external agency”, or the ability and desire to mobilize others (Eakin et al. 2016). As individuals reinforce and shape their internal agency through interacting with the world, these individual uncoordinated interactions may lead to a new emergent system (Kates et al. 2012; Feola 2015). The first case would lead to deliberate

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework illustrating how crises relate to transformations by changing the existing social–ecological context and social discourse that affect individual’s objective capacities (i.e. their assets) but also how risks and opportunities are appraised (linked to changes in perceptions, values, attitudes, desires and other cognitive dimensions that shape one’s internal agency). These in turn lead to differing individual responses. Some people do nothing. Others radically change their behaviors and values (by mobilizing their internal agency) leading to individual transformations that may scale up further. Some individual transformations include a greater engagement in collective action (through the exercise of external agency), which may or not may not, lead to deliberate system-level transformations. The multiplication of individual transformations may lead to emergent system-level transformations

transformations while the second to uncoordinated emergent system-level transformations (Temper et al. 2018), even though the underlying individual transformations may be deliberate. Both are not mutually exclusive but rather co-constitutive given that collective agency requires the mobilization of personal agency first, and personal agency can be energized through interactions with others. In the next section, we apply this framework in the case of individual and collective responses to the Greek economic crisis.

Case study

The Greek economic crisis (2008 onward) and associated austerity measures have led to negative social impacts that are still felt today. At the height of the crisis in 2013, general unemployment rose to almost a third of the population with significant impacts on wages and household

consumption (Giannitsis and Zografakis 2018). Athens was the epicenter of the crisis, experiencing a 51% increase in poverty (Skordili 2013). Given the financial mechanisms of the crisis, the most affected were the unemployed and self-employed, young and middle-aged families as well as people paying rents or mortgages. Traditionally vulnerable groups, such as farmers and the elderly, were comparatively less affected than urban wage earning families (Papadopoulos et al. 2019).

While all economic sectors were affected by the economic crisis, the primary sector weathered the impacts of the crisis better than other sectors. Between 2010 and 2016, the gross value added for primary sector activities shrunk by 10% versus 19% and 25% in the secondary and tertiary sectors, respectively (Papadopoulos et al. 2019: 480). Employment in the primary sector increased from 11.3 to 13.5% from 2008 to 2014, although due to an overall employment shrinkage, there were no differences in absolute

numbers (Papadopoulos et al. 2019; World Bank Data 2019). PASEGES, the Greek new farmers association, estimated that 17,000 people entered into the agriculture sector in 2011; most of these are presumed to be unemployed individuals from urban areas (PASEGES 2011). Nevertheless, these numbers did not outweigh a pre-existing rural exodus characterized by farm abandonment and an ageing farming population (Kasimis and Zografakis 2013: 29). The potential entry of new farmers is significant not only for employment, but also for the persistence of farming landscapes and rural development, which is why the back-to-the-land movement plays such an important role in national policy debates and public discourse.

The numbers of new entrants into farming are probably underestimated. In European statistics, new farmers are often associated with the entry of young professionals into the field failing to account for older demographics or for non-commercial farmers (Zagata and Sutherland 2015). Greek official statistics only refer to people that registered as professional farmers, and do not account for the harder-to-track non-registered farmers that are part of the informal economy or engaging in subsistence-based food production. Thus, it can be assumed that a significant part of the Greek back-to-the-land trend is invisible. In the work supporting this research, only 28% of people interviewed as new farmer entrants were officially registered as farmers (Benessaiah 2021).

The scholarship on the Greek back-to-the-land movement reports that Greek urbanites were attracted to rural areas for economic reasons (i.e., lower costs of living, opportunity for jobs) linked to the crisis and facilitated by pre-existing ties to rural relatives (Gkartzios et al. 2013, 2017; Remoundou et al. 2016; Anthopoulou et al. 2017). Despite the importance of family ties, outmigration to rural areas was also observed for people with no family ties during the crisis (Anastasiou and Duquenne 2020). Rural areas, and farming, were seen as a “refuge” in times of crisis (Zografakis and Karanikolas 2012; Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2013; Kasimis and Zografakis 2013; Daudon and Vergos 2015; Papadopoulos 2015) and food production revalued in both urban and rural areas (Kasimis et al. 2013; Partalidou and Anthopoulou 2017; Papadopoulos et al. 2019). This return to agriculture can also be interpreted as evidence of the increased vulnerability of both urban and rural populations during the crisis (Anthopoulou et al. 2017). All these studies emphasize the presence of pre-existing urban–rural family ties that facilitated access to land to urban populations (Papadopoulos et al. 2019; Anastasiou and Duquenne 2020). Yet, few studies explain why urban folks that seemingly had access to land and other land-related resources prior to the crisis chose to engage in the back-to-the-land movement during the crisis (Papadopoulos and Fratsea 2020). Additionally, while many studies focused on the emergence of new grassroots

social movements in Greek urban areas during the crisis (Kaika and Karaliotas 2016; Roussos 2019), few discussed how these relate to processes of individual transformations that lead people to radically change their life trajectories, fostering new engagements with back-to-the-land activities within as well as outside of cities. This research focuses on these processes of individual transformations triggered by the crisis that led people to go back-to-the-land.

Methods and analysis

The data were produced through semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2014–2015, of 76 households that turned to land-based activities post-crisis (after 2008) in various regions of Greece. These households were residing—and some still do—in urban areas before the crisis and were not substantially involved in land activities previously. Because the initial population was unknown, households were selected using snowball sampling. To minimize selection bias that might lead to missing potentially important isolates, initial interviewees were drawn from diverse and unrelated sources, including referrals from academics, civil society members, business and government organizations, from newspaper, blogposts and social media posts discussing back-to-the-land initiatives as well as new farmers themselves. The semi-structured interviews collected qualitative and quantitative data related to household demographics, livelihood activities and assets (pre- and post-economic crisis), land access, motivations, the ways that household members perceive, relate to, and manage different components of their land (i.e., soil, water, farming techniques adopted, how is knowledge acquired, market strategies), and the livelihood and land outcomes of these transformations. The interviews ranged between one hour and three hours, with most lasting two hours.

This article is based on the analysis of qualitative content from the interviews using a grounded-theory approach whereby initial concepts and theories framed the ways that questions were formulated but room was left to iteratively integrate new concepts that emerged during the data collection process (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Grounded theory approaches challenge the idea that theory needs to be constructed a priori, rather theory is developed in an iterative process whereby initial theoretical concepts are refined by revisiting key concepts and ideas as they emerge through the research process (Charmaz 2006). This meant that while we had an initial list of questions informed by theory, these evolved as the interviews unfolded. A few questions were added—for example, the political dimension of going back to the land—as new concepts emerged through the interviews and people were recontacted to provide insights into these new emergent concepts. Similarly, the coding process

Table 1 Motivations for going back to the land

Motivations	Description	Percent mentioned (<i>n</i> = 76) (%)
Reconnect to nature	Need to be close to the environment and various attributes associated with living in more ‘natural’ areas	54
Good life	Search for a meaningful and good life, with better life and work conditions. Often mention raising a family, having more time	51
Self-sufficiency	Desire to become more autonomous, to get a sense of security and independence	51
Employment security	Need to secure a stable job and secure source of income	33
Political action	people stating explicitly that they considered turning to land-based activities as a form of resistance and a political statement	33
Being healthy	Desire to eat ‘good’ food, without chemicals (usually organic), rediscovering the taste of food. A general concern over health	26
New investment	Primary sector seen as an investment opportunity for economic growth (without having a green growth focus)	18
Green economy	Desire to invest in new, more environmentally friendly, land production systems (geared towards creating a green business)	17

was informed by initial insights from the literature and iteratively expanded based on findings emerging from the interviews in a deductive–inductive approach (Charmaz 2006: 104).

This article focuses on main themes emerging from two questions: “Why did you go back to the land?” and “How did the economic crisis affect your decision?” and were coded using Nvivo 9. Answers to the question “Why did you go back to the land?” were coded into seven broad themes that explain people’s motivations (see Table 1). These themes were developed after a first round of coding where main concepts related to people’s motivations were extracted before being consolidated into fewer explanatory categories. Additionally, key themes related to agency were inductively coded for based on instances when people explained why they decided to act. This included discussions of the role of creativity and imagination, relating the crisis to personal transformation (internal agency) and/or the emergence of collective action (external agency) discussed in particular in relation to the code “political action”. Key quotes relating to different themes are presented in the results. All names are pseudonyms to safeguard the anonymity of people interviewed, and quotes are identified by a unique code only known to the main investigator. All quotes were translated from Greek by the main investigator.

Results

Results are organized by looking at three key dimensions of the framework (Fig. 1): How the economic crisis leads to a changing context and social discourse (“**No longer crazy: changing context and social discourse**”), how the crisis mobilizes internal agency and affects the risk and

opportunity appraisal process (“**Internal agency and changing risk and opportunity appraisal**”) and how internal and external agency are interrelated and linked to system-level transformations (“**Interplay between internal and external agency**”).

No longer crazy: changing context and social discourse

Crisis and insecurity

The economic crisis led to an abrupt worsening of social and economic conditions, especially in urban areas. While several interviewees mentioned unemployment as a reason for deciding to go back to the land (30% of households were unemployed), lack of job stability also played a key role, as illustrated in this quote: “*I wanted to be my own boss and have work! Stable work. I changed jobs 7 times in the last 3 years. I did jobs where I stayed 2 months, 3 months, 1 month. It’s not easy. How could I live like this?*” (I19).

This instability created deep crisis-related fears linked to the vulnerability of people that were previously reliant on a wage economy decimated during the recession. Going back-to-the-land, and growing food in particular, was a way to enhance one’s capacity to deal with present and future economic and political collapse. This can be clearly seen in the following quote that associated growing food to future survival: “*In 2010, I started seeing gardening more seriously...like something needed for survival*” (I109). Learning how to grow food gave people a feeling of strength and self-efficacy, as stated by one person concerned about his potential unemployment: “*I started*

thinking “what will I do if I lose my job?”, now that I produce my food, I feel stronger, it gives you confidence” (II91).

Among those that still had an employment, the economic crisis led to a worsening of labor conditions with people having to work longer hours and losing many of the labor protections that existed previously. These precarious labor conditions made farming and the opportunity to be one’s “own boss” incredibly attractive. Work conditions were becoming so difficult that people linked the crisis and living conditions in the city to a “loss of humanity” that could only be regained through a process of personal transformation, as illustrated by the following quote:

“I couldn’t stand being in Athens the last 3 years because of the economic crisis. I left my work voluntarily because I couldn’t cope anymore...It was a daily abuse to my dignity with the constant requirements that they had, the work shifts, the stress and anxiety, and the (shrinking) earnings. I don’t believe that going to the square [protests] is a solution. The solution is to change your life alone, and whoever wants to do the same can do it. I left because I wasn’t feeling human in Athens anymore. I felt like a cog in the wheels of the system and I was unhappy. Depressed.” (I22)

Going back-to-the-land was not solely motivated by economic reasons. Reconnecting to nature and the search of a good life and greater self-sufficiency were among the most cited reasons for going back-to-the-land (Table 1). People sought to reduce their vulnerability but also to give meaning to their lives in time of deep change. A third of people associated going back-to-the-land as an act of resistance, characterizing it as a political action. Motivations were influenced by people’s material capacities (including land access and prior farming knowledge). Those that had professional farmers in their families were more likely to view farming as an economic opportunity while others were more interested in the non-material dimensions of farming lifestyles, such as the search for “a good life” or “reconnecting with nature”. Those with little prior land experience were most likely to view going back-to-the-land as a political action, in parts because they felt extremely vulnerable and growing food was identified as a means to enhance their capacity to deal with the crisis. Indeed, learning how to grow food gave them agency, people mentioned feeling stronger and more confident (internal agency). Those with little prior land experience were also more likely to experiment first with collective land management (e.g. community gardens, proto eco-communities). Appendix A further details how motivations for going back-to-the-land were linked to prior land experiences.

Farming is a good idea: changing social discourse regarding farming and life in rural areas

The general social discourse pertaining to farming and rural areas changed during the recession, and had an influence over individuals pursuing new opportunities in rural areas. People mentioned experiencing greater social acceptance, even support, from their families and friends, which facilitated their individual transformation as illustrated below:

“My family sees my occupation more positively with the crisis. [...] The farmer from the past was connected to poverty. Now the majority of people views going back-to-the-land as an economic opportunity. [...] It’s also linked to a broader turn to quality. At many levels, including in diets, services and human relations. People have been submerged for so many decades with crap....advertisement, showing off...that we have to get rid of a lot of garbage to rebuild our values... [...] Now when you say to people “I live in the countryside and I produce agricultural goods, I am a farmer”, the other is looking at you with respect, and says that it’s great that there are some people doing something good. There are people that are starting to value this, beyond economics. They value what you do as an action. A movement. The way you are doing it, with respect for the land and differently. In the past if you said “I have an organic tomato” people would think you’re crazy.” (I65)

“Many people have left to go to rural areas. When I was a kid in ‘80s, people used to write graffiti on the walls saying “country bumpkins go back to your villages and not only for Easter”. There used to be a significant rejection of rural life by urbanites. Now that’s not the case, urbanites even see rural areas positively. Something has changed” (I83)

“In the past when I was discussing coming to the village, people were more negative, they were thinking it was crazy. Now more people are doing it, and people in general are saying “you were right... it’s a good idea to have some basic food supply, your own garden”. People have started accepting this turn to the land and to the village as a good idea and I think it’s because of the crisis” (I2)

This change bolstered people’s agency and confidence. Increased family support was important given that land, physical capital (e.g., inherited farm equipment) and financial resources were often accessed through family networks (see Benessaiah 2021 for a discussion of back-to-the-land capacities). 64% of the interviewees accessed land through their family networks while the remainder accessed land through collective arrangements (i.e. eco-communities, community gardens and other types of commons, 25%) or by

buying or renting land (11%). These results show that initial land access was not a barrier for most interviewed households—in contrast to most western countries—highlighting the high levels of individual land ownership in Greece.

In other cases, individuals—especially those from farming families that experienced hardships in the past—still faced negative attitudes about farming that undermined their choices. This is exemplified by the case of Markos M. who, while coming from a farming family, did not know anything about farming because his family did not want him to become a farmer.

“Growing up, I was barely involved in farming. My parents used to be very poor and when they were farming they always incurred losses. One year – the good year as we say – they had a surplus and they opened a business and said no more farming. Starting then my contact with agriculture was a form of punishment: If you don’t study you will become like your uncles that are farmers said my parents. In rural areas to be a farmer is not valued, it doesn’t have social prestige. And that’s what they were trying to convey to me. I don’t have a good relationship with my family. They do not want to help me become a farmer, they consider it bad that their child that was accepted to become an engineer will come back to be a farmer. They view it as a shame.” (I52).

Markos M. then specified that his family refused to lend him their old farming machinery to dissuade him from continuing on his path to become a farmer. Together these examples illustrate the synergistic relationship between social discourse, individual circumstances and resource availability. While in some cases, individuals benefited from a shift in social attitudes, this was by no means universal and each household experienced different reactions from their social circle.

Internal agency and changing risk and opportunity appraisal

Going back-to-the-land as a choice

About a third of households emphasized that going back-to-the-land was their choice not solely a crisis response. By claiming such a choice, while being fully cognizant of the many ways by which the crisis had challenged Greek society and their lives, these interviewees were in fact emphasizing their agency. They were not victims of the crisis but rather agents that were taking control of their lives. Expressions like “take our own lives in our hands”, “seizing our personal strength”, “doing something” were often mentioned when talking about their decision. For instance, Katerina P. firmly

stated that going back to her village was her family’s choice, but then went on to clarify:

“I think it would be an exaggeration to say that the crisis didn’t affect us. It affects everyone differently. It didn’t affect me in my personal life but it touched my social circle so, it’s the same. [...] I didn’t have assets in my name, I didn’t owe anything, I wasn’t fired from a job so it certainly didn’t affect me that way. But... before coming to the village I was involved in the big protests in Athens, and was looking to participate, to make sense of what is going on. When we came here I thought that our escape was a way to show the system that you are not participating or at least that there is a way to live differently. The crisis was a way to start thinking. I love doing things with my hands, and I want to learn more because in the back of my mind there is the thought ‘what if something happened...’ Anything could happen twice as hard, so it’s good for people to know everything. So the crisis has surely influenced me maybe not so much economically because my needs were always very limited.” (I66)

For Katerina P. and her husband perceived going back to her village as a relatively low-risk activity: they neither had debts nor were they tied to a well-paying job in the city. The move also provided the opportunity to engage in activities they loved, such as working with their hands and being close to nature, while resisting the crisis in their own way; going back-to-the-land was a way of “doing something” and “to show the system that there is a way to live differently”. This sense of agency is also clearly visible in another households’ responses:

“The crisis is a general feeling of disappointment. Acting (I can produce, I can do) is against that feeling of disappointment. It gives strength, and it plays a very important role [in driving people]. If other jobs were going well, you would not think of working here unless you had parents that are farmers. You need to have a fear, an insecurity. The crisis is an opportunity.” (I97)

The perception that one has a choice and that this choice may change things is very important for agency. Giannis O., whose father used to be a farmer, was forced due to unemployment to leave the city to work with his father in a periurban area of Thessaloniki, Greece second largest city. He is one of the few interviewees to describe his going back-to-the-land experience as a loss of freedom:

When I was 26 I became unemployed for a second time. I found another job but they didn’t give me any benefits (health insurance). So I decided to experiment with my father [working the land]. But it’s twisted because I don’t know if that’s what I want to do. I still

haven't decided if I want to be a farmer. Maybe it's because I was forced to enter into farming and it might be different for people that chose to do this" I12

The crisis as a catalyzer of latent desires

Overall, many households framed the crisis as an opportunity to start farming: an activity that many were previously interested in but did not do because the risk and opportunity appraisals were very different pre-crisis (i.e., family and societal pressures, high-opportunity cost since they would have to leave good jobs, etc.). Others went further to say that the crisis was a “catalyzer”, speeding up a decision that was sometimes in the back burner for years, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“The economic crisis made me ponder where we are going. To try and find something to do, a solution. And because I had some infrastructure [in his village], and because I liked working the land, it was easier for me to try it. That's what was positive about the economic crisis. My friends were always telling me to become a farmer and I never listened. And here I am. I did it 15 years later.” (I19)

“The crisis played a major role in my decision, it pushed me to think more seriously about going back-to-the-land, something that I was thinking about for years. And it led me to make it a reality. Immediately. I didn't have other choices...” (I22)

“The crisis made things easier for me. It happened when I was on the verge of deciding to come here and everything became easier and clearer for me and for my family for whom it no longer was just my craziness but also the wider context” (I42)

By framing their situation as an opportunity, interviewees reclaimed their agency. This observation was illustrated by Nikos M.: *“The crisis was a big opportunity for me. Meaning that I found the positive in this crisis that was imposed on us. That's how I saw it, and I am glad I did see it that way from the start because I might not have done anything otherwise.” (I5).*

Changing life goals and values: imagining new futures

Going back-to-the-land was for some households an entirely new endeavor. The crisis deeply changed the way they framed their personal life goals and values; former markers of success, such as professional advancement and income gains, were often no longer attainable and were now questioned and associated with the root causes of the crisis itself, as discussed in the following quotes:

“The crisis played an important role in my decision to change. I changed my life goals entirely. Until recently I was a painter that was very much interested in a successful career. One or two years after the crisis, I left painting, it was no longer inspiring me. I was no longer interested in expressing something symbolic about society because I could no longer understand what broader goals and values were present.” (I37)

“Before I was entirely into a capitalistic mode of living in Athens. I wanted to be a businessman, to make it and conquer everything. I did it all: studies, professional advancement etc. And I had bosses that were handing carrots and were saying “everything is yours, keep on going”. I mainly changed after thinking about it all. The upheaval happened during the crisis when I started thinking how did things get to this and what am I doing? That's why I decided to start learning how to be self-sufficient” (I50)

The crisis started a deep questioning of societal values and meanings, and the nature of the existing social contract. Many did not frame the crisis as an economic crisis but a “crisis of values”, for which a deep societal restructuring was necessary:

“The economic crisis is not an economic crisis but what many call a crisis of values. We had the impression that we lived in a world that had it all. In essence, we didn't have anything. Now many people that have lost their jobs have the opportunity to do something new. Some people that saw their income shrinking, used their brains to see how they could find complementary income, not to be rich but to have an aside. Yes, this crisis was an opportunity. I don't say economic crisis, I say crisis. Society saw the values that it had lost (solidarity, friendship, reconnecting to nature)” (I55)

Several interviewees mentioned that a turn to land-based activities gave them “prospect”. The ability to imagine and plan for a better future. Self-efficacy, or the belief that actions can effect change, is at the core of agency, and most of the interviewees conveyed that their actions were not done only in response to the shock of the crisis but to go beyond it by planning for a better future and more meaningful lives for themselves and their children. For most of the interviewees, the crisis spurred a deeper thinking about the meaning of life and the attainment of fulfilling desires and needs. Despite incredibly difficult conditions, households mentioned that their transition phase was also a creative moment. As eloquently stated by one interviewee: *“Now with the crisis a lot of people have started to exercise something basic that they didn't use as much before: their minds and their imaginations. Previously people were living in rhythms that don't*

leave time for reflection, in a robotic everyday life. Now people have to sit down and imagine and think “what can I do?”, and that spark of imagination and use of the mind is very important” (I14). Creativity here is inherently related to internal agency, and the recognition of new capacities through the exercise of imagination.

Interplay between internal and external agency

As noted by Katerina P. earlier, the crisis is a way to “start thinking”. Such wake-up calls are often necessary for the actualization of personal transformations, and to potentially bolster collective action as discussed below by another person:

“The crisis acted as a catalyzer affecting some people positively and others negatively. In any case, it has accelerated processes of change. People that were undecided, or had a very small interest or that considered such a step [turning to land] in the realm of a faraway fantasy, have now been hit in the face and are now exploring the situation better: thinking differently and about potential collective solutions. They feel the need – as I do – to defend their dignity with their life, their daily action and to keep a responsible stance when confronted with social, economic, environmental changes.” (I65)

Given the failure of the state to provide support and the deep restructuring of social and economic relations, many households felt that the only solution was to take initiative and self-organize, and going back-to-the-land epitomized this solution. As a result, several new collective initiatives emerged to try and fill in the gap left by a struggling welfare state, including as noted below, self-organized initiatives that managed health, food, education and other services:

“As the crisis – this crisis of values that we are living in – deepens, more and more people are trying to self-organize and self-manage their health, their food, their education; services that they were not worrying about previously because they were provided by the State. [...] So, I consider that the crisis in that regard was good for people. People have started to realize that they can manage some things on their own. And that’s what we’ve seen in the past years in Greece with the emergence of a multiplicity of initiatives that deal with health, self-organized clinics, schools, self-management of food etc. (I75)

This questioning of social values, norms and relations was also associated with key collective events that led to the increasing politicization of several interviewees. For instance, the 2011 mass and multi-month occupation of Athens’ main square (Syndagma)¹ was referred to by several households as the source of their political awakening and a strong motivator for their turn back-to-the-land. Thomas R. explained how engaging in the square movement led to his personal transformation, and helped him decide to become a farmer:

“Since 2010 when we entered into the first memorandum, I was constantly in various movements in [Syndagma] square. There I started waking up from the lethargy that I was living in. Because when you have a good work and good money, some things don’t preoccupy you much. [In Syndagma] I realized that if we wanted something serious – initially I believed in revolution but saw that it couldn’t be implemented – we needed serious solutions. And they must be realized now. The most important thing was to get to the food chain from the start: agricultural production.”(I5)

Participation in collective action amplified individual processes of personal transformation, and vice versa. Meeting other people that shared similar ideas and concerns gave people strength, because they realized they were not alone. In the case of Syndagma square, people mentioned that the square was where they first engaged in self-organization given that people had to self-manage a health clinic, food, lodging and so on for a large group of people. Thomas R. left the square with a decision to start farming and he also ended up co-founding a self-organized social grocery store in Athens which allowed him to bring farming goods, including his own, closer to urban residents. The example of Thomas R. is not singular. Nearly half (49%) of the households interviewed joined or co-founded a knowledge or sales-oriented self-organized cooperatives or collectives during the crisis. Knowledge self-organized groups aimed to increase the exchange of knowledge and experiences, while sales-oriented cooperatives aimed to facilitate market or barter exchanges of

¹ Syndagma square is located in front of the Greek parliament where many protests occur. From May to August 2011, anti-austerity groups occupied Syndagma square to protest austerity measures and the rapid deterioration of economic and social conditions. The occupation of the square was inspired by broader anti-austerity movements such as the indignados in Spain, Indignés in France and the Occupy Movement in North America. Time at the square was transformative for many because it allowed groups that had shared interest and ideas to meet (this was noted by the interviewees). It was also transformative because people re-enacted at a smaller scale principles of self-organization. During the 4 month occupation people self-organized a clinic, food provisioning, and all aspects of the daily life in the square, many went on to build and join self-organized groups later on (Arampatzi 2017).

goods. Their involvement was not always constant and some collective efforts did not last long. Nevertheless, this finding provides evidence of the relation between personal transformation (internal agency) and efforts towards collective action (external agency). The importance of collective action is also evident in the fact that 25% of households accessed land through collective land arrangements (i.e., eco-communities, self-managed farms and gardens). Many viewed going back-to-the-land as part of playing a role in a collective political action, whether or not their individual strategies relied on collective resources and networks.

Going back-to-the-land was thus often framed as a profoundly transformative political action that enabled households to be less dependent on the dominant economic system that was identified as the source of their woes. This is eloquently expressed in the following quote:

“I realized that sustainability and self-sufficiency have to do with being able to satisfy your needs in a small, closed system, local... and these concepts have great political significance, and are more revolutionary than many other revolutionary actions. Revolutionary in the broader sense as they undermine the foundations of the existing economic system. Before I saw the revolutionary potential of these concepts – sustainability, self-sufficiency and self-organization – but I hadn’t experienced them [yet]” (I28).

The interviewees presented contrasting perspectives on the role of internal vs. external agency in broader system-level transformation. There was a distinct difference between those that believed that profound transformative change comes from within, by changing oneself, and those that believed that change comes by actively changing others. For the first, societal transformation is deeply linked to internal agency and the ability of people to reassess their needs, dreams and desires to actualize a personal transformation. The following quotes illustrate this view that emphasizes that “personal revolution” (in people’s own words) comes first from within:

“For me the crisis is that we have lost our contact with nature. We think that life is in the city, work, 8 hours long, 5 days a week, holidays 15 days a week... consumerism... and so on. I started realizing that if we wanted to escape from that type of crisis we have to change our way of life. It’s a matter of starting your own personal revolution, to do your personal change and hope that you will provide a good example to attract others in such a change.” (I76)

“I don’t believe that going to the square [protests] is a solution. The solution is to change your life alone, and whoever wants to do the same can do it.” (I22)

“The crisis was a way to start thinking. [...] I do see it (going back-to-the-land) as a form of resistance, as strange as it may seem. But I believe that revolutions and resistances do not come from the mass, they come from what each of us do for themselves and how they show it to others” (I66)

As evidenced by the quotes above, those that strongly believed that change comes based on profoundly personal transformations viewed societal transformation as a contagion: people would be inspired to follow if that change fit their own needs and aspirations.

In contrast, others among people interviewed believed that transformative change is primarily linked to collective action. These people focused on the need to organize and network, to exercise external agency. In that view, while individual transformation is key, there comes a moment when wider connection, or scaling up, must occur for societal change to come about, as discussed in the quote below:

“Small islands or cells of an alternative world are created that satisfy some of the needs that the system does not fulfill. And that is a very important thing, because when you create these islands and if these islands connect to one another then you have created a different world. That’s how you reach a large mass of people: each person choose an island and eventually maybe these islands network to form a new world. I think that we are at that embryonic stage where these islands – these spaces – of an alternative world are being created. It’s a matter of choice for everyone what will happen next” (I28)

Discussion

Agency and personal transformation

The crisis led to people mobilizing their agency to both navigate the effects of the crisis and to open up new opportunities, all of which led to deep individual transformations in people’s values, sense-making and actions as expressed by the decision to radically change their lives by going back-to-the-land. Many people emphasized that going back-to-the-land was a choice. In doing so, they were asserting their agency. Rather than being victims of the crisis, they chose to see themselves as agents capable of taking control of their own lives. Many even elevated the crisis to an opportunity. This strongly touches on the idea of prefiguration (Gibson-Graham 2008; Leach 2013). By becoming active agents in shaping their lives, they were also practicing the type of future they were aspiring to collectively, making that intangible future a present possibility. These results illustrate

that framing greatly matters for people's agency, changing what could be exemplifying lack of alternatives into a choice (Pahl-Wostl et al. 2007; Lumosi et al. 2019). This highlights the importance of self-efficacy and confidence for agency and adaptive capacity (Grothmann and Patt 2005).

The crisis also offered opportunity to reassess meaning and values, leading to a deep internal changes (O'Brien and Sygna 2013; Charli-Joseph et al. 2018). The crisis catalyzed latent but inactive desires to live differently. Many people had vague dreams of reconnecting to nature and becoming farmers but had not done so before the crisis. The crisis also changed the life goals and values of people that were not interested in going back-to-the-land at all before. It did so by changing markers of success and prestige, such as professional advancement and making 'lots of money', which were now seen as unattainable and meaningless. The collapse of the previous status quo led to a loss of structure that offered opportunity for people to exercise their creativity and imagine new futures. By upending prior values and norms, the crisis opened up opportunities for new expressions of agency: to imagine and practice new ways of living, working, and engaging with land and nature. By envisioning new futures characterized by different relationships to nature and work (Author et al. in prep), interviewees engaged in transgressive, potentially transformative, and deeply affective exercises of their imagination, all of which are essential to foster internal and external agencies and for the emergence of new sustainable and just future pathways (Moore and Milkoreit 2020).

Nevertheless, while agency greatly matters to enable people to envision alternative future, harness resources and persevere when faced with obstacles, people's adaptive capacity is also predicated on the ability to mobilize available resources (i.e. their objective capacities), including land, knowledge and financial resources (Benessaiah 2021). The back-to-the-land movement in Greece was facilitated by a pre-existing connection to land and rural areas that maintained strong urban–rural linkages (Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2013; Anthopoulou et al. 2017). While not necessarily productive in nature, people maintained a memory of the rural and an attachment to the 'village of origin' unique to a country that has not completely transitioned from its agrarian roots (Gkartzios 2018). This memory of the rural which was an obstacle for back-to-the-landers in the past—due to the association of the rural with poverty and lack of opportunity—played an important role when the crisis hit and the broader social discourse surrounding farming changed. The crisis changed the decision context, which refers to how risk and opportunity were assessed and their interplay with broader societal values, rules and knowledge which in turn changed what were considered appropriate actions or "good ideas" (Gorddard et al. 2016; Colloff et al. 2018; Wittmayer et al. 2019). Due to the worsening of social and economic

conditions, going back-to-the-land was no longer seen societally as something crazy, but rather as a good idea. The value of land and farming was part of a broader social memory—a collective repository of knowledge and experience of dealing with change—that was reactivated during the crisis (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al. 2020). People also had much less to lose: they often no longer had jobs and if they had a source of unemployment, conditions were so difficult that the situation was untenable. The change in social discourse over the value of farming and life in rural areas also meant that people were better able to negotiate their livelihood transformation with their families and broader social circle. That means that they were better able to gain support, economic and otherwise, which helped them in their efforts to go back-to-the-land. This activation of agency and personal transformations does not mean that going back-to-the-land was not fraught with difficulties and tensions. People had to navigate these new dreams and aspirations within—and often because—of a very difficult economic context.

Lastly, participation in collective action, such as protests or self-organized initiatives, was both a reason and an outcome of personal transformations. The crisis affected people's inner lives—their sense of self and relations with the world—which often led them to engage with new forms of experimentation and collective action that, in turn, further influenced their personal transformation (Trott 2016; Ives et al. 2020). Engagement in collective action amplified people's self-efficacy, people felt they were not alone, and that change was possible as a result. This was particularly apparent at the early stages of the crisis, when local activists and residents—mostly in urban centers—self-organized to provide basic needs related to housing, food, education, health that were threatened by the crisis, leading to new forms of commons experimentation and prefigurative politics (Rousos 2019). These engagements in collective action were also spurred, however, by initial personal transformations that made people realize that they could do something, and that action was needed. As a result of this interplay between personal transformations and collective action, 49% of the households joined or co-founded self-organized collectives or cooperatives during the crisis, most of which were related to their efforts to go back-to-the-land.

Importance for system-level sustainability transformations

These personal transformations are very important for potential broader sustainability-oriented social–ecological transformations for two reasons. First, these personal transformations involved changes in beliefs, values as well as practical actions that centered on efforts to build a good life in reconnection with nature. Ultimately people's values and perceptions influence what is considered possible and desirable,

and thus changes in beliefs and values that are compatible with a sustainable world are crucial (O'Brien and Sygna 2013; Abson et al. 2017; Ives et al. 2020). Second, back-to-the-land activities are part of sustainability experiments, which may be essential to steer the overall system towards sustainability (Bennett et al. 2016). The crisis spurred new expressions of agency, leading people to imagine and practice new futures and ways to engage with nature and with each other; which in turn may lead to new sensemaking, increased innovation, experimentation and actions towards sustainability (Roussos 2019; Wittmayer et al. 2019; Moore and Milkoreit 2020). Broader transformations require these innovations and experimentations, which rely on people's "capacity to create untried beginnings from which to evolve a fundamentally new way of living when existing ecological, economic, and social conditions make the current system untenable" (Westley et al. 2011: 763). The literature on prefigurative politics emphasizes the importance of these everyday political experimentations that explore new types of social relations that are important for sustainability and just transformations (Gibson-Graham 2008; Törnberg 2021). Yet, these are also challenged by deep structural barriers that challenge the ability of some people—usually already marginalized—to bring about their desired transformations (Ribot 2013; Blythe et al. 2018; Nightingale et al. 2020). In this case, going back-to-the-land was challenged by limited capacities (knowledge, funding etc.) and other barriers to small-scale farming that were already present pre-economic crisis and further enhanced during the crisis (Anthopoulou et al. 2017; Benessaiah 2021). Further research needs to examine further the tensions inherent to these prefigurative sustainability experiments to elucidate whose transformations ultimately emerge.

Our results reaffirm a need to further relate agent-based approaches that dig deeper into how individuals' mobilize their agencies to broader system-level dynamics of transformation (Scoones et al. 2020). Our framework allows us to examine different pathways to system-level transformation starting from how individuals make decisions, their motivations and values and relating those to broader decision contexts that are dynamic (Gorddard et al. 2016; Colloff et al. 2018). In turn, we need to further make explicit what these internal, often subjective, individual transformations that relate to cognitive and affective dimensions mean for the mobilization, valuation and use of resources including land, money, and other objective capacities. And how these drive broader system-level changes.

Will these back-to-the-land efforts be sufficient to substantially change the broader social–ecological system over the longer term? Many people framed their turn back-to-the-land as a political action that could have far reaching impact. They differed in their views however as

to how change would come about. Some viewed processes of individual transformations, driven by internal agency, as the main motor for societal transformation. Changing 'inner lives' including shifts in values, beliefs, emotions were seen as a means and an end driving greater sustainability transformations (Ives et al. 2020; O'Brien 2021), which are linked to uncoordinated (emergent) transformation (Kates et al. 2012). These are often understudied because of the difficulty in assessing a multitude of often intangible micro-transformations. Others thought that societal change could only come about through collective action and the exercise of external agency, emphasizing the need for deliberate system-level transformations at different scales and by different agents, from social innovation leaders (Westley et al. 2013; Moore et al. 2014) to grassroot movements (Leach 2013; Temper et al. 2018). Ultimately, as discussed earlier, both internal and external agency are mutually self-reinforcing, and processes of broader change come about through both uncoordinated transformative actions and deliberate efforts to change parts of the broader system that are driven by multiple agencies acting simultaneously.

Further research is needed to further relate crisis and different expressions of agency to broader system-level transformations. Six years after the research was conducted, another major global crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—is affecting the lives of Greek people already impacted by a long-lasting economic crisis. Based on anecdotal evidence, the people we interviewed that saw broader sustainability transformations emerging from changes in their individual inner lives—and that tended to act individually—were more likely to continue working on the land today. In parts, this reflects the difficulties in sustaining collective action and working collaboratively within a broader context of mainstream capitalistic relations (Monticelli 2018). Those that sought to go back-to-the-land as a part of collective projects (i.e. eco-communities, communal gardens) were confronted with not only transforming themselves, but also needed to transform their relationship with others: how they viewed and engaged with power-laden issues of land ownership, capital, labor, and gender dynamics on top of learning how to work the land (and all this in times of economic crisis). In short, engagement in collective action—and external agency—is hinging upon deep changes in the inner lives of people first. To transform collectively requires transforming also internally, to change how one relates to other people and more-than-human actors (Manuel-navarrete and Buzinde 2010).

These prefigurative experiments can form, however, a form of social memory that is utilized mostly in times of

crisis. When COVID-19 measures were initially implemented in early 2020, government measures initially prohibited farmer's markets and direct sales, mostly affecting small-scale farmers which includes most of back-to-the-landers. Civil society organizations mobilized in response, similarly to what happened during the economic crisis, to create direct supply chains between urban consumers and producers that were hindered by the COVID emergency measures (Gkiougi 2020).² This illustrates that the type of prefigurative experiment—and how radical the new social relations explored are—truly matters for understanding scaling up dynamics. Managing land collectively requires deeper individual and collective transformations than experimenting with new consumer–producer relations. This also highlights the considerable structural constraints involved when trying to ‘scale up’ these radical sustainability experiments that are part of prefigurative politics (Törnberg 2021).

Conclusion

Our results, organized by our framework, highlight three key points. First, crisis can change existing social–ecological conditions in ways that lead to rapid changes in what is valued in the broader social discourse, thus affecting the decision context (Gorddard et al. 2016). This challenges the notion that preferences, values and attitudes are slow to change (Meadows 1999; Abson et al. 2017). These may in fact, as illustrated in this case-study, rapidly shift in times of crises. Latent values and preferences may also emerge and facilitate particular pathways of change (Chan et al. 2020). In this case, farming shifted from being devalued to becoming a ‘good idea’ thus promoting pre-existing yet hidden values and desires and also leading—for some—to value changes in their priorities and values. Going back-to-the-land was not only valued due to for economic reasons, but was also predominantly linked to searching for a good life and a desire to reconnect to nature.

Second, agency is needed to respond to crises but is also further enhanced when mobilized. More specifically, internal agency—linked to changes in subjective cognitive dimensions including creativity and imagination, self-efficacy, desires and preferences—can be enhanced by acting upon one's dreams and aspirations (Moore and Milkoreit

2020). In short, the practice of prefigurative politics require agency but also further contribute to agency-creation. These different dimensions of agency—internal and external—are mutually co-constitutive. Indeed, the case study shows that collective action required the mobilization of internal agency and personal transformations, and in turn through engagement with collective action, contribute to furthering one's internal agency.

Third, systemic-level transformation may emerge through multiple pathways. These include deliberate transformations resulting from collective action as well as the aggregation of multiple individual transformations that lead to emergent transformations. This highlights the complexity involved when seeking to understand transformation (Temper et al. 2018). Most studies focus on deliberate system-level transformations paying less attention to the processes of individual transformations. Doing so is problematic because individual transformations underpin efforts towards collective action and deliberate transformations, and due to their potential for uncoordinated system-level transformations.

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² For example, a coalition emerged that sought to create direct supply chains between urban consumers and organic small-scale farmers. After a few days, more than 400 urbanites expressed interest in linking to small-scale organic producers, highlighting the demand for local food production in times of crisis. In the summer of 2021, a year and half after starting, their social media site has 134,000 members and many direct sales are being facilitated.

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