

November 2018

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The Urban Lab of Europe !

# The CURING THE LIMBO Project Journal n°1

*Project led by the City of Athens*



**INTEGRATION OF  
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**



European Union  
European Regional  
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Région  
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# The CURING THE LIMBO Project

The **Curing the Limbo** project targets newly arrived refugees and vulnerable locals that are unemployed and without a role in society as well as tackling the issues surrounding the large number of buildings that have become vacant since the economic crisis. Therefore, the project will empower refugees to interact with local citizens while addressing various city and social needs in exchange of access to affordable housing. These actions are especially important for those under-skilled refugees. The project will capitalise on the strong civil society in Athens to help them overcome the state of inertia they find themselves. The city will pilot different and tailored pathways to access affordable housing in exchange for limited hours of community service, providing them in addition with language learning, psychological support as well as knowledge on their rights and duties.

## **Partnership:**

- Municipality of Athens
- Athens Development and Destination Management Agency S.A;
- National and Kapodistrian University of Athens;
- Catholic Relief Services – United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Greek Branch;
- International Rescue Committee (IRC Hellas)

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# 1. Executive summary

*“We are building a process of real social exchange that serves both refugees and the city.”*

## Antigone Kotanidis, Curing the Limbo

Curing the Limbo, an initiative by the Athens Municipality funded by the EU’s Urban Innovative Actions programme addresses some of the most burning challenges that European cities face today. Bringing together a great variety of local and international stakeholders, the project connects issues of refugee integration, housing, exchange economy and active citizenship, thus revealing the **interconnectedness** of policy areas that are usually dealt with separately.

In 2015, Greece witnessed the arrival of 856.723<sup>1</sup> **refugees** through the Greek-Turkish border, mainly from Syria and other conflict-hit countries in the Middle East. Many of these refugees have continued their journey to other countries, 22.822<sup>2</sup> asylum seekers (out of the planned 66,000) were officially relocated to other countries from Greece in the frame of the EU’s relocation programme, and over 35,000 people applied for asylum in Greece between 2010 and 2016.<sup>3</sup>

The 2015 refugee crisis or “Autumn of Solidarity” was a crucial event not only because of its impact on the European political landscape but also in the way it gave a **stress test to existing institutions**, mechanisms and policies of refugee acceptance. The incapacity of European institutions to quickly

react and the simplistic responses developed by national governments both proved that it is impossible to develop responsible, inclusive and long-term solutions to complex challenges without the involvement of a variety of local and international stakeholders, from NGOs through actors of the social economy to urban developers and technological innovators. In this context, cities – with their more hands-on approach and higher innovation capacity – have become laboratories of new policies and programmes. The strategic position of Athens made it a test case of refugee integration.

**Athens** has been at the centre of the refugee crisis, as a main hub on the refugee route. While most arrivals were registered in the Greek islands East and South of the mainland, Athens has become a natural stop for migrants on their way to Northern European countries. In Autumn 2015, many public spaces of the Greek capital were occupied by temporary refugee shelters and the city’s Eleonas neighbourhood became home of the first mainland refugee camp in Greece.

Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, Athens has been home to a **thriving civil society**, with the emergence of hundreds of organisations filling the gaps of public welfare and assuring basic services for the most vulnerable groups in the city, with the help of social kitchens, volunteer-run hospitals, emergency housing programmes or community venues and public spaces. By the time the new humanitarian crisis reached Athens,

<sup>1</sup> Source: UNHCR, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

<sup>2</sup> Source: UNHCR, [http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Relocation-procedures-up-to-30-3-2018\\_gr.pdf](http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Relocation-procedures-up-to-30-3-2018_gr.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Source: Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex, annual aggregated data (rounded), code [migr\_asyappctza].

many of these initiatives and organisations have already developed important competences in education, training, integration and the provision of different social services. In 2015, the arrival of refugees mobilised a great number of **citizen initiatives and NGOs** that could deploy a great amount of expertise and resources towards refugee education, integration, employment and housing, and developed a series of coordination mechanisms to join forces and use more efficiently their complementary competences.

While many refugees were planning to continue their journey to Germany, Sweden and other Northern European countries, most of them remained **blocked in Athens after the closing of the borders in March 2016**, either waiting for the evaluation of their asylum application, for an opportunity to leave or accepting to settle down in Athens. In 2018, there are 64.900 refugees in Greece, including 17.600 on the islands.<sup>4</sup> Many of them will stay in Athens, often in the “limbo,” the in-between state of inactivity and apathy for a long period.

The challenge of public institutions and civil society organisations is therefore no longer to provide the basic emergency services to the freshly arrived individuals and families, but to **help refugees exit the limbo** and pave the way to their **long-term integration**. Integration is a complex process that requires many elements: speaking the local language, interacting with one’s environment, having a job and a place to live are fundamental conditions for being part of a community. Helping refugees move **from apathy to activity** is the first step in this process.

Curing the Limbo connects the aspects of education, active citizenship, employment and housing in one system where skills,

connections, time and space are all resources to be shared within an exchange framework. Bringing together a **partnership** that includes the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the International Rescue Committee, the Catholic Relief Services, as well as the Municipality’s Athens Development and Destination Management Agency (ADDMA) and the Innovation Department’s Synathina team, Curing Limbo **mobilises a lot of knowledge and experiences** in the fields of language education, vocational training, housing and active citizenship.

The **trajectory** envisioned within the project will allow recognised refugees to participate in language courses as well audio-visual and ICT training and engage with citizen initiatives – thus helping them develop their skills, gradually enter the job market and access housing. In turn, citizen initiatives will “make use” of refugees’ engagement in their activities, thus improving their capacities to improve neighbourhood services and facilities and contributing to a better quality of life in Athens. Public, institutional and private property owners will enter the system with their unrented apartments or empty buildings that will be used as housing in exchange for a variety of incentives provided by the municipality or a series of urban regeneration activities and services from the side of citizen initiatives and the refugees involved.

This is a system that requires all elements of the process – education, active citizenship, employment and housing – to work well. For this, the partnership will rely on a **dense ecosystem** of citizen initiatives, NGOs, social economy organisations, private employers, property owners and institutions, developing a **scheme of incentives** to engage them in the process.

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<sup>4</sup> Source: UNHCR, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66298>

Curing the Limbo is an experiment in connecting different areas of policymaking and action at an unprecedented scale. As social polarisation and political extremism is gaining space in Europe, complex responses to the challenges of social inclusion and refugee integration will be an invaluable contribution not only to local policies but also to national and European politics. Following the economic and refugee crises, and experiencing a boom in tourism and real estate speculation, all eyes are on the Greek capital: Athens is a living laboratory of the most urgent

challenges of European cities and its findings will have significant consequences all across Europe.

This Journal will accompany Curing the Limbo in its development. The first issue serves as an introduction: after exploring the project's policy context, ambitions, innovative features, resources, stakeholders and implemented activities, it identifies the main challenges and the responses to these challenges. The issue concludes with the main take away points and anticipates the next issues.

## 2. Background (Specific policy context at the European, national and local level)

*“In 2015 there was a mechanism around Victoria square to coordinate organisations providing different facilities, services and food. Since then the needs have changed: it’s no longer about emergency response, but about integration.”*

Dionysia Lambiri, Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee issues

Following the 2015 refugee crisis, the European and national debates about refugee acceptance have been focusing on the inconsistencies and insufficiencies of the major international treaties and conventions safeguarding refugee rights.

The 1951 **Geneva Convention** (or Refugee Convention) defines the rights of individuals who are granted asylum and the responsibilities of nations that grant asylum. These responsibilities include providing administrative assistance (Article 25), elementary education (Article 22), public relief (Article 23) and social security (Article 24) as well as the possibility of assimilation and naturalisation to refugees (Article 34), and to not expel (Article 32) or return refugees to their country of origin (Article 33).

The 1990 **Dublin Regulation** determines the EU member state responsible of processing an asylum application as the first member state that an asylum seeker entered. After criticism on the

disproportionate responsibility on the shoulders of border states in providing asylum to refugees, the EU proposed a burden-sharing system among member states. Since 1999, the EU has been working on the **Common European Asylum System** (CEAS), to assure a shared responsibility of welcoming asylum seekers. The CEAS has been updated with a number of legislative measures including the **European Refugee Fund**, the **Temporary Protection Directive** and the **Family Reunion Directive**. The European Commission’s **Policy Plan on Asylum**, presented in 2008, aimed at aligning asylum legislation in various EU states. In 2015, in order to ease the weight of new arrivals on member states at the continent’s Southern and Eastern borders, a **reform of the Dublin Regulation** was proposed to introduce a “fairness mechanism:” a **quota system** to relocate asylum seekers among EU states for processing of refugee claims and to resettle asylum seekers whose application had been accepted. The quota system has been one of the most discussed European policies in the past years.

The Greek asylum system is based on the European legislation concerning refugees. Specifically, Greek law grants a number of rights and benefits to persons granted refugee status, including a 3-year (and renewable) residence permit and travel documents as well as access to education, social welfare, employment and health care on the same basis and conditions

as nationals.<sup>5</sup> However, in 2011, the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice found many systemic deficiencies in the Greek asylum system, including the lack of reception centres and poor detention conditions.

Although providing basic assistance to refugees including housing and food is conceived as a responsibility of national governments, experiencing the incapacity of many nation states to deal with the growing number of refugees prompted the UN refugee agency **UNHCR** (founded in 1950 in order to co-ordinate international action to protect refugees) to share many of these responsibilities with local and national bodies. In Greece, UNHCR together with Athens Municipality, other cities and NGOs has taken over the responsibility of a variety of housing and integration programmes: besides operating the **Eleonas Refugee Camp** in Athens (hosting over 2000 people), it has also run the EU-funded **ESTIA accommodation and cash assistance programmes** since 2016. In the framework of the accommodation scheme, over 300 apartments have been rented in Athens by the ADDMA to house asylum seekers and refugees – and many more by NGOs like PRAKSIS or ARSIS. While the original focus of UNHCR was housing, the programme was restructured in order to respond to imminent needs, including elements of social and psychological support and health support. With the ESTIA scheme planned to come to its end, UNHCR is now negotiating with the Ministry of Migration Policy about taking over the programme in 2019. A future scheme might involve transferring housing funds to integration funds or adding rental fees to the monthly allowance of refugees, making them more independent in contracting their

own apartments, but also more exposed to the eventual reluctance of individual and institutional owners to rent their properties to refugees.

Besides the need for a more sustainable model, the new housing scheme – together with the Curing the Limbo project – will also have to face a **new housing situation** in Athens. In the early years of the ESTIA programme, there were a lot of empty apartments in the city and public refugee accommodation programmes had a great chance to access these apartments by renovating them and paying rents upfront. The explosion of city tourism in Athens and the arrival of Airbnb have increased prices by 30% in 2 years and eliminated a large part of the available housing stock, making it more profitable for private owners to use their properties for short term rental.

*“Working together with government organisations and NGOs helps to see how different their thinking is and to get the best out of both worlds.”*

Dionysia Lambiri, Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee issues

While most of asylum-related competences are held by the national government, the **Athens Municipality** has been very active in developing mechanisms with the involvement of local stakeholders to enhance the integration of refugees. In 2015, the position of the **Vice-Mayor for Migrants and Refugees** and the **Department of Support and Social Integration of Migrants and Refugees** was created to deal with the social integration of migrants and refugees and to give more political weight to the question. The Vice-Mayor and the Department oversee the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/greece.php>



**Migrant Integration Centre (MIC)** and the **Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee issues (ACCMR)**, two elements of a concise policy at the municipal level. The MIC is located in a three-storey building, offering spaces for migrant communities and related NGOs.

The **ACCMR** started officially in June 2017 as a public-private partnership, funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation to execute a strategy developed by the Athens Municipality. ACCMR's aim is to create a formal cooperation framework with the civil society organisations that have been active in the area of migration in the past years, building on the experiences of the impromptu coordination mechanism between NGOs and citizen initiatives around Victoria Square in 2015. Following a series of invitations to organisations to join and a process to map the activities of these organisations, now 88 NGOs with over 250

representatives participate at the Centre. ACCMR is organised around working groups focusing on accommodation, education, livelihood and economic empowerment, legal issues, health and gender. Each group brings together municipal departments and NGOs, meeting every month to explore gaps in the various services towards migrants and refugees and to create plans as well as develop proposals to fill these gaps and improve services. These meetings also help each participant to understand the perspectives of other stakeholders. ACCMR has created an ecosystem of cooperation that is an important asset for the Curing the Limbo project. This ecosystem reaches beyond Athens: The ACCMR has a leading role in the **Cities Network for Integration**, a nationwide network to connect municipalities that have an accommodation scheme to work together on integration issues more strategically.

### 3. Ambitions & innovative feature

“Progress is not linear, it is circular. Trainings will not be a one-off event - we will need periodic feedback coming from all directions.”

Thalia Dragona, Athens University

Curing the Limbo has developed an **integrated approach** to address the challenges of recently arrived refugees. At the core of the project lies the recognition that integration is inseparable from education, employment, housing, community and active citizenship - these are all elements that Curing the Limbo brings together in order to develop mechanisms that help refugees leave their limbo status and gain autonomy in their everyday life. Curing the Limbo therefore connects various fields of urban policy and action in order to place refugee integration, housing and active citizenship into the exchange economy ecosystem: each of these components need to work well in order to have the whole system work well together.

Curing the Limbo also constitutes a pioneering **partnership** with partners whose collaboration has no precedent in Greece: the Athens Municipality, its Synathina team, the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the NGOs Catholic Relief Services and International Rescue Committee all have different perspectives, experiences, knowledge and tools to bring to the table. This collaboration, structured through a methodology developed by the university, while raising many challenges about the compatibility of working methods between different public bodies, NGOs and a university, will also open new processes of collaboration between

different actors, offering trajectories not only for refugees but to all members of the supporting ecosystem: teachers, trainers, property owners, community initiatives, NGOs and actors of the social economy. Innovation therefore appears in Curing the Limbo both in how different sectors of working with refugees are brought into a joint effort and within those individual sectors.

“Employment and integration are very linked. If you have a place in the labour market, you have a first-hand understanding of how is it to live in the city, earn your salary, become independent and integrate yourself.”

Ilektra Simitsi, IRC

**Education and employment** are a fundamental part of the project: training programmes will rely on the curriculum developed by the University, with inputs from the IRC. Language is a crucial element of integration and employment: therefore novel teaching methods of Greek and English language will be developed and implemented during the project, mostly with the help of experts from the university with experience in education processes within minority groups. Besides languages, refugees will also obtain financial literacy, knowledge about the work environment and develop connections with the public administration, community groups and private companies as well as acquire new skills through vocational training, including audiovisual and ICT. In order to guarantee the innovativeness and efficiency of the learning trajectories, the training of refugees will be complemented by the training of teachers, job

councillors, employers and other key actors of the learning process. To better understand the needs of the labour market, assessments of previous training processes and feedback from private employers will support the curriculum development and teaching methodologies.

“If you visit a house, you see the apartment but you can also see how the situation of the family is: if you see the apartment neglected, most likely it is related to psychological issues. You need to have this contact. It is not only about the house, also the mental issues, it has to be seen as a whole.”

Sani Paraskevopoulou, Athens Development and Destination Management Agency

The **housing** component of Curing the Limbo will use the experience of previous refugee accommodationschemesbutaimingatdeveloping a more sustainable, integrative and community-

based model. As maintaining the current public funding of rental apartments for refugees is financially not feasible, the housing exchange will introduce various exchange elements in the equation where refugees are encouraged to take part in civic initiatives and services that can indirectly help securing their accommodation. It will not need to be a one-to-one service-for-housing exchange: instead, the skills offered and efforts contributed will enter a pool of skills and actions and will generate a series of exchanges involving public, private and civic actors as well as housing. The exchange element as well as the neighbourhood-based and community-integrated nature of the planned accommodation scheme will also alter the available housing stock, potentially making available apartments or buildings that were invisible for other programmes. In order to secure the necessary amount of housing for the programme, new



incentives to private and institutional owners will be conceived and implemented.

The **community and active citizenship** component of Curing the Limbo is based on the acknowledgement of the thriving scene of citizen activism in Athens and on the understanding of the role volunteering plays both in the development of skills towards employment and in the quality of life in Athens. This component will be assured through synAthina, the community platform of the Athens Municipality, that has mapped and assessed citizen initiatives across the city. Since 2014, synAthina has developed a variety of mechanisms to help groups and initiatives that work on improving the quality of life, assuring services and promoting solidarity, through grants, adjusted regulations, capacity building, promotion and networking. In Curing the Limbo, synAthina will focus on neighbourhoods and initiatives and spaces that can “absorb” refugees in their activities, helping them develop skills, get to know communities and contribute to the creation of a positive impact on a neighbourhood. The platform will provide the connection between refugees and neighbourhood groups and initiatives, allowing beneficiaries of the programme to engage with civic activities within the exchange framework and to actively contribute to the quality of public spaces and services of Athens. This connection assures that besides social integration on the refugee side, the city of Athens will also benefit from the skills and capacities as well as the activities and engagement of refugees.

*“If you do language teaching, job training and accommodation separately you cannot reach real integration.”*

Ilektra Simitsi, IRC

An important innovation of Curing the Limbo is that instead of standard mass solutions, it develops **personalised trajectories** for beneficiaries. Unlike other integration programmes, Curing the Limbo focuses on the **key challenge of helping refugees leave the “limbo”** – the psychological state of apathy – and move towards new activities and engagements. The educational and training curriculum elaborated specifically for the project, the employment matchmaking activities, the housing exchange and the active citizenship component all support this approach. The scale of the project allows for personalised case management, one-to-one counselling and training situations that take into account personal needs and competences. This approach requires mapping the skills and needs of each beneficiary and connecting them to the training, employment, active citizenship and housing opportunities available within the programme. Personalised matchmaking and networking will be supported by a data collection management system, to be developed by a data officer employed within Curing the Limbo.

## 4. Resources & stakeholders

*“Curing the Limbo gives us flexibility as partners to understand what we can do as a partnership.”*

Anastasia Sikiaridi, IRC

Curing the Limbo mobilises a great amount of knowledge and resources within the city of Athens. Through the involvement of a variety of NGOs, community centres, citizen initiatives and local communities, the impact of the project will go beyond the actual partnership itself. The **project partnership** consists of organisations some of which have worked together and therefore have established a knowledge of each other and routine in cooperating. Others are new to the partnership and bring fresh contributions to the programme. The diversity of the partners and their staff, as well as external contributors assures a truly interdisciplinary approach to address the challenges of refugee integration. While the International Rescue Committee as well as the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens have thorough, hands-on experience in innovative educational and training programmes targeted towards vulnerable groups and minority communities, the Catholic Relief Services and ADDMA have been involved in various housing programmes and refugee accommodation schemes and Synathina has a detailed overview and connections with the city’s civic sector.

Besides expertise within the partnership, Curing the Limbo also builds on the **knowledge and experiences of other organisations** active in the fields of social integration, housing and active citizenship, mobilising the **existing social ecosystem** of the city and the **strong culture of cooperation** between different sectors. While

the various project elements will be harmonised and synchronised by the Curing the Limbo project coordination team, and many local and international organisations and initiatives will be involved through various partners, a **technical steering group** will advise the partnership on accommodation models and possibilities in Athens.

*“The municipality is a factor of assurance. For us it is important to maintain a certain degree of commitment and certain level of quality.”*

Lefteris Papagiannakis, Vice-Mayor for Migrants and Refugees

As a reaction to the ills caused by the economic crisis and the challenges posed by the arrival of big waves of refugees, Athens has developed a strong ecosystem of **social integration** initiatives with a diversity of organisations complementing each other in their activities. Among many other organisations, this ecosystem includes large, internationally funded NGOs like Solidarity Now, offering social protection and counselling, as well as operating “solidarity centres” or hubs for civil society organisations; Praksis, focusing on social services and housing support, or Nostos, working on helping vulnerable individuals access the labor market and the Citi Foundation, developing entrepreneurship projects with refugees. Another part of the ecosystem consists of smaller organisations like Cassandra’s, a community space that people can use in exchange for maintaining the building, Generation 2.0, an advocacy group for second generation migrants’ rights and empowerment, Melissa, a livelihood programme and space for migrant women, the Orange House,

a cultural space and shelter for refugees, or the Victoria Square Project, an art gallery involving local migrant and Greek communities in cultural events and exchange.

Similarly to education, integration and social services, the issue of **housing** has also been addressed by many organisations besides public bodies and the UNHCR. The Greek Council for Refugees, was operating a rent subsidy programme among other services. Refugees Welcome, an international network of local organisations connects refugees with local

hosts, thus offering opportunities of cultural exchange instead of mass accommodation. Other initiatives operate in the broader field of housing, elaborating alternatives to extractive and speculative real estate developments in the city. CoHab Athens has been working on developing models of cooperative housing as a means of affordable and inclusive accommodation, while the local chapter of Fairbnb has been exploring the possibilities of socially responsible tourism channeling tourism revenues into social projects in Athens neighbourhoods.



Besides developing cooperation with NGOs working on refugee issues, the Athens Municipality has also developed programmes to help the broader civil society and **active citizenship initiatives** in their daily operations. synAthina, the municipality’s community platform

has mapped, helped, connected and promoted over 3000 activities of 360 groups active in Athens and 3000 activities. Within Curing the Limbo, the synAthina team will have the task of updating the pool of collaborators, NGOs, community groups and social projects in the city that can be

involved in the UIA Initiative. This update also includes identifying the neighbourhoods that can potentially be more receptive to refugees. This renewed overview of Athens initiatives will help the team in “unlocking” local communities and engaging local protagonists as well as cultural mediators to open space for the involvement of refugees in neighbourhood projects. Assessing local needs and capacities through the planned neighbourhood public events will also enable

synAthina to incite new collaborative projects through targeted seed funding.

*“We need an alternative way. Our vision is to change the municipality. We have to keep in mind the administrative part but also the creative part.”*

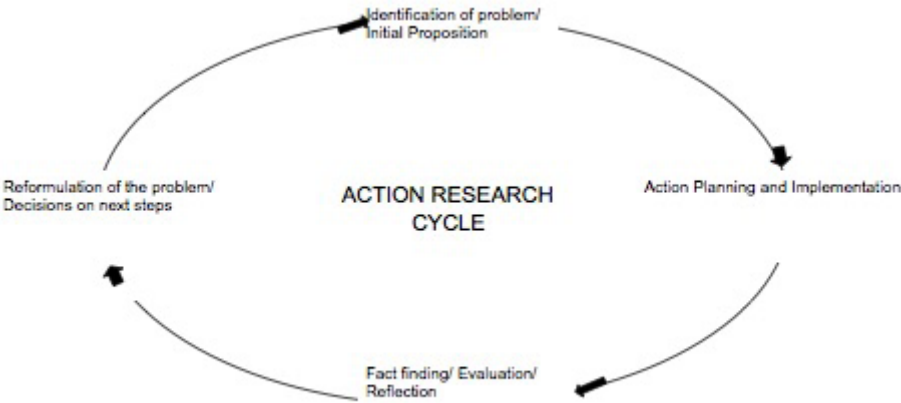
Haris Biskos, synAthina

# 5. Activities in the first 6 months

*“I very much believe in the action-research scheme and in that sense everybody has to contribute at every step. We have to create a shared intervention and evaluation culture, a common ideology and a common methodology.”*

Thalia Dragona, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Curing the Limbo took off with a series of activities in its first 6 months: the development of the project methodology, the design of the project structure, the establishment of the technical steering group and external expert panels as well as the hiring of staff, the opening of the Limbo Exit Lab, and the preparation of the first neighbourhood public events.



To assure the coherence of actions within Curing the Limbo, the University developed an **action research methodology** that establishes the fundamentals of the project: mobilising and producing knowledge through research and exchange, testing concepts through actions, receiving continuous feedback from partners and building new methodologies and models based on these experiences. This methodology is supported by a series of **training courses** where all partners and collaborators take part. In October 2018, the Athens University organised a 60-hour workshop in order to help partners develop a common understanding and working culture between them.

The first period of Curing the Limbo was also used by partners to **refine the project structure** and to **establish the working teams**. At the core of the cooperation, a project management team (with delegates from all partners) and a coordinating team will oversee all the activities and teams. The working teams include the training team (Limbo Exit Lab director, psychologist, social worker and training coordinator); the housing team (CRS and housing facilitation manager); the active citizenship team (Synathina team members and communications manager); the integration or beneficiary monitoring team (social worker, employment counsellor and Limbo Lab director) and the quality assurance team (Limbo Lab



director, IRC, CRS and Synathina). The financial management of Curing the Limbo will be the responsibility of the ADDMA.

Besides the working teams, some additional groups will help the work of the partnership. The **Technical Steering Group**, in charge of giving input and advise in the development of the housing exchange model, is composed by a variety of organisations and experts from the fields of social housing, social geography, refugee integration and solidarity economy. The group includes representatives of the organisations PRAKSIS (focusing on homelessness and social housing for vulnerable groups), Human Rights 360, (in the frontline of refugee integration since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis), ESTIA Programme (ADDMA), Housing Europe and the National Centre for Social Sciences. The Technical Steering Group will meet monthly or bi-monthly, for workshops facilitated by Open Lab Athens, and will offer guidance to the programme. Knowledge to support the work of the Technical Steering Group as well as the working teams will be collected and produced by **external panels**. One panel, consisting of researchers from the University College of London, has produced a desk review about models of housing within the exchange economy. Another panel will work on creating an overview of vacant housing, related property owners and potential incentives in Athens.

*“We wanted to have a transparent system, with a clear criterion, based on merit. The municipality did not have prior experience with this, it was uncharted waters for everyone and the process is very time consuming.”*

Antigone Kotanidis, Curing the Limbo

One of the most time-consuming activities of Curing the Limbo was the **hiring process**. While the most rigid public procurement rules

do not apply to EU programmes, the Curing the Limbo coordination team aimed at a maximally transparent hiring process, including a point system and an interview combined, setting unusually high standards for a Greek administration. Due to the high interest in the Curing the Limbo positions and the complexity of the process, significant delays were created in the project implementation. As a result of the hiring process, 42 new positions were filled, including 5 Greek and 5 English teachers, 5 members of the Synathina team, a data analyst, 4 coordinators for the various training programmes (ICT, audiovisual, cultural mediators and languages), one social worker and one psychologist, and other administrative positions.

A key event of Curing the Limbo’s first 6 months was the **opening of the Limbo Exit Lab**. The Lab uses an existing municipal building within the Serafeio sports complex, occupying a half floor. The Limbo Exit Lab is conceived and designed to be the venue where all partners will regularly meet and where also beneficiaries will spend time at various courses and consultations. In order to cater for different uses and groups, the existing building floor was redesigned by an architect, adapting the floor to the project’s needs and turning the official arrangement and aesthetics of the building into friendlier, more accessible spaces. Thus a variety of spaces were created, including a reception area, a project management room, hot-desks for part-time employees, offices for Synathina, the University and CRS, an office for administration and data management, a space for trainings, a consultation room for psychologists, social workers and employment specialists, and a lunch room. Of course, the Limbo Exit Lab has its limitations and it might not be appealing for all kinds of groups. Therefore many activities will be organised in partner spaces across the city in order to further promote integration.

Besides establishing the structural elements of Curing the Limbo, the working groups have also advanced their agenda in the project's first months. The **training team** has developed a variety of curricula and project methodologies, and designed and organised a capacity-building workshop for all participants and closer stakeholders of the project. The **housing team** launched open calls for the desk review on housing exchange and for the overview of

available housing and related incentives, and participated in a workshop with UCL students to design a housing model that includes an exchange element. The Technical Steering Group has held its first meeting. The **active citizenship team** began discussions with neighbourhood initiatives, met past and potential partner organisations and began to organise the first neighbourhood public events to map hopes and fears and collect ideas for interventions.

## 6. Overall challenges and responses to them

Curing the Limbo brings together the seemingly distant aspects of refugee integration, underutilised buildings, and active citizens in an integrated exchange system and a joint set of actions. As such, the project faces the challenge of **assuring coherence** between various elements and avoiding parallel or duplicated activities and to manage the administrative workload in the most efficient way. Work on refugee training, active citizenship activities and access to housing will have to develop in a synchronised way, assuring that each activity (training, housing and stakeholder group (refugees, active citizen groups, housing providers) enters the programme in the right moment, when their presence is needed and when the programme is capable of accommodating them. This coherence is provided by the University's **project methodology**, on the one hand, helping partners not only in coordinating their activities and refining their schedules, and the project's **coordinating team**, on the other hand, that will oversee the work of the training, housing, integration, active citizenship and quality assurance teams. A **series of training sessions**, organised in October 2018, are designed to enable partners to get acquainted with each others' disciplinary underpinnings and working culture as well as to develop personal relationships for better cooperation.

Another challenge is procurement. Curing the Limbo is a staff-oriented process, depending on the contribution of a high number of project coordinators, trainers, teachers, data analysts, facility managers and other contributors who

will cover the needs of the demanding project. While some new jobs are accommodated within ADDMA, the municipality's development company, many other jobs are created within the university and other partners. The project team aimed at creating an exceptionally transparent hiring process, with open calls launched, written application forms required and interviews organised for every position. The **long times and procedures of public procurement**, however, create potential delays in proceeding with some of the activities foreseen for earlier stages of the project. These delays (between 3-5 months for the composition of different teams) have not put any elements in danger: the changes have been integrated into the project's updated work plan and all partners are following closely the hiring process to adapt their own schedules.

*“The biggest challenging aspect of our work will be case management when we have five different organisations that will have different views on each beneficiary.”*

Anastasia Sikiaridi, IRC

**Beneficiary selection and case management** is another key challenge of Curing the Limbo. As the most competent asylum seekers are likely to have already been relocated or they left the country illegally, the most vulnerable and least educated groups of refugees are left behind in Athens. While the criteria to enter prior housing programmes was vulnerability, Curing the Limbo needs the most engaged and motivated people to join the

programme, who also plan to stay in Greece in the long term. As the pool of beneficiaries might be quite diverse, professors and job counsellors will need to be able to accommodate different levels of knowledge. Furthermore, partners have different logics of working with their beneficiaries and this creates a challenge of assisting them through different training stages and services. A strong project methodology, joined trainings and continuous coordination is needed to tackle these challenges.

*“Someone in the group might have a university degree, other people might have zero experience in working. Someone might speak better English, but with some there might be language barriers. So we have to have clear selection procedures for the people participating and set standards.”*

Ilektra Simitsi, IRC

**Adapting** to changing timelines and to a context in full transformation will be a constant requirement for the project’s success. The project was conceived still in a period of economic crisis, with many buildings laying abandoned and apartments unused. However, with the explosion of city tourism and the corresponding demand for short-term rental facilities, many vacant buildings and apartments have been converted into units to rent on airbnb and other holiday accommodation platforms. This current tendency, combined with the lack of social housing programmes and the non-existence of non-profit housing providers, is leading to an **emerging housing shortage** where apartments available for refugee accommodation are becoming increasingly scarce. While new regulations to limit and control short-term accommodation have been recently developed, in this context, new **incentives towards property owners** are needed to make refugee

accommodation a viable option for them, as well as a more detailed knowledge of the housing stock. The project’s technical steering group, supported by external panels, will develop a housing exchange model that includes a variety of incentives to all participating actors as well as a thorough mapping of vacant housing in Athens.

*“We had the example of cities that we are very close to and whose experience gave us the time to have something in place.”*

Lefteris Papagiannakis, Vice-Mayor for Migrants and Refugees

Part of the changing context is the transformation of the general context and the **alteration or discontinuation of certain national and international programmes** aiming at refugee accommodation and integration. The closure or alteration of the UNHCR’s ESTIA housing scheme might result in unexpected consequences and eventual new waves of refugees or a massive influx from the islands can also create new situations. New programs are being designed for asylees, the project’s target group, which might as well affect its implementation. Therefore vast coalitions of stakeholders are needed, and a variety of strategies and solutions need to be kept open for the case of emergency.

While *Curing the Limbo* relies on the cooperation between a variety of stakeholders, the **general mood towards refugees has also been changing** in the past years. Although Summer and Autumn 2015 were characterised by a wide-spread support to refugees by the population and civil society groups, this support has been decreasing and the coming housing crisis will potentially open a new front of conflicts between refugees and more marginalised Greek and migrant communities. Therefore it is important that the housing

exchange and incentive systems implemented by Curing the Limbo also **take into account the needs of local communities** and create a sensitive balance between serving refugees and broader communities in need. The Synathina team’s work on initiatives of active citizenship and its involvement in specific neighbourhoods will be an important element of building bridges between different vulnerable groups.

Corresponding to the general mood change, Curing the Limbo also faces political challenges. The programme currently enjoys the support of a progressive city government and some progressive state bodies in a close alliance with many civic actors in the city. **Local and national elections in 2019** might bring about new governments

both for Athens and the Greek state. A change in government at the local and/or national level might alter the dynamic of public-civic cooperation, as well as the support to this particular programme. Therefore in order to be sustainable, Curing the Limbo needs to create a working structure that is resilient to political changes, and relies on a variety of foundations and funding sources.

*“The most challenging is the sustainability of the programme: what happens when the programme ends. This is what we should focus on, to create different and diverse safety nets. So you do not rely on only one: if one collapsed, there is still another nine.”*  
 Stefania Gyftopoulou, Catholic Relief Service

**TABLE 1: MAPPING CURING THE LIMBO AGAINST THE ESTABLISHED UIA CHALLENGES**

Challenge	Level	Observations
1. Leadership for implementation	Low	Curing the Limbo enjoys strong political support: two Vice-Mayors are directly endorsing the project. This support from leadership was a pre-condition for the implementation of the project. The upcoming elections and a potential change in leadership might cause new challenges for the project. The partnership includes some outstanding personalities / ambassadors; it is important to keep them aligned with the overall objectives.
2. Public procurement	Low	There are minor investments in the project, with no significant issues. The main challenge within procurement is with hiring: the high number of applications and the complex evaluation procedure have created delays in the process but most of the positions were filled with good candidates.
3. Integrated cross-departmental working	Medium	Several departments and the municipality’s development company are all directly involved in the project and the Social Innovation Department is directly connected to the Mayor’s office. The strong political support to the project helped in proceeding with internal challenges within the municipality. The complexity of the project requires that all project elements (integration, housing, exchange economy and active citizenship) work well. In order to develop a project coherence where various activities are synchronised and harmonised, it is crucial to create a common culture among partners. This common culture is assured by a series of joint training programmes and internal communication.

Challenge	Level	Observations
4. Adopting a participative approach	Low	Curing the limbo is based on a multi-stakeholder partnership. The participation of consortium partners is assured by internal communication and a series of joint training programmes. Besides the consortium, many stakeholders active in the fields of refugee integration, education, housing, exchange economy and active citizenship will be involved through events, workshops, interventions. Various teams within the consortium have well-developed partnerships with professional actors, civil society organisations and neighbourhood initiatives that will be engaged within the programme.
5. Monitoring and evaluation	Medium	Monitoring and evaluation is an important challenge of Curing the Limbo: there are potential tensions between the evaluation criteria that academic, municipal and non-profit partners apply. Therefore, a common language will have to be developed during the workshops and training series. The joint monitoring and evaluation methodology is under development.
6. Financial Sustainability	Medium	The project was conceived in the context of the economic crisis when Athens was characterised by the abundance of vacant buildings and apartments. In the meanwhile, the explosion of urban tourism and short rental platforms in Athens radically reduced the housing stock available for refugee accommodation. New mechanisms for housing exchange need to be developed during the process in order to assure the long-term sustainability of the programme.
7. Communicating with target beneficiaries	Low	Through its partnership Curing the Limbo has access both to groups of asylum seekers and refugees and to various stakeholders including neighbourhood initiatives, exchange economy actors, educators and housing providers. Partners in the consortium also have a long history and experience in communicating with these stakeholders as well as with the broader public.
8. Upscaling	Low	At the core of Curing the Limbo lies the development of mechanisms of direct and indirect exchange between refugees, neighbourhood initiatives and housing providers, with the involvement of educators and exchange economy actors. Besides individual cases that will be involved in the pilot programme, Curing the Limbo is designed to develop mechanisms that will continue working after the pilot period, and will also be expandable to include other vulnerable groups beyond refugees.

## 7. Take away points

Athens can certainly learn from other cities when it comes to preparing to the challenges that tourism and real estate speculation are bringing about. At the same time, many European cities can look at Athens as a laboratory where new solutions are developed for common problems. Athens is at the forefront of experimentation in the following points:

a) **An integrated approach to refugee integration:** connecting different aspects like education, active citizenship, housing and employment into a common system will make the local ecosystem stronger, more interconnected and more resilient.

b) **Personalised trajectories:** aiming at moving refugees from the “limbo” – the in-between state of waiting characterised by apathy – to activities and engagement with a future envisioned in Athens, the project looks at the individual psychology of refugees and develops mechanisms to motivate them.

c) **Interdisciplinary partnership:** Curing the Limbo brings together a variety of organisations with different experiences. The different expertise and knowledge mobilised by the partners will guarantee that the project stands on many feet and its impacts are mutually controlled. Working side-by-side and sharing spaces in the Serafeio building help strengthening the project’s coherence, and so do the training sessions organised for all partners and stakeholders in October.

d) **New housing resources:** while many European cities are struggling with limited housing stocks

for its present and future residents, Athens is actively looking for available housing units in new areas, by attracting private, institutional and public owners to submit their properties into a housing pool.

e) **Exchange economy:** in order to help building a housing model embedded in an exchange economy framework, Athens has been mapping expertise in the field through an open call and has organised workshops to develop different scenarios.

f) **Reliance on NGOs:** informed by the economic crisis, Athens has learned already before the refugee crisis how to work together with various civil society organisations. Building on existing coordination mechanisms and the Synathina platform, Curing the Limbo had access to a strong ecosystem of initiatives and NGOs to support the project with their experience and knowledge.

g) **Connection to neighbourhoods:** building on its existing network of citizen initiatives, the Synathina team could reassess its local partnerships through the lens of Curing the Limbo, identify the organisations that could work with refugees and start organising neighbourhood events to connect people better to each other and to future beneficiaries of the project.

h) **Benefiting Athens:** involving refugees in citizen initiatives and neighbourhood activities not only helps their integration but also aims at turning them into active citizens who give back to their new neighbourhood, their new city.

i) **A methodology to share:** once developed and tested in the context of refugee integration, the Curing the Limbo methodology will be applicable to help the social integration of other vulnerable groups as well.

j) **Adaption to changes:** the impact of Curing the Limbo does not only depend on a successful implementation of the project but also on its capability to adapt to the changing circumstances in terms of politics, funding as well as housing availability or the general attitude towards refugees.



## 8. Conclusion

Curing the Limbo only began a few months ago, and its results and impacts are not yet visible. The project is in its first phase and most of the partners efforts were focusing on refining the project structure, coming to common terms about the modalities of cooperation and hiring their staff for the coming years. In this phase, the implementation was limited to strategy building, process design and human resources management. It will take some time for Curing the Limbo to unfold a variety of parallel and combined processes in Athens. Right now most of the project consists of teams, concepts and work plans. In the next years, however, Curing the Limbo will deliver a series of tangible outcomes: from neighbourhood events and public seminars through vacancy mapping

and incentive development to trainings and matchmaking workshops, the project will produce important milestones that will serve as elements of a new integration model. In this process, Curing the Limbo will mobilise the broader scientific, professional and civil communities with their specific knowledge and experiences that can directly or indirectly contribute to refugee integration and urban regeneration. This Journal will follow these processes from close: zooming in to the issues of active citizenship, education and housing, the next editions will explore all this aspects in details and will help readers get acquainted with the methods, tools and protagonists as well as challenges, difficulties and surprises of the project.

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



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