



EURO CITIES



THEMATICS X

- SOLIDARITY
- CULTURE
- ECONOMY
- PUBLIC SPACE
- ENVIRONMENT
- TECHNOLOGY
- HEALTH
- EDUCATION / INFORMATION
- TOURISM
- CHILDREN



# Athens engages citizens in reform

## Turning grassroots activities into tools

Athens has seen the value of harnessing the active civil society that has emerged during Greece's financial and social crisis. Its synAthina social innovation platform is facilitating novel community-led solutions for local problems and a new culture of public policy making.

The operational capacity of Athens' city government had been drastically reduced by the country's economic crisis and austerity measures. To compound the problem, outdated regulations were stifling reforms that could have made the government more effective in leaner times. As a result, trust between citizens and government had broken down. Against this backdrop, community groups across the city were taking it upon themselves to find solutions to newly-emerging problems and bringing fresh ideas and energy to the task.

As grassroots social initiatives sprung up to tackle issues such as homelessness, urban poverty and graffiti vandalism, former documentary maker Amalia Zepou got involved - and inspired. Believing in the potential of these initiatives to make a difference and that the city should provide a framework and instruments to support them, she approached the mayor. Working first as his advisor and then as elected vice mayor for civil society, Amalia Zepou set about creating a new model for making use of the capacity of public-spirited citizens to find simpler, faster and more sustainable solutions for the city.

### Collecting ideas

The vice mayor's ambition was to enable the municipality to capitalise on civil society's collective intelligence to help respond to its most taxing current problems and also to highlight where local administration services and ways of working need to change. A centralised, systematic mechanism was clearly needed to co-ordinate, support and learn from volunteer efforts. While a simple digital space for sharing information about activities had already been created, a €1 million award by the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge meant this could be developed into a sophisticated social innovation platform: synAthina.



We have a significant reduction in the capacity of the city's government and at the same time see very large number of autonomous civil society groups emerging, with citizens collaborating to come up with solutions to newly emerging problems in the city.

**Haris Biskos, synAthina Platform Project Manager, City of Athens**



cities in action

November 2016

where: Athens, Greece  
what: Innovation  
when: 2013 - ongoing

SynAthina provides a way for community groups to promote their activities and publish public calls for volunteers and materials. Thousands of people from all political and professional backgrounds, many of them unemployed, have uploaded information about their initiatives as well as proposals for city improvements under categories such as public spaces, cultural activities, the environment and health. A matchmaking facility then connects them with relevant sponsors including government representatives, NGOs and businesses who can offer knowledge, equipment or funding to help strengthen and scale-up their projects.

## Adding value

By collecting and connecting citizens' activities, the platform makes them visible to all and valuable to the municipality in many ways. The synAthina team evaluates the activities, for example, identifying the issues citizens care most about and highlighting the high-impact projects from which the city could learn. It also explores how specific best practices might be incorporated by local government into service updates or redesigns. Some activities also reveal where regulations, culture, routines or even mayoral priorities would benefit from being amended to align with the actual needs out on the streets.

SynAthina's successes so far include an initiative that takes unsold produce from a farmers' market to those in need, an anti-graffiti project whose network of volunteers is helping clean up the streets and a healthcare organisation, which runs 70 free clinics for people without health insurance. The project's vision of public engagement in reform is perfectly exemplified by one major project, Kypseli Market. Empty for 10 years, this important municipal building was in need of renovation and reinvention. SynAthina provided a way for over 470 proposals for potential uses to be submitted. Kypseli is now set to become a central city hub, with cultural and creative workspaces, shops, offices, municipal services and a pavilion for exhibitions.

## Sustaining success

SynAthina has a real world presence too, with the team opening its office doors every Monday to support and empower groups' proposals.

It also runs thematic meetings to stimulate ideas and cooperation among neighbourhood groups, institutions, sponsors and organisations. With this omnipresence and its enthusiastic team, synAthina has proved highly effective. So far, 2,070 activities have been registered and realised by 235 community groups. Up to 10 activities a year are being adopted by local government. The city is also working on loosening rules such as those around selling and cooking food on the streets.



Supporting initiatives rather than suppressing them is helping the municipality regain residents' trust, give confidence to people who had felt powerless and generate pragmatic proposals for projects, structural changes and reforms. It hasn't always been easy though: in particular, the municipality is having to learn to act as quickly as civil society does and to respond to a range of ad hoc initiatives while also progressing the mayor's strategic agenda. There is a great will, however, to reap the full benefits of synAthina today and to ensure it extends beyond the mayoral term and into the future, ideally absorbed into the municipality as a fully functional city service within a new innovation unit.

“SynAthina has developed from a pilot programme to a government tool for civic engagement, opening up to a side of Athens that tended to be socially excluded.”

**Amalia Zepou, Athens Deputy Mayor  
for Civil Society**

