

March 2020

Author:  
**Levente Polyak**  
*UIA Expert*



The Urban Lab of Europe !

# The Curing the Limbo project Journal N°4

*Project led by the City of Athens*



**INTEGRATION OF  
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**



# 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)

# Table of Contents

<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. PROGRESS</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Organisation and partnerships	6
2.2 Trajectories	9
2.3 Education	11
2.4 Employment	12
2.5 Housing	15
2.6 Community and active citizenship	17
<b>3. CHALLENGES</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4. TAKE AWAY POINTS</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>5. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>23</b>

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Curing the Limbo is an Urban Innovative Actions-funded project to help refugees engage with the city of Athens as their new home. Designed by a consortium led by the Athens Municipality, the project combines the aspects of education, employment, housing and community involvement in a complex programme that brings beneficiaries through various stages of learning and engagement. Aiming at moving refugees out of the suspended state of “limbo” experienced by many people seeking asylum in Greece, Curing the Limbo gives its beneficiaries hands-on skills that enable them to start a new life in Athens. **Emancipation and exchange** are the central concepts of the project: refugees are encouraged to take an active role in shaping their future, as well as to use their time, skills, knowledge and energy to “give back” to their new city.

The past 6 months were a period for **stabilising the pillars** of Curing the Limbo. After long months of struggling with bureaucratic procedures, all teachers have been hired, completing the programme’s offer as originally planned. In some cases, this required overcoming the challenges of procurement with the help of temporary solutions. With 296 people registered for the programme as of February, most classes and activities have been filled up, some of them expanded to another cycle, others with waiting lists. By February, 62 rental contracts were signed, increasing to over 90 in the following months. Around 23% of the refugees with housing have already obtained a job. All in all, the mechanisms envisioned for Curing the Limbo have begun to work at full capacity, and bringing about the expected impact.

In some instances, the original design of the planned activities had to be altered to adjust services to the changing needs and circumstances. In some areas of the project, bottlenecks resulting from underestimated capacity needs in some activities prompted partner organisations to **redesign their services** by introducing new positions or mobilising resources from other programmes. Based on the first years’ experience with beneficiaries’ needs, the logic of the psycho-social services has shifted to focus more on in-depth relationships with the participants. Similarly, employability service was also altered to focus more on one-to-one sessions and was expanded to include entrepreneurial training.

Other pillars of the project have also opened to new experiments. The housing service, learning from its experience with property owners, has launched a **Social Rental Agency** that brings together landlords and refugees with the aim of signing rental contracts. This matchmaking process is supported by an online platform, as well as with a variety of legal and financial guarantees. Curing the Limbo’s active citizenship pillar has launched **Co-Athens, a process to develop collaborative actions** with the participation of neighbourhood initiatives and refugees, promoting collaboration as a vehicle for designing integration.

**Cooperation between the consortium partners** has been strengthened by closer coordination and joint actions, like language and audio-visual classes taking place in different Athens neighbourhoods or employment trainings connected to local businesses. In addition, new positions were created to create stronger

connections between the activities of different thematic pillars of the project. The exchange model of Curing the Limbo, engaging refugees to “give back” to their city has been redefined, giving refugees a variety of options to engage with local communities.

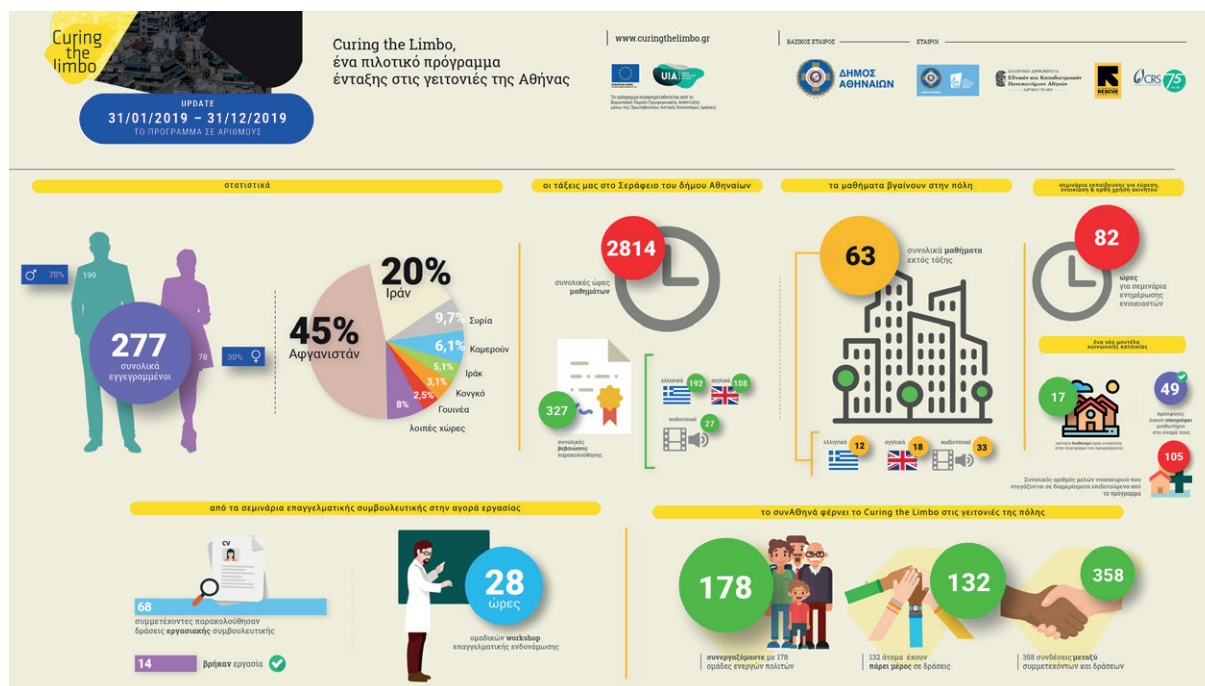
This Journal accompanies Curing the Limbo in its past half year of progress. By giving an account of the main activities and achievements of each

project component, the fourth issue explores the challenges of capacity shortage in some areas of the project, creating joint activities between project partners, and to use the first years’ experiences to adjust the programme’s services or launch new initiatives. This snapshot of the project was created in February 2020, a month before the arrival of COVID-19 to Greece, whose impact remains to be explored at the upcoming journal.

## 2. PROGRESS

*“The next step in our project management is to think strategically: to scale up and to do advocacy.”*

Antigone Kotanidis



### 2.1 Organisation and partnerships

The past 6 months helped to **improve the consortium’s coherence** by better connecting the activities undertaken by the project’s pillars: education, employment, housing and active citizenship. The better integration of the participating organisations has been achieved through improved coordination of their activities, strengthened synergies between their working methods as well as with the help of new positions within the partnership. For instance, *Syndeo*, the **neighbourhood** liaison of CRS connects beneficiaries with the local community: putting in touch refugees with Greeks but also immigrants who arrived earlier and have a better knowledge of how the system works. Therefore, the neighbourhood liaison, besides working closely with both CRS and synAthena, also needs to know the

neighbourhoods and voluntary structures that can accommodate refugees.

In the past months, there has been an evolution of the **exchange model**, originally designed to connect housing and other services received by refugees to their engagement in local communities. In the first years of the project, there has been a constant debate about how to articulate this exchange model in a way that encourages but not forces refugees to participate in neighbourhood activities. In the first months of 2020, the exchange model was re-introduced into the programme, redesigned to give a variety of options to refugees, particularly to encourage those who had not yet been involved in any of such activities. These options include doing activities on a voluntary basis, as part of a voluntary

group or with a group of people organised by synAthina. Once a beneficiary signed a rental contract, the CRS team connects them with the synAthina team whose members present these engagement options to the refugees.

However, with the help of better coordination, insufficiencies of the cooperation also came to the surface, highlighting the **challenges of everyday cooperation**. While Monday meetings with all the project managers and Friday meetings with staff members from partners continue to bring together the main issues, the information shared here does not always spread evenly to all parts of the project. This situation was curiously changed by the COVID-19 crisis where an increasing number of online meetings have helped to improve communication between different partners and actions.

*“The integration of the various components takes time. When you get down to a difficult issue like the refugee issue, the cohesion of the intervening group is very important but difficult to achieve. The fact that teachers managed to work closer with synAthina and IRC and do joint things is important. This project is about how you can expand beside your own constricted boundaries.”* Thalia Dragona

Besides the coherence of the Curing the Limbo consortium, the project’s success also depends on its close **cooperation with the local ecosystem** of organisations that have a stake in refugee integration or dispose of resources that the consortium can rely on. In order to improve this cooperation, a “network training” was organised to bring together psycho-social personnel from the consortium’s organisations as well as other agencies and NGOs. This training of 60 hours contributed to sensitising local stakeholders and professionals, building a sense of community around the project.

Curing the Limbo’s space of manoeuvre is also influenced by its relationship with public

administrations, both at the local and the national levels. The project’s further **cooperation with the municipal authority** was facilitated in the past period by the appointment of a new counsellor for the refugee issue within the administration who is also the president of ADDMA, which allows closer communication and collaboration between Curing the Limbo and the local authority. The new municipal administration also participated actively in synAthina’s call for cooperative actions and the implementation of the Co-Athens initiative. Representatives of the authority are part of the jury to select the projects to be funded among the proposals submitted by community initiatives and refugees. The new administration also shares the interest of Curing the Limbo in focusing on action at the neighbourhood level in various areas of Athens.

*“Working at the local level is one of the priorities of the new administration. The idea of working with neighbourhoods was very prominent in the mayor’s branding before the elections.”* Harris Biskos

Approaching the end of the project, the past period also brought an increased effort by the consortium to rethink some elements of the project’s evaluation, monitoring and sustainability. First, there have been new efforts invested by the consortium into the **monitoring and evaluation** process. Existing evaluation and monitoring tools are not pointing towards new policies. Therefore, more tools and methods are needed to assess the impact of Curing the Limbo’s trainings and services on refugees, in order to help developing the programme into a policy.

Second, the issue of Curing the Limbo’s **long-term sustainability** has been continuously on the consortium’s agenda. With some of the results already evident and the project advancing towards its end, the question of sustainability will gain even more importance. Sustainability can be achieved in



various means. On one hand, some of the education, employment, housing and community involvement elements of Curing the Limbo could also be implemented addressing other marginal and disadvantaged groups, or focusing on other key issues like climate change. On the other hand, the programme's continuation will depend on municipal support: with the continuation of the collaboration brought together by Curing the Limbo, and with potential funding by the municipality and private actors, the programme could continue in a new form. Ideas for the continuation of Curing the Limbo abound. A building identified as a potential integration hub, could be at the centre of continuing

the programme. However, such a continuation can only be conceived with the help of public funding and the support of the new administration.

In the past months, Curing the Limbo gained additional **visibility** by its involvement in the TV show Master Chef in March. After links were created by between the show's production team and Curing the Limbo, several formats were discussed, before settling on the final version where the participants of the cooking competition cooked for refugees as sign of a welcome to the country. This event, through its high visibility, helped to communicate the programme to a wide public.





## 2.2 Trajectories

*“It’s not the same people who are active from the beginning. Their status changes, now they are active and in three months they will have other priorities, and then they will be reactivated. It’s the fluidity of this population.”*  
Antigone Kotanidis

In the past months, Curing the Limbo had experienced a sharp **increase in the number of its beneficiaries**. In one year before February 2020, 296 people registered in the programme, of which 190 are active. The programme’s dropout rate is around 40%, in line with the expectations. The high number of beneficiaries, as well as the changing need for some components of the project have raised **challenges in securing a smooth, continuous trajectory** to all participants. Limits to the capacities of some activities within Curing the Limbo are part of the original design of the programme, and these limits were reached in this period. While some of the classes, for instance, had been fully booked and had to be closed, others, like A1 or A2 level language classes are still open, and so are ICT classes. CRS still accepts new registrations for housing, and so does synAthina for community activities. The job counselling team in particular, composed of part-time staff, has had limited availability to work with such high numbers and therefore has a long waiting list. In order to address this bottleneck, budget leftovers are assessed and the opening of new vocational trainings in the hospitality sector or elderly care is under consideration.

The consortium learned from some **flaws in the project’s original design**. For instance, the psycho-social service originally was designed to be attached to the students’ progress, their activities in the programme. Instead, because

Curing the Limbo work with vulnerable people, many individual problems emerged that were not directly related to the beneficiaries’ trajectories within the programme. Therefore, the logic of the psycho-social department has changed: with a new social worker hired, the methodology of the service will change to focus more on in-depth relationships with the participants. This will allow the psycho-social service to support participants more, based on their core needs. Furthermore, the service will focus on refugees who received subsidised housing with the help of CRS, in order to help them keep their housing once subsidies are gone.

The project’s well-designed trajectory, combining elements of education, employment training, housing assistance and community engagement has helped many refugees in establishing their new lives. However, refugees need to **combine the attendance of the programme’s activities with curiosity and sometimes luck** to develop new skills, obtain a job and find housing that suits them. The story of Mohamed Tayeb well illustrates such a successful trajectory. Mohammed arrived to Athens from Syria and lived in a refugee camp for several months. He began attending classes within the Curing the Limbo programme. With the help of the housing service, he found an apartment and signed a contract with two friends. Through his Greek teacher, Mohamed met a group of friends who were involved in a theatre. In 2019, he got a temporary job in the production of the musical, unloading objects from trucks for the theatre stage. After a week the theatre decided to hire him for more substantial work. Since then, he worked as a technician at the theatre until the coronavirus lockdown, as part of the production team. The COVID-19 lockdown influenced his job

as all theatre activities have been suspended. However, Mohamed counts on continuing to work with the theatre once the lockdown is over and in the meanwhile, he is exploring other opportunities on the job market.

*“I didn’t know anybody at the beginning. I met the technicians and they were all very nice. Half of the actors are English people. As I speak English I got in touch with them. It is also a good opportunity to work with Greek people so that I can improve my Greek and be involved with the society here. We had a lot of challenges, it is very intensive: we all cried at the end of the first show. It was a fantastic moment.” Mohamed Tayeb*



## 2.3 Education

*“Students get acquainted with the city, synAthina helps them open new windows. Teachers organise the classes keeping in mind with what would be useful for the students: classes are taking place in the shopping centre, the hospital, in cultural places... they feel that the language is useful for them.” Thalia Dragona*

In the education component of Curing the Limbo, classes have entered in their fourth cycle. With the help of the creativity and commitment of teachers, the **impact of the classes** is clearly visible. The audio-visual classes have opened a source of creativity on the side of beneficiaries, they learn new ways to express themselves and this process gives them valuable skills. Language classes began to give certificates to all the students, giving participants a sense of competence: a tangible proof of their efforts that can be helpful when looking for work. Coordinated with synAthina, many activities have been taking place outside the Serafio Building, in locations corresponding to the needs of students.

A sensible area of the project’s educational component has been resolved. After long months of searching for **ICT teachers**, a solution was reached: the consortium decided to commission directly a company while opening a procurement process for the contract. ICT teachers were thus hired for one cycle and afterwards a new call will be opened. Based on this solution, programme finally managed to start the ICT education: two classes were launched in December, both of them with students at different levels, taking place until the end of March. Earlier, bureaucracy also impeded the project from getting **cultural mediators** on board. Therefore, similarly to the ICT teachers, the hiring of cultural mediators was also outsourced.

With four cycles in the project, the experience of the classes clarified an important aspect of the educational curriculum. They do not only benefit refugees: **teachers also learn a lot and develop new skills**. The educational structure allowed them to adapt the overall curriculum to their specific classes, thus adjusting the syllabi according to the principle of differentiated learning. The heterogeneity of the classes has given teachers the experience of teaching at different speeds, an asset to be used in their future career. This fact gives a particular type of sustainability to the project: innovation spills over the classes and teachers will bring with them their new skills to use them in other projects, potentially in other areas of Greece. Similarly, the principles of the curricula developed by the University of Athens are already used in teacher trainings funded by the UNHCR.





## 2.4 Employment

*“I learned how rigid the municipality can be in terms of bureaucracy. If you have your own staff, recruitment process, performance management structure you have a lot more dynamism and flexibility and can do more things. But if you want a change in the contracts of the job counsellors employed by the municipality you have to pass it through the municipal council.” Anastasia Sikaridi*

The past six months, after that all the planned staff was hired, the work within the employment pillar of Curing the Limbo has been focusing on adjusting some elements of the pillar’s original design to the programme’s needs. Some of the original plans to deliver the services offered by IRC have been **challenged or delayed by limited capacities and complex procurement procedures**.

The key challenge within the employment pillar of the project is related to the **staff structure** designed for the project. The fact that there is a dual reporting system and IRC are not the direct managers and employers of job counsellors makes it more difficult to support beneficiaries within the programme. Similarly, hiring job counsellors on a project basis limits the impact of their learning within the municipality: their training will not necessarily create new capacities within the municipal structure and the new knowledge might not be passed on to regular employees in any other related departments.

The capacity originally designed for IRC is smaller what would be needed today. IRC’s original role is described as technical advisors, providing curricula and scientific supervision. In reality, there is a gap between this and the job counsellors’ work. They need guidance and **IRC expanded its role** by stepping in to support the daily work of

job counsellors and provide direct implementation instead of only background support.

The **structure of the employment service** has also slightly changed. Originally, more job readiness trainings were planned as a series of workshops, focusing on topics such as job search techniques, interview preparation, soft skills and labour rights. However, the number of such trainings was limited by both the trainers’ capacities and the growing importance of one-on-one counselling as opposed to group trainings, using more energy at this part of the programme.

The **original staff structure needed to be altered and expanded** to match the needs of the programme. In the first months, employment services offered by IRC were only in English and Greek, with no interpretation available. This period served to pilot the concept that if one does not speak English or Greek, one will face difficulties in finding a job. However, the lack of interpretation was a gap in the process, as it did not allow beneficiaries who could potentially get a simple, menial job, to discuss with the job counsellors about their expectations. Hiring an interpreter was not feasible because it would have been a part time job with only very few hours. But the IRC disposed of an interpreter from another programme, who could be deployed also in Curing the Limbo: this allowed the programme to reach out to Arabic and Farsi speakers and thus expand its outreach.

Similarly to the interpreters, **other capacities were also mobilised by IRC from other programmes**. As many IRC officers are “roving” between a variety programmes, they could bring some of their activities in other programmes into synergy with Curing the Limbo. With the help of a migrant enterprise counsellor allocated to the

project, beneficiaries of Curing the Limbo were referred to an entrepreneurship course organised in collaboration with the Alba Graduate Business School. This allows refugees who are beneficiaries of Curing the Limbo, to structure their own entrepreneurial ideas, besides exploring their employability opportunities.

Another challenge in implementing the planned activities was created by the **limited capacity of job counsellors and interpreters**. The original project design targeted job counselling to 60 people. As a result of this design, job counsellors all work part time and their limited capacity is a bottleneck in the programme. This results in a waiting list reaching 70 people who were all directed to the IRC by the psycho-social support service. This waiting list, signalling a demand beyond the originally planned capacity for job counsellors, was reduced by focusing on beneficiaries really committed to go through a job readiness training. There is also priority given to those who already have a rental contract and need to get a job to be able to keep their accommodation.

Besides expanding its services, IRC also worked on creating links to sectors and organisations that could help in the employment of refugees. A lot of jobs that are potentially in reach for refugees are seasonal jobs in the tourism sector. Adapting to this, IRC has organised a **tourism-oriented job readiness training**. This training focussed on building a specific vocabulary, understanding how the sector works, the difference of front office and back office jobs, being aware of one's rights and accommodation possibilities when in resorts. While seasonal jobs can be difficult and require a lot of flexibility, they are a good way to start gaining work experience in Greece and building a CV. In the pre-COVID situation, tourism jobs offered a lot of opportunities for refugees, particularly between April and August.

Besides focusing on the tourism sector, IRC has also been working on **engaging companies** that could potentially hire refugees. IRC's work with companies include encouraging them to be more diversity-friendly and asking them to share their job openings, to support with mock interviews or trainings. As co-chair of the Livelihoods sub-committee of the Athens Coordination Centre for





Migrant and Refugee issues, IRC organised a job fair in November 2019, mobilising 19 companies from its network, with over 200 attendees.

*“You find an HR person at the job fair and contact them. You tell them that you are a job counsellor and that you have people with right to work, permits and skills for the job, and that we think that having diverse work staff is very beneficial for the workforce. You create a link. The optimal goal is hiring but there are various steps before.” Anastasia Sikaridi*

Such a complex approach, adaptive to needs and challenges brought **tangible results**. By January 2020, about 23% of the beneficiaries holding rental contracts found a job. IRC is working on

monitoring job retention, tracking the percentage of refugees who keep their job for more than 4 months as well as the job types, full-time and part-time jobs, seasonal employment contracts. IRC also conducts a skills assessment with refugees, at the beginning of a beneficiary's trajectory and at the end of the project to understand how they acquired new skills throughout the process.

*“We want to be more looking outwards as a type of service. Creating more synergies, more job fairs. We never expected that all of these people would find a job. But we hope the outward looking activities will empower individuals to be more outward thinking and improve their opportunities.” Anastasia Sikaridi*

## 2.5 Housing

*“There is a big problem with housing in the city and the personal networks of refugees are very helpful in finding a home. People who have strong networks, who are connected, are able to find a home themselves.”*  
**Stefania Gyftopoulou**

The housing component of Curing the Limbo has made great progress in the past period. A new shelter officer, hired in January 2020, is working on finding accommodation for beneficiaries in the programme. Compared to the 9 rental contracts signed 6 months earlier, by February 2020, there were already 62 rental contracts signed. About half of the beneficiaries who signed a rental contract found their apartments through the help of CRS, the other half independently, through their social networks. This created a dilemma whether to subsidise rental agreements created outside Curing the Limbo: the consortium decided that not supporting those who find a home outside the assistance of the CRS would disincentivise the refugees’ own initiatives. All rental contracts so far were signed with individual property owners. Negotiations are continuing with institutional owners like the university that needs tenants to have a guarantor.

*“The way we find houses is mostly in the private market. We contact them to talk about the programme and its benefits for them and the beneficiaries. We try to use our networks, to speak to people, local communities, and spread the word about the programme.”* Ihab Shabana

The cash subsidies offered to refugees continue according to the original plan: rent subsidies are full for the first six months, then 75% for next 3 months and 50% for the last 3 months. Some modifications are discussed to adapt the

payments to the needs of the remaining project period. In order to provide refugees with access to subsidised housing, a variety of criteria had been experimented with. In the five calls for housing applications, the first two rounds used the point-based eligibility criteria developed by CRS. In the following three calls, another approach was tested where only the engagement with language learning was kept as a criterium. This moved Curing the Limbo’s housing model closer to a “housing first” model where all applicants would get housing first in order to be able to develop their other activities, learn new skills and look for a job.

Following the success of the first housing workshop, a series of pre-tenancy trainings were organised in the past months in order to help refugees prepare for their life in an Athenian apartment building. To accompany these trainings, written and audio-visual materials were developed, with online and offline components. These components cover legal rights and responsibilities, technical features and household budgeting, including utility costs. The most important themes and formats of this training are to be identified and designed through a series of focus group discussions.

*“Utility costs are surprising for refugees. Many of them never paid for utilities before. Here you need to pay for water, and electricity is expensive. We need to inform them about these costs so that they are useful and don’t consume much.”* Eleni Vira

An important new feature of the housing support is Syndeo, a neighbourhood integration programme where beneficiaries are matched with locals. Inspired by the Antwerp municipality’s “local buddies” concept, refugees

are matched with local residents who can help them find their way in the neighbourhood or the city, volunteer in community activities, and give support for day-to-day activities by helping submit official documents or navigate Greek administrations and bureaucracy. These local matches can be individuals living in the same building or street as beneficiaries or members of organisations willing to help refugees. As of February 2020, three matches had been made between refugees and locals.

*“The neighbourhood integration programme is designed according to the needs of our beneficiaries. Some refugees said they would need someone to practice their Greek with to learn more about Greek culture, or hoping that a local match would help them find a job.”*

**Stefania Gyftopoulou**

Based on the experiences in linking property owners with refugees within Curing the Limbo, the CRS has been developing a new model, the Greek version of a Social Rental Agency. The agency is designed to act as an intermediary between prospective renters and property owners. Through its online platform [Athens Social Rentals](#), the agency offers refugees a pool of apartments with verified conditions, and provides technical support, legal advice and rental subsidies to refugees, including help in setting up bank accounts, changing names on utility bills or organising payments online. By providing financial assurances to both tenants and landlords, the agency also contributes to building trust around the issue of rental housing.

Similarly to the other components of Curing the Limbo, the housing pillar is also looking for ways to secure its continuity once the project is over. The housing component's long-term sustainability depends on municipal support. Unlike many

other cities in Europe, Athens does not have a designated housing department: housing issues belong to the social policy department with limited budget, while it remains a national competence. In order to engage better local actors and institutions, CRS is preparing an international symposium focusing on housing. The symposium is designed to bring on board a variety of actors, including various departments of the new municipality, to work together towards a long-term solution. According to the plans, a more representative first day, with prestigious guests, will be followed by a more hands-on days to gather inputs for both Curing the Limbo and the municipal agencies. The symposium's planning has been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and therefore the event was postponed to a later date. Another dimension of Curing the Limbo's sustainability can be reached through the methodologies and knowledge developed throughout the project. The pre-tenancy trainings offered to refugees can be highly useful for other vulnerable groups as well. Similarly, the Social Rental Agency can, on the long term, cater for many other social groups as well.

*“The main challenge remains the lack of affordable apartments, especially one-bedroom flats. This is combined with the lack of employment opportunities. Most refugees in our programme with rental contracts don't have a job: we are worried about what will happen when the subsidies are over.”*

**Stefania Gyftopoulou**

## 2.6 Community and active citizenship

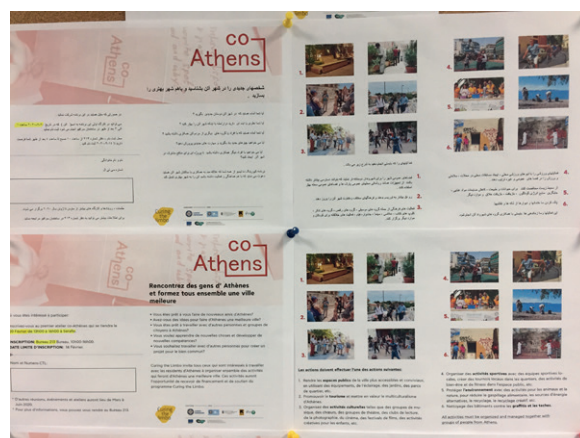
In the past months, the active citizenship pillar of Curing the Limbo continued to **inform educational, employment and housing activities**. SynAthina helped some classes visit community initiatives and engage in cooking lessons, for instance. At another occasion, a collaboration was established with a manufacture producing thread. This experience led to the design of workshops with IRC to address refugees with experience in fabricating thread. These experiences do not only serve to improve refugees' skills and their sense of orientation but also to make local communities more receptive to the refugees' needs.

***“We had English and Greek courses through community cooking. At the end, the 80 portions cooked were given to a community centre to distribute to people in need. We try to connect benefits for students with benefits for the city.”***  
**Harris Biskos**

The active citizenship component of Curing the Limbo has opened a new chapter in its activities. After four community events, synAthina began to capitalise on the insights gained and the networks created during these events and started to prepare Co-Athens, a **process to develop collaborative actions** with the participation of neighbourhood initiatives and refugees. Although planned from the beginning of the project, the final design of this process is the result of a series of explorations and experimentations in the project.

***“The goal of Co-Athens is to help the integration of refugees, make neighbourhoods friendlier for them, address pressing challenges at the local level and promote collaboration as a vehicle for designing integration.”***  
**Harris Biskos**

Preparations for an open **call for proposals**, at the core of Co-Athens, were done by synAthina



together with the new municipal administration that arrived to office in September 2019: it included defining together the guidelines, themes, focus areas and deliverables of the call. Before launching the call, synAthina organised a series of capacity-building seminars for people interested in submitting a proposal, also referred to as “capacity-building-boot-camp-speed-dating incubator” events. The five seminars organised in a period of over three months were designed as workshops to showcase activities from the civil society in Athens and to involve refugees in the design of the call.

***“By inviting community groups to the workshops, we brought refugees closer to the mindset of the Athens civil society: they went to visit spaces and initiatives in the city and interviewed people. We tried to explain, analyse and understand what being an active citizen means. What it means to act in the public field. What it means to act for the common good.”***  
**Harris Biskos**

Combining neighbourhood priorities identified during earlier public events with the skills and ambitions of refugees and the priorities of the new administration allowed synAthina to define six general themes for the call: interventions in public space, local tourism, cultural activities, sports and wellness, environmental actions, street art. To accommodate projects in these

themes, the neighbourhoods of Kerameikos, Metaxourgeo, Kolonos, Plato Academy, Victoria, Museum, Exarchia, Neapoli, America Square, Koliatsou Square, Agios Eleftherios and Kato Patisia were identified.

The call was designed to include two phases. The first phase did not call for precise ideas: instead, it required previous experience in neighbourhoods, networks and collaborations. For the second phase, 20 groups selected by the jury (mostly composed of municipality and development agency of Athens representatives) would join the Co-Athens Forum to create new groups with the refugees of Curing the Limbo and start planning activities together. The selection criteria include the quality of relationship with a specific neighbourhood, tangible outcomes, innovativeness, multidisciplinary composition, experience in implementation.

Once the co-design process reached its results and the call was ready, it was published on 23 December 2019, circulated widely among community groups and presented at a public info day on 14 January 2020. By the 3 February 2020 deadline, 58 applications arrived to the call. The winning projects, selected by the jury, would not only get funding, but also an accompaniment by the programme, with community initiatives in the role of mediators.

*“Refugees come to Curing the Limbo because they want to learn the language, get access to housing and have more opportunities for jobs but they don’t understand civil society. We have to work to fill that cultural gap between refugees and civil society.” Harris Biskos*

While this process allowed refugees to better understand the activities carried out by volunteer organisations, it also helped community initiatives to get to know each other better and build **stronger local ecosystems**. These connections proved to be resilient even to the COVID-19 lockdown due to the variety of digital tools used for communication and coordination. Moreover, the events leading to the call strengthened synAthina’s central position in the Athens civic ecosystem and expanded its local network to include new initiatives. In this sense, Co-Athens is a key process to explore new methodologies and secure long-term sustainability and relevance for synAthina as well.





### 3. CHALLENGES

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

Challenge	Level	Observations
<b>1. Leadership for implementation</b>	<b>Low</b>	After months of uncertainty about the programme's relationship with the incoming municipal administration, substantial cooperation began with the municipality's involvement in planning the next phases of the community involvement pillar of Curing the Limbo. This pillar's focus on neighbourhoods overlaps with the new administrations' priorities and this opens a perspective for fruitful future cooperation. The municipality has been engaged in developing Co-Athens, a spin-off project focusing on developing collaborative actions with the participation of neighbourhood initiatives and refugees.
<b>2. Public procurement</b>	<b>Low</b>	After long months of struggling with bureaucratic procedures, all staff have been hired, completing the programme's offer as originally planned. After long months of searching for ICT teachers and cultural mediators, a solution was reached: the consortium decided to commission directly a company while opening a procurement process for the rest of the contract. The burdens created by the municipal bureaucracy and complex procurement processes have not entirely disappeared.
<b>3. Integrated cross-departmental working</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<p>The project's cooperation with the municipal authority was improved by the appointment of a new counsellor for the refugee issue within the administration who is also the president of ADDMA. This allows closer communication and collaboration between Curing the Limbo and the local authority. The new municipal administration also participated actively in synAthina's call for cooperative actions and the implementation of the Co-Athens initiative.</p> <p>Cooperation between the consortium partners has been strengthened by closer coordination and joint actions, the establishment of new positions as well as the renewed exchange model encouraging refugees to "give back" to Athens.</p>

Challenge	Level	Observations
<b>4. Adopting a participative approach</b>	<b>Medium</b>	The project's beneficiaries take an active role in activities related to education, employment, housing and community activities: they give a constant feedback and thus help shaping the programme itself. Similarly, the co-design and launch of Co-Athens also strengthened the project's participatory approach. In order to improve cooperation with the local ecosystem of organisations that have a stake in refugee integration or dispose of resources that the consortium can rely on, a "network training" was organised to bring together psycho-social personnel from the consortium's organisations as well as other agencies and NGOs.
<b>5. Monitoring and evaluation</b>	<b>Medium</b>	Approaching the end of the project, the past period also brought an increased effort by the consortium to rethink some elements of the project's evaluation, monitoring and sustainability. First, there have been new efforts invested by the consortium into the monitoring and evaluation process and a project Theory of Change was agreed. Existing evaluation and monitoring tools are not pointing towards new policies. Therefore, more tools and methods are needed to assess the impact of Curing the Limbo's trainings and services on refugees, in order to help developing the programme into a policy.
<b>6. Financial Sustainability</b>	<b>Medium</b>	In the past period, there have been important efforts invested in the sustainability of the project. Some of the education, employment, housing and community involvement elements of Curing the Limbo could also be implemented addressing other marginal and disadvantaged groups, or focusing on other key issues like climate change. On the other hand, the programme's continuation will depend on municipal support: with the continuation of the collaboration brought together by Curing the Limbo, and with potential funding by the municipality and private actors, the programme could continue in a new form.

Challenge	Level	Observations
<b>7. Communicating with target beneficiaries</b>	<b>Low</b>	The project gained visibility both through word-of-mouth and other communication channels. In the past months, Curing the Limbo had experienced a sharp increase in the number of its beneficiaries. In one year before February 2020, 296 people registered in the programme, of which 190 are active. The programme's dropout rate is around 40%, in line with the expectations. With 296 people registered for the programme as of February, most classes and activities have been filled up, some of them expanded to another cycle, others with waiting lists. In the past months, Curing the Limbo gained additional visibility by its involvement in the TV show Master Chef in January, where the participants of the cooking competition cooked for refugees as sign of a welcome to the country.
<b>8. Upscaling</b>	<b>Low</b>	There are many elements of Curing the Limbo that can be transferred and upscaling with sufficient public support. The curricula developed for the educational and employment pillars of the project can be used in other contexts as well. Similarly, the pre-tenancy trainings created for beneficiaries and the mechanisms of the Social Rental Agency can be transferred to other locations as well as shifted to other target groups. The Co-Athens methodology can also be applied a variety of themes, by putting collaboration at the centre of integration and innovation.

## 4. TAKE AWAY POINTS

In this period, Curing the Limbo has stabilised its operations, with participants of the programme filling up its classes and activities. The trajectory designed by the consortium proved successful, with an increasing number of beneficiaries gaining new skills, accessing housing, and obtaining jobs. With the programme running close to full capacity, new bottlenecks have been identified and addressed with the help of adjustments, temporary positions and new activities.

- a) **Synchronise processes:** once all processes of the programme are running, make sure to identify bottlenecks where the fluidity of these processes is blocked and where adjustments are needed.
- b) **Redesign services:** instead of sticking to plans, use the experience of the first years to redesign services according to the actual needs of beneficiaries.
- c) **Joint activities:** create activities that are the joint responsibility of different partners. They can help partners understand better each other's' working logic and build more organic connections.
- d) **Collaboration:** explore the power of collaboration in conceiving new services: embrace and promote collaboration as a vehicle for designing integration and innovation.
- e) **Involve institutions:** in order to stabilise cooperation with public administrations and institutional actors, get their representatives on board for designing the next phases of the project.
- f) **Ecosystems:** work on strengthening the programme's position within the local ecosystem: partnering with a variety of organisations will increase both the projects acceptance and rootedness in the territory, as well as its resilience.
- g) **Good practices:** don't hesitate to integrate elements from good practices in your project: learning from other initiatives can give your project a greater variety of instruments and a more robust structure to build on.
- h) **Space for innovation:** allow the development of spin-off programmes that are based on learnings within the project. Such spin-offs will be able to focus on some elements of the programme and have a good chance of gaining additional visibility and resilience beyond the project in general.
- i) **Visibility:** use unlikely alliances, like a TV show, to increase the programme's visibility and gain backing for the case championed by the programme.
- j) **Conceive sustainability:** there are many dimensions to sustainability. From structures of the programme that will continue after the funding period ends, through partnership that were established during the project, to individual skills that will increase the capacities of institutions.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The Curing the Limbo programme has gone through a period of stabilisation where its classes were filled with beneficiaries and its various thematic pillars found new synergies through joint actions and positions. The consortium has overcome the challenges of public procurement that had paralysed some elements of the educational and employment programme. With the help of virtuous bureaucratic manoeuvres, all positions have been filled up and all planned activities have been launched.

It has also been a period of intense learning and experimentation. Based on experiences of the first years, consortium members took initiative to redesign some of their services that were considered not sufficient or focused enough. For instance, realising the need for in-depth assistance to refugees, both from the psycho-social services and the employability trainers prompted these pillars to adjust their activities to the demand. In order to overcome the shortage of capacities in positions related to these adjustments, consortium members have also succeeded in mobilising support from their organisational resources.

After months of uncertainty about the programme's relationship with the incoming municipal administration, substantial cooperation began with the municipality's involvement in planning the next phases of the community involvement pillar of Curing the Limbo. This pillar's focus on neighbourhoods overlaps with the new administrations' priorities and this opens a perspective for fruitful future cooperation.

The past months have also been a period of innovation: based on the learnings of the first

years of Curing the Limbo, a variety of new services were tested within the programme. The employment pillar was expanded with entrepreneurship courses, the housing service set in motion a Social Rental Agency and a corresponding online platform, and synAthina launched Co-Athens, a process to develop collaborative actions with the participation of neighbourhood initiatives and refugees.

Besides strengthening cooperation within the consortium and with the local administration, Curing the Limbo has also reached out to other key partners: with a network training and a series of other events, the programme has engaged a variety of companies and NGOs that have a stake in refugee integration or dispose of resources that the consortium can rely on. This ecosystem will be crucial in the programme's future and can have a strong impact on the resilience of the Athens civil society. The very notions of participation and collaboration underlying Curing the Limbo can help to strengthen the positions of NGOs and other civil society organisations as well as socially-minded companies.

As Curing the Limbo is approaching its closing, there has been a renewed effort invested in the monitoring and evaluation of the project. Similarly, the sustainability of the project has been increasingly discussed and assessed within the partnership. Curing the Limbo's sustainability can be conceived in a variety of ways: some of its elements, like the Social Rental Agency can be maintained with sufficient public support and be also used to accommodate other vulnerable groups. Other elements of the project, like Co-Athens could be deployed focusing on other



challenges like climate change. The closer and broader partnerships of the programme can also be potentially maintained, in the form of a collaboration ecosystem in Athens. Furthermore, the individual knowledge skills acquired by both beneficiaries, coordinators and teachers will have a continuous impact not only on individual life trajectories but also on institutions and on the knowledge pool of Athens and Greece in general.

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.



## Urban Innovative Actions

Les Arcuriales  
45D rue de Tournai  
F- 59000 Lille

**+33 (0)3 61 76 59 34**

[info@uia-initiative.eu](mailto:info@uia-initiative.eu)

**[www.uia-initiative.eu](http://www.uia-initiative.eu)**

Follow us on **twitter**  
[@UIA\\_Initiative](https://twitter.com/UIA_Initiative)  
and on **Facebook**.