



ATHENS

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM SYNATHINA

How can local government work productively with citizens to promote the wellbeing of the city?





# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What has synAthina achieved?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>How does it work?</b>	<b>10</b>
• Collecting	10
• Connecting	12
• Sieving	14
• Incorporating	16
<b>Select tools and tactics</b>	<b>18</b>
• Online Platform	19
• Open Mondays	20
• Open Calls	21
<b>What Athens is learning</b>	<b>22</b>
• To build trust, start by listening	22
• Have something tangible to offer	22
• Community groups find value in collaboration	23
• Engaged citizens can help a city achieve its goals	24
• City culture change is vital – but takes time	24
• A long term view	25
<b>Further reading</b>	<b>26</b>

# INTRODUCTION

**The Mayors Challenge encourages cities to generate bold new ideas that solve urban challenges and improve city life, as well as have the potential to spread.**

The competition invites hundreds of cities to define a serious problem and develop a bold, new idea to solve it.

The City of Athens is one of five winners of the Bloomberg Philanthropies 2014 Mayors Challenge.

In the wake of Greece's economic crisis, austerity measures had significantly reduced the operational capacity of Athens' city government. Outdated regulations and practices were stifling the reforms necessary to make government work in leaner times, and trust between citizens and government had eroded. As of 2013, only 13% of Greek citizens would say they trusted public institutions, while 98% considered corruption a major problem.<sup>1</sup>

When Bloomberg Philanthropies announced the 2014 Mayors Challenge, the City of Athens devised an ambitious project that would generate real insights about residents' needs, and help to rebuild trust between citizens and the municipality. The result was synAthina, a plan to document, strengthen and support Athens' civil society – and use the findings to inspire change in city hall.

While synAthina has roots in the Greek financial crisis and is, by definition, an Athens solution to an Athens challenge, its core purpose resonates internationally. Since synAthina launched, the team has received several expressions of interest from other Greek and European cities wanting to learn more about the project, and to replicate some aspects of it in their local contexts. In 2015, Athens launched a new Eurocities Creative Citizenship working group that today counts 56 city-members.

synAthina is part of a bigger movement towards local democracy and meaningful citizen engagement. This booklet provides a resource for other cities who are interested in supporting citizen initiatives that improve quality of life in their city. Drawing on Athens' experience, it aims to share key lessons learned by the city, and to provide guidance to local governments seeking to work more collaboratively with citizens.

1. Source: Gallup World Poll

## THE PROBLEM

In the aftermath of financial crisis, the City of Athens was left with limited resources, hampering its capacity to deliver critical services. Against this backdrop, community activities sprang up quickly across the city. A vibrant civil society emerged, with large numbers of citizens working together to improve their neighborhoods.

However, these initiatives were often spontaneous, and invisible to the municipality. The new crop of community groups were disconnected from each other, and from potential supporters. There was no clear way for city government to engage with their activities, which carried on alongside its own social services.

Furthermore, the city recognized that these activities were often restricted by outdated regulations, and a lack of infrastructure and support. They wanted to tap into the potential of this newly active civil society and capitalize on the ideas and energy in communities to drive change in city hall.

## THE RESPONSE

Athens' winning idea is synAthina: a public platform to build trust and encourage collaboration between civil society and the city. synAthina connects citizens who plan activities to the people and organizations that can increase their impact. It harnesses the creativity of citizens, and the momentum of their ideas, to change city government for the better.

At the heart of synAthina is a website platform that allows members of the community to engage in problem solving and reform. Individual citizens and groups submit activities, as well as ideas on how to improve their city. Citizens who submit ideas are then connected to the relevant local government representatives, non-governmental organizations, and private businesses that can help make their ideas a reality.

If traditional processes are prohibiting the advancement of good ideas, the synAthina project team works with partners in city hall to upgrade policies and embed a culture of openness with the human capacity of the city.

# WHAT HAS SYNATHINA ACHIEVED?

“Athens has recognized the role of civil society and has dynamically embraced citizens’ initiatives in its decision-making process. In times of austerity, we wanted to create a systematic mechanism that collects the available capacity of public spirited citizens to co-create new solutions for a better life in the city.”

Giorgos Kaminis, Mayor of Athens

synAthina aims to enable a better relationship between the municipality of Athens and active citizens. The team has categorized the work of synAthina into four main activities: **collecting**, **connecting**, **sieving** and **incorporating**.



1

## COLLECTING



Mapping and documenting citizen-led initiatives

The first step towards supporting citizens' participation is to understand what they already contribute to the city. In Athens, the crisis fueled the emergence of many citizens-led initiatives covering basic services that the city can no longer afford to deliver. However, these initiatives are often spontaneous, and invisible to the municipality.

The synAthina team uses an online platform and dedicated staff to map and document what is already happening in the city. This is a powerful way to build trust and show that the city values active citizens; spot opportunities to coordinate efforts for more effective action; and enable the municipality to better understand citizen's priorities.

### IMPACT

synAthina has succeeded in creating an evolving map of Athens' civil society. To date, it has generated significant interest and engagement from local community groups, with the number of community based activities registered on its digital platform at 3,000 and counting.

2

## CONNECTING



Strengthening the ties between community groups, sponsors, and the municipality

Grassroots initiatives tend to be led in spontaneous ways by small numbers of individuals, and often act in isolation. As a result, they may miss out on the opportunity to support each other, and may fail to achieve impact at scale.

In addition to connecting community groups with each other, synAthina facilitates connections with potential sponsors, who may support the groups by providing volunteers, specific expertise, equipment, or funding.

Moreover, when necessary, synAthina sources support from relevant municipality departments. These connections ensure that citizens' ideas and efforts can flourish and draw on resources available in the city.

### IMPACT

Around 400 citizen led initiatives have reached out on the synAthina platform seeking access to resources and networks to empower their efforts. Over 200 positive collaborations have emerged, whether that's community groups working together to deliver services, or new initiatives connecting to municipal resources.

3

## SIEVING



Identifying opportunities for citizens to partner with government

Supporting civil society to have a greater impact on the life of the city is not just about building a resilient network. It is also about inspiring new activities to emerge. The synAthina team conducts field work to identify best examples of citizen-led initiatives, evaluate their impact, and capture their key features. Through the platform, synAthina promotes best practices, in order to inspire both citizens and the municipality.

When this process reveals a match between the interests of citizens and city leaders, synAthina can facilitate grassroots organizations to partner with local government. This type of partnership enables the city to take on complex, intractable social problems that no city hall, business, or community group could tackle alone.

### IMPACT

Building on the issues that citizens care about most, synAthina has brought community groups together to help deliver on several of Mayor Kaminis' big priorities. It has mobilized community groups to transform previously derelict buildings into new public spaces, like the recently re-opened Kypseli Market. synAthina partnered with Athens' Vice Mayor for waste management and cleaning to launch an anti-graffiti campaign supported by banks, businesses and civic groups. The city provided the cleaning supplies and volunteers committed to cleaning and maintaining the streets where they live and work. Unlike previous efforts, cleaned and protected streets have remained free of graffiti — in the past, buildings were re-tagged within days, if not hours, and the city could not keep up.

4

## INCORPORATING



Leveraging collective community voice to drive change in city hall

Civil society can sometimes be restricted by a government's bureaucratic culture. There is a lot to be learned from the resourceful and nimble ways grassroots solutions work that can improve government efficiency. synAthina amplifies the community voice to challenge the municipality to change ways of working that have long been the norm. But it also develops tools and methods to coach community groups to increase their impact. Working closely with both sides to build a culture of innovation and collaboration requires new city skills, such as design, moderation and more transparent accountability, and synAthina offers the context and platform to develop them.

### IMPACT

synAthina's work has led to the creation of a new department in the municipality. The Innovation Office launched in early 2017, and will lead on and support innovative projects within the municipality, building on practices developed and often inspired by synAthina. This demonstrates a commitment from the mayor to make the methods that synAthina has developed an integral part of the city's structure.

# HOW DOES IT WORK?

The synAthina team has developed specific methods, tools and processes to help citizens activities achieve their goals. Some are known techniques, while others are new, or have rarely been applied in the context of local government.

1

## COLLECTING



Mapping and documenting citizen-led initiatives

### TOOLS & TACTICS

#### Online platform ([www.synathina.gr](http://www.synathina.gr))

Used to map and promote community activities by theme, date and district

#### Public Engagement Officer

A dedicated synAthina team member whose role is to document and actively network with community groups, encourage them to use the platform, and connect them with one another

#### Open calls

Collecting ideas and proposals from community groups and active citizens to respond to a particular need or challenge

#### synAthina Kiosk

A community space in the center of Athens, opened up to host citizen activities

## AN INTERVIEW WITH PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OFFICER

Katerina Gkoutziouli talks about her role as a Research and Public Engagement Officer.

### Not just an online platform

Public engagement is an important part of my role. The first step is to research and identify community groups. The second step is to invite these groups for a telephone or face-to-face meeting. I have found that these methods have proven more effective than reaching out through email. I also keep a calendar for all community events and conferences, which I attend to establish and reinforce relationships - this normally includes 3-4 events per week. My role requires strong coordination and time management skills when planning meetings with diverse groups of people.

Most of my time is spent on the ground, mapping community groups. Each district has their own specific issues. Identifying groups in their contexts helps me make connections between activities and themes so that I can define the right strategy for each district.

### Being in tune with the community

Research skills are essential for neighborhood mapping and finding community groups using desk-based and on the ground methods. An analytical and critical mind is integral, as my role involves coordinating and navigating through lots of dense information.

Being adaptable is also key. I need to adapt my behavior and my language to specific situations and show empathy. You also need an ability to reach beyond the usual suspects, and find groups that are not obviously visible. Sometimes we have to act intuitively. One

example of this is when I inquired about a building undergoing renovation work in my local area. I discovered the building was being transformed into a community center for refugees. I started attending set-up meetings. At first, I did not reveal my identity, because I know that some groups are skeptical of what the government does. In the end they saw that I was like them, so I invited them to the office and offered to put them in touch with relevant stakeholders such as educators or architects, who could help support their project. In order to build trust with groups, it is vital that I demonstrate my compassion towards community groups. Because I used to be involved in civil society, I am able to connect.

### The main challenge is to build trust

There is a general feeling of mistrust towards the Greek government, meaning that activist groups tend to resist state participation. I tackle this by explaining what they can achieve through synAthina. I explain that we can connect them to other groups so that they can spread and scale their activities, and achieve greater impact.

### Capturing an ever-evolving civil society

More researchers will be required at some point since civil society constantly gives birth to new ideas and is always changing. This is especially true with the younger generation. We have seen many young people forming community groups or social enterprises. It wasn't the case in the past. Growing issues such as the refugee crisis are also triggering a rise in groups being established to help support the demand. This is why I think the platform will always require more research and public engagement.

## 2

### CONNECTING



Strengthening the ties between community groups, sponsors, and the municipality

#### TOOLS & TACTICS

##### Online platform

Used for ideas sharing, networking, and peer-to-peer match-making between “doers” and “givers”

##### Public Engagement Officer

A dedicated synAthina team member whose role is to document and actively network with community groups, encourage them to use the platform, and connect them with one another

##### Open Mondays

Weekly meetings on Monday afternoons where citizens are invited to drop-in the municipality buildings, share their ideas, and make requests for support

#### CASE STUDY

##### LIBRARY FOR REFUGEES AT A DAY-CARE CENTER

The library, which was launched in July 2017 at the CRS Hellas refugee day-care center in Patission Street, highlights synAthina’s ability to connect civil society actors with the aim of coordinating their actions and enhancing their impact.

The We Need Books organization joined the network of synAthina in its search for synergies that would help them build multicultural libraries for refugees. The disclosure of this need to synAthina’s network of stakeholders provoked the positive response of the organization CRS Hellas, which offered to create a library at the refugee day-care center operating on Patission Street, hosting single parent families.

The library created consists of 320 books in Farsi, Pashto and Arabic and over 450 books in English. The space is designed to serve everyone, regardless of the level of education, interest or taste. It provides classical literature, teen literature, history, cooking, art, education, comics, science fiction, dictionaries and encyclopedias.

#### CASE STUDY

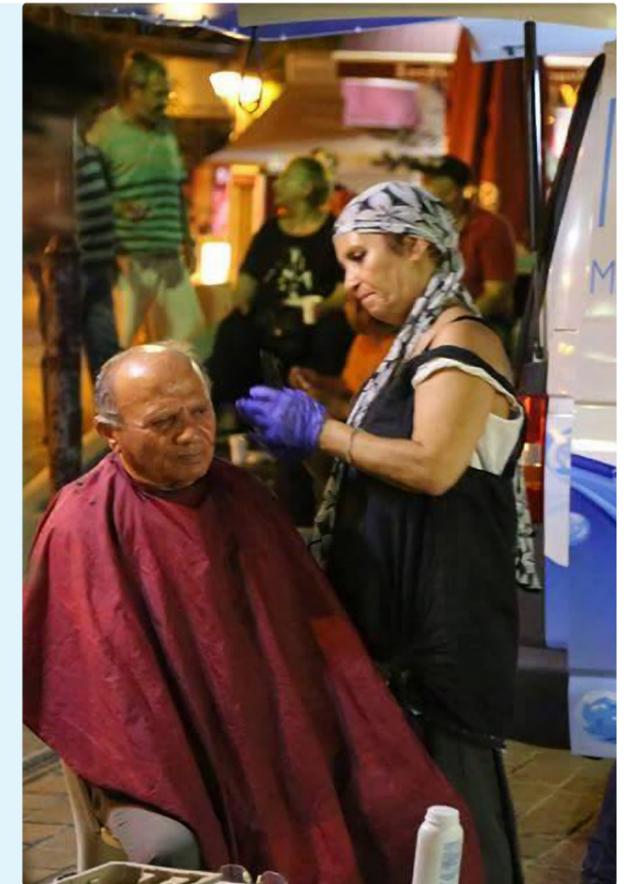
##### ONE STOP

In April 2016, representatives of several community groups supporting homeless people, met at the offices of synAthina during an Open Monday session in order to explore opportunities to cooperate.

The participants included The Unseen and Bridge, both street work organizations, Ithaca Laundry, a mobile laundry service for homeless people, PAREA, a food distribution organization, as well as Katy Aravantinou, a citizen who offers free haircut services.

Together, they decided to join forces to hold a weekly event, called One Stop. The event takes place every Wednesday and Sunday night at the synAthina kiosk, in the center of Athens. In addition to the basic services listed above, the line-up is open to entertainers, medical staff and anyone else who is willing to contribute. The ambition is to avoid the undignified routines of queuing for help and to create an atmosphere of community and festivity.

People using the services provided at One Stop have reported that having a regular and reliable event to go to makes a difference, as most organizations that do outreach with homeless people don’t have spaces, and it can be a challenge to know where and when to get support.



One of the organizations contributing to One Stop is Ithaca Laundry, a van that has been converted into a mobile unit for washing and drying the clothes of homeless people.

In addition to connecting Ithaca Laundry to the other community groups and financial sponsors, synAthina helped facilitate connections with the municipality’s energy and water departments so that the mobile laundry unit is able to access water and electricity at different points in the city.

# 3

## SIEVING



Identifying opportunities for citizens to partner with government

### TOOLS & TACTICS

#### Fieldwork

Intensive fieldwork to identify the best examples of citizen-led initiatives, evaluate their impact and capture their key features

#### Online platform

Used to promote best practices via case studies

#### Open calls

Encouraging municipal services and departments to use an open call process to invite proposals from citizens to respond to a particular need or challenge of the city.

#### Community consultation

Using participatory processes for public consultation to engage members of the community in decision making, to decide the future of a project, or to play an active part in implementing solutions

### CASE STUDY VICTORIA SQUARE PROJECT

Conceived by artist Rick Lowe as an ongoing social sculpture during the documenta14 exhibition in Athens, Victoria Square Project has evolved into an open community center in the place of a previously vacant shop in the neighborhood of Victoria Square, one of the most deprived areas of Athens, severely hit by the financial crisis.

More than 150 activities have taken place in collaboration with the local community, businesses, public institutions, municipal programs, and international and local artists, highlighting the cultural and historical features of the area. Victoria Square Project is one of the best examples of solving the problem of vacant spaces in Athens, and has added to the municipality of Athens wider strategy to tackle the problem in the city together with citizens.

[victoriasquareproject.gr](http://victoriasquareproject.gr)

### CASE STUDY ITHACA LAUNDRY

Ithaca Laundry is a converted van that provides a mobile unit for washing and drying the clothes of the homeless for free. The mobile nature of the van allows the Ithaca Laundry team to reach out and serve many people living in the streets of Athens who cannot leave their spots in the city unattended. In addition its operational costs are low since it does not need to pay rent and related costs. By helping homeless people maintain their cleanliness, Ithaca Laundry aims to help them regain their dignity and self-esteem, while also creating new jobs by allocating responsibilities of running the service to the beneficiaries themselves.

Networking and synergies are essential for the effective function of Ithaca Laundry. It has collaborated with the City of Athens' Reception & Solidarity Center and established connections with other solidarity focused groups within the regular activity One Stop at the kiosk of synAthina, thus ensuring that its services are properly



targeted and find suitable beneficiaries. The equipping of the van with professional machinery and its daily supplies of consumables are funded by donations.

The Ithaca Laundry and was awarded the Social Impact Award 2015.

[ithacalaundry.gr](http://ithacalaundry.gr)

# 4



## INCORPORATING

Leveraging collective community voice to drive change in city hall

### TOOLS & TACTICS

#### Promoting success

Publicizing the success of key demonstration projects, to help city leaders understand how working with community groups could help to achieve departmental goals

#### Leading by example

Using flagship projects to demonstrate collaborative and innovative methods

### CASE STUDY CURING THE LIMBO

In 2017, Athens was announced as winner of a €5-million grant from the European Union to apply the synAthina approach to another critical situation: the dramatic surge of refugees and migrants entering the country.

Athens' "Curing the Limbo" plan was one of 15 proposals selected from the 206 submitted by 21 EU states. Curing the Limbo aims to use synAthina to empower refugees and migrants as they build their new lives in the country. The city will provide refugees accommodation in formerly abandoned public and privately owned properties, in return for refugees engaging in community service and a program of skills development. In addition, the University of Athens will help to deliver workshops to provide language and skills training. Community groups will offer opportunities for refugees to get involved in community-based volunteer work.

### CASE STUDY KYPSELI MARKET

#### A shared vision for a city asset

The Kypseli Market has been an emblematic municipal building for the local community, but been unused for many years. The demolition of the building was quite often on the agenda, but was fortunately prevented, following interventions and protests by residents of the area. Finally, in 2006, the building was declared listed but the uncertainty around its re-activation by the municipality led to a squat by local community groups. In 2012, the Municipality of Athens undertook its restoration using EU funding ending the squat, which had already started fading away. The aim was to reinstate its historical form and activate it, to the benefit of the local community.

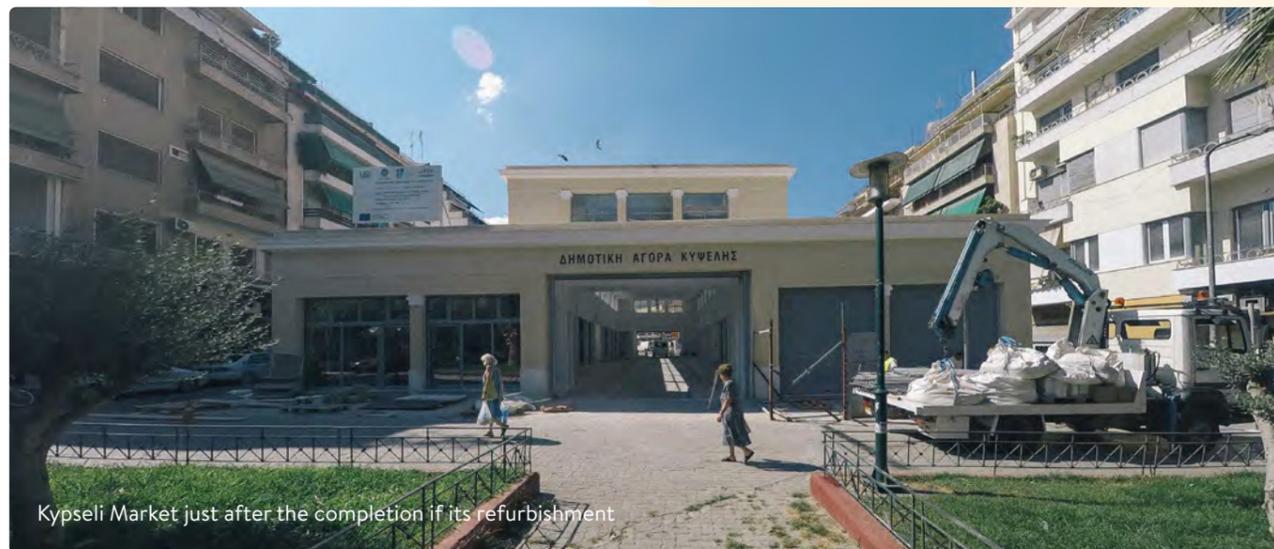
In May 2015, the synAthina team led a public consultation event to engage members of the community to help decide the future of the building as well as to propose ideas on its use. 470 proposals from 200 participants were collected, and this information was used to create a new vision and business plan for the building. In June 2016, following intensive preparatory work, synAthina placed an open call for proposals, aiming at appointing an appropriate body for the overall management of the commercial and cultural spaces of the Kypseli Municipal Market, for a period of five years. synAthina invited non-profit organisations, collaborative social enterprises and legal entities with a purely charitable

scope of business, to elaborate on ideas regarding the overall management of the Market, by submitting proposals that would further specify the results of the consultation process. The task was to create an integrated framework for hosting not for profit and creative collaboration schemes, by fostering innovation, utility for a wider range of persons and the exchange and dissemination of ideas by open processes.

In November 2016, synAthina launched a six-week program in the market for community groups and individuals to organize collaborative events and public workshops in advance of the official opening of the market. This showcased the diversity and creativity of groups that had been previously unknown and added to the organic rise of the new management model.

#### Impact on the municipality

synAthina worked with the local community to co-create a new model of place-making: a public consultation for the new uses of the market and an open call inviting proposals from local organizations to manage the market. Both practices now have a wider resonance within the municipality. The development of consultation processes for major issues has become a strong model for the municipality, used to open up to its creative civil society to develop several projects including the pocket-innovation program at the commercial triangle of Athens, the national park redevelopment, and the open-school program.

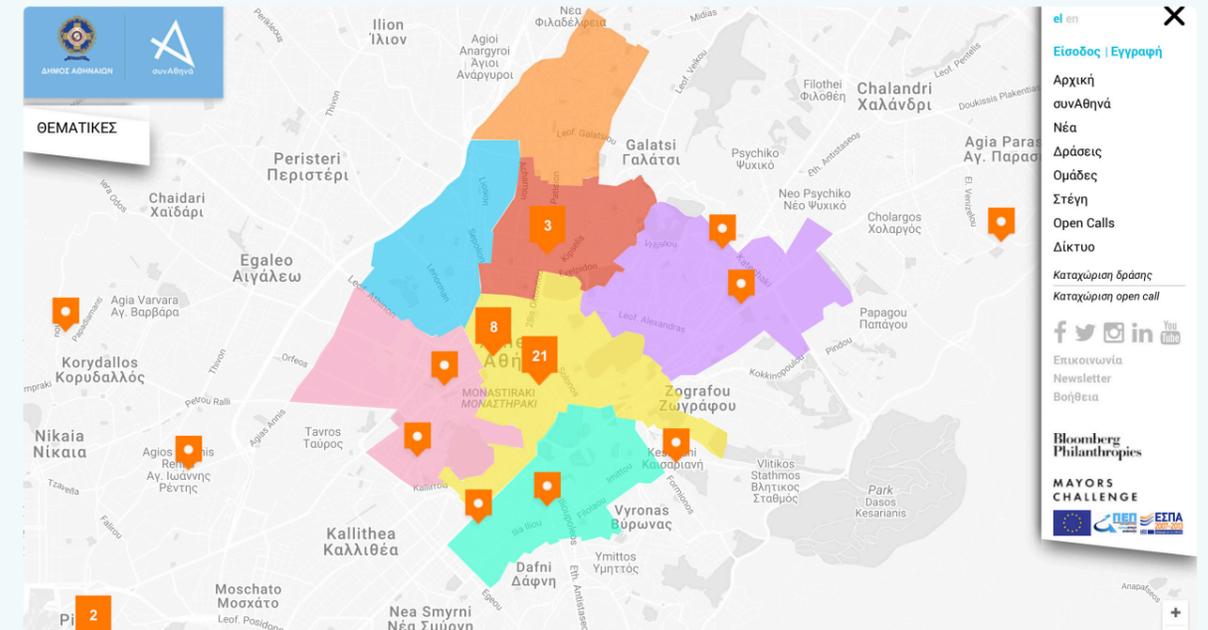


Kypseli Market just after the completion of its refurbishment

# SELECT TOOLS AND TACTICS

There are some very practical tools and tactics that have worked in Athens to breathe new life into the relationship between city and civil society. To date, Athens has received many expressions of interest from other cities who would like to apply their methods, and learn from their work.

## SYNATHINA ONLINE PLATFORM



synAthina has developed an online platform where citizens can submit and map initiatives. The platform was developed to support the following functions:

**1. A networking tool** through which community groups can send requests to the municipal services and communicate their needs to a network of supporters. These can, in turn, enhance their work through donations, volunteering, or contribution of expertise. This networking tool gives community groups the chance to collaborate and create their own autonomous networks of mutual support.

**2. A directory of activities** that can be browsed by theme, location and date. This renders the platform not only valuable for citizens looking to get involved with some of the activities, but also to the municipality, which has access to a live map of the community activities and assets.

**3. Best practices** are highlighted. In addition, there is support for the publication of toolkits, which share lessons from the implementation of actions that are considered exemplary.

**4. Open Calls** inviting citizens to submit projects or to get involved in initiatives led by the municipality or other community groups strengthens participation.

In 2018, synAthina will open source its online platform transforming its digital source-code from a protected copy-righted asset to open software available to be distributed freely among a community of cities, organisations and innovators. Cities who share the same ideas on the value of collecting and facilitating citizens' led initiatives but they would like to have more tools to empower their work on this direction could then have access to synAthina's source code, obtain it, modify it, study, improve, change and distribute it freely among their network.

## OPEN MONDAYS



In order to facilitate connections and partnerships, synAthina hosts Open Monday sessions. These take place every Monday afternoon, at the synAthina offices. While the office is within the municipality, it has been designed to feel very different from the rest of the building: it is bright, open, and people are invited to sit around a large communal table. It may seem secondary, but the quality of the space is actually a key condition for community groups to feel open, comfortable and safe. This is in contrast with the traditional image citizens might have of municipality officials as older and unapproachable.

The Open Mondays are often focused on themes around a specific priority for the city. For example, when the city saw an increase in the number of refugees, coupled with an increase in initiatives aiming to work with them, synAthina invited relevant community groups, city departments, private stakeholders and experts to share ideas and form new partnerships around supporting refugees.

In addition, synAthina started to collaborate with the Bodossaki Foundation to form a new program, Social Dynamo, which empowers social initiatives by providing training in project management, fundraising, and other skills they might need to sustain and grow their impact. This helps to attract new community groups and to make sure their visit to the municipality is worth their time.

*“Half come with a spirit of wanting to collaborate. The ones who do already know what to expect from the Open Monday sessions. They know what kind of tools we use. They come here to connect. But the other half don’t really know what they want. They come because the municipality is open. The important thing is that when they visit the office, they can talk to the vice mayor. That is very important to them, to feel that their idea is legitimized.”*

*Haris Biskos, synAthina Project Manager*

## OPEN CALLS

One of the key methods that highlights and enhances synAthina’s connecting role is the publication of open calls. An open call is a process that any organization can use to invite proposals from citizens or other organizations to respond to a particular need or challenge. Until recently, the authors of open calls were mainly groups of citizens seeking allies for the implementation of activities in the city.

Recently, however, open calls have been used for more than communication among members of civil society. Municipal services and departments have started to use open calls to ask the city’s creative forces to submit ideas and solutions for the city’s problems.

There are now numerous instances of the open calls method being used in municipality projects. One notable example is the ‘Open Schools’ program. Through this initiative, schools stay open after hours, hosting creative workshops for students and adults and bringing communities together to address real needs, increase engagement and interaction between schools and neighborhoods. The synAthina platform was used to easily identify and locate community groups to take part in the process. The project is now regularly using the open calls methodology to invite citizens to submit activities they would like to see in schools.



## TOP TIPS

# WHAT ATHENS IS LEARNING

## 1. To build trust, start by listening

*“You don’t need to engage citizens. You need to listen to what they are already doing. Once you have the listening tool there, everything else – support, collaboration, inspiration – flows from that.”*

*Vice Mayor Amalia Zepou*

**Listening sets the tone.** In the wake of Athens’ new culture of public-spirited activity, the synAthina team knew that a top-down citizen engagement initiative would never stick. By simply mapping what is happening in the city, synAthina sends a strong signal that the city values its active citizens, and appreciates their work. The team has found this a powerful way to build trust. It sets a new tone for any citizen engagement attempts that follow.

### **Actions speak louder than words.**

Because synAthina is based on community groups’ actions (not their ideas, words, or good intentions), it highlights what citizens are actually doing for their city. The platform has given the municipality new insight into the issues and services citizens care about most – those they are actually motivated to take action on.

### **It helps to know your audience.**

synAthina’s work is all about opening local government, and building deeper, more constructive relationships with communities. Members of the core team, including the Vice Mayor for Civil Society and Innovation, Amalia Zepou, who founded synAthina, do not come from government – in fact, most have a background in community development. One of the advantages is that they are well-placed to build trust with community groups.

## 2. Have something tangible to offer

**Breaking the ice.** When synAthina started in 2014, the municipality was perceived as untouchable and impenetrable. City hall had always been closed to citizens. One of synAthina’s first actions was to open up the building and invite community groups to meet the Mayor. This was the first step to breaking the ice. Three years later, in 2017, synAthina invited community groups to present their activities to the Mayor. The team describes this as a big moment that symbolized the shift from a relationship based on mistrust to one based on mutual understanding and celebration.

**Up front commitment.** Many community groups operate with little funds and assets. The synAthina team needed to provide something practical to answer some of their immediate needs, before they could successfully engage them with the wider, intangible vision of an open government. When synAthina launched, the team took over a disused building in the center of Athens, offered it up to citizens and involved them in managing the space. This ensured they felt ownership of the space and sent a powerful message about the ethos of synAthina being an enabler for community groups, and valuing their contribution to the city.

**It helps to get face-to-face.** In the process of building the platform, the team realized that many new groups were hesitant to make the first step. There was no other tool like synAthina - the platform was unfamiliar for some. For others, the association of synAthina with the municipality may have been off-putting. In order to sign up to the platform, community groups needed to feel it would be genuinely helpful for them - not just a box ticking exercise. The team found that being there in person, when community groups first interact with the online platform to upload their profile, helped to build trust.



## 3. Community groups find value in collaboration, but connections can’t be forced

**Creating the right conditions.** One of the biggest incentives for community groups to use the platform is that synAthina connects them to donors, experts, and municipality services. While the potential impact of a partnership might seem obvious, connections cannot be forced. The synAthina team has learned that it is best to focus on creating the right conditions for relationships to form, and to let collaborations to emerge through their Open Mondays meetings. They have learned to avoid over-managing how people might connect, and not be prescriptive about how they should work together. Now, they typically connect groups, let things progress, and then check-back when it happens to see what impact it had.

## 4. Engaged citizens can help a city achieve its goals

### Mayoral support increases the impact.

Despite their focus on grassroots initiatives, the synAthina team realized that within the municipality, they could further bring hearts and minds on board by proposing to run large projects aligned to the Mayor's priorities - and using those projects to demonstrate collaborative and innovative methods. Because they were seen as political priorities, these have become exemplar projects. They have demonstrated the value of the synAthina approach to the municipality, opening eyes to new ways of working based on collaboration.

**Starting with the easy wins.** In Athens, the municipality overall seemed very far away from working innovatively and collaboratively. However, the team started by reaching out to those colleagues and departments who seemed more open to different ways of working. With them, they could move to implementation quicker, and lead projects that would then serve as an example to unlock other departments. In addition, they brought city officials and community groups together at open forums, to foster trust. Colleagues in the municipality, who were needed to support community projects, felt more connected to them and better understood how working with community groups could help them achieve their departmental goals. This helped to gain the buy-in of city colleagues.

## 5. City culture change is vital – but takes time

**Culture, not just regulation.** In the early stages of the project, the synAthina team thought they would be able to easily identify and remove government rules and regulations that were getting in the way of community activity. This has proven to be true in some cases, but the team soon realized that aiming for regulations changes within a long established bureaucratic culture was harder than they had anticipated. Fortunately, they have also found that in many cases, the barriers to community activity have been less to do with prohibitive rules and regulations, and more with the culture and practices of the municipality and its employees.

The team has since learned that a change in regulation is not always the most significant sign of movement. What they have instead seen is a slow impact on some of the practices of the municipality, mostly through projects they have facilitated. The “Open Schools” project, mentioned above, was the first. A year later, synAthina facilitated the newly established Athens Coordination Center for Migrants and Refugees to build a site based entirely on the synAthina platform's principles. Other examples include the range of new activities it brought for the nomination of Athens as World Book Capital for 2018, and its support to an on-going project for urban design interventions in neighborhoods, the “Polis Square” project.

**Building support internally.** It has taken a lot longer to generate trust internally than it did to get community groups engaged with synAthina. The team are slowly making the case for this way of working, through practical collaborative projects that represent a shared interest for the municipality and community groups. These projects require extensive facilitation from

the team. The synAthina team has learned that the following strategies help build trust and collaboration:

- Involving the Mayor in promoting synAthina inside the municipality. This provides legitimacy and visibility.
- Making sure that requests from community groups to the municipality are as simple and specific as possible to avoid confusion and delays.
- Encouraging municipality officials to make their own requests to community groups, showing that collaboration works both ways, and that they too can benefit from the platform.

## 6. A long term view

**Reflections for past and future.** After four years in the municipality, the team is now evaluating the project's achievements, and the changes synAthina has brought.

The team's ability to moderate projects with multiple stakeholders, in a transparent manner, has introduced a new set of skills among city officials. The phrases ‘co-design’ and ‘co-create’, a previously unknown terminology, are now in regular use. Even the notion of “community groups” (rather than NGOs or established solidarity organizations) is now common in the City's communications. Open working spaces, such as the one synAthina created for its own office, are increasingly imitated by other sectors. While these may seem like small changes, they are the visible signs that a more collaborative culture is emerging.

Finally, synAthina has inspired structural changes in the Municipality. Increasingly, new programs reflect a policy of openness towards the contribution of civil society. Most of these programs have now moved into a new building, the Serafio Sports, Culture and Innovation Center, which gives them a strong physical presence in the Municipality. Perhaps one of the biggest successes of synAthina has been to inspire the launch of the new Innovation Department. This has taken four years, and a lot of progressive trust-building. The team have learnt that, in order to embed new ways of working, they must also be willing to adapt them to fit the existing structure.

synAthina could not have happened without Mayor Kaminis' political vision, and alignment with international efforts to strengthen democratic reflexes in local government. In turn, the team have found that synAthina's practical approach to collaboration and co-design has been key to ensuring the sustainability of the municipality's new programs.

By opening the source code of its platform, and sharing its experience with other cities, synAthina hopes to continue to stretch, strengthen and refine its idea – and to make a real contribution to the field of citizen engagement.

# GOING FURTHER



## FURTHER READING

**Interview of Giorgos Kaminis, Mayor of Athens, by the Solidarity Cities Network** - <http://solidaritycities.eu/press/coverage/56-interview-with-georgios-kaminis-mayor-of-athens>

**Interview of Athens Vice Mayor for Civil Society and Innovation Amalia Zepou by the Social Innovation Community** - <https://www.siceurope.eu/network/community-led-innovation/meetamalia-zepou-and-her-award-winning-platformcitizens->

**Athens - Eurocities presents the synAthina platform as a case study of social innovation** - [http://nws.eurocities.eu/MediaShell/media/2016%20Awards\\_Cities%20in%20action\\_Athens.pdf](http://nws.eurocities.eu/MediaShell/media/2016%20Awards_Cities%20in%20action_Athens.pdf)

**Article & video on synAthina's winning entry at the Eurocities Awards 2016** - <https://news.gtp.gr/2016/11/18/eurocities-awards-athens-synathina-innovation/>

**Cityscope's article on the rise of grassroots initiatives in Athens** - <http://citiscopes.org/story/2015/how-greeces-economic-crisis-produced-emerging-civil-society-athens>

**Report on the New Europe-City Makers Summit in Amsterdam, May 2016** - [https://issuu.com/pakhuisdezwijger/docs/new\\_europe\\_-\\_city\\_makers\\_summit](https://issuu.com/pakhuisdezwijger/docs/new_europe_-_city_makers_summit)

**Interview of Athens Vice Mayor for Civil Society and Innovation Amalia Zepou , August 2017** - <https://www.bloomberg.org/blog/profile-bold-leadership-deputy-mayor-athens-amalia-zepou/>

**Interview of Athens Vice Mayor for Civil Society and Innovation Amalia Zepou about citizens engagement, September 2017** - <https://www.urban-future.org/single-post/AmaliaZepou>

**Article on how synAthina led to Athens new program "Curing the Limbo" to tackle migrant crisis , October 2017** - <https://medium.com/@BloombergCities/athens-pivots-to-address-migrant-crisis-b2f38cbd5b2>

**Citylab's article on how Athens confronted government distrust by connecting citizens to each other, December 2017** - <https://www.citylab.com/solutions/2017/12/connecting-communities-in-athens/547754/>

**Shareable's article on synAthina, April 2018** - <https://www.shareable.net/blog/synathina-online-community-platform-for-civic-projects>

## SOCIAL MEDIA

-  [facebook.com/SunAthina](https://facebook.com/SunAthina)
-  [twitter.com/synathina](https://twitter.com/synathina)
-  [instagram.com/synathina/](https://instagram.com/synathina/)
-  [linkedin.com/company/synathina](https://linkedin.com/company/synathina)
-  [youtube.com/channel/UCgA-jp-buZG4YMuQE5GGewZA](https://youtube.com/channel/UCgA-jp-buZG4YMuQE5GGewZA)
-  [issuu.com/synathina](https://issuu.com/synathina)

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