

Governance strategies for cooling cities: the cases of Athens and Istanbul

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Abstract:

Cities' vulnerability to heatwaves is an oft-overlooked public health problem expected to worsen with climate change, mainly due to high population densities and the potential additive effect of urban heat islands. Yet the adverse health effects can largely be prevented by effective urbanisation policies designed using a participatory, multi-disciplinary, and multi-actor approach. An example is the #CoolAthens campaign, developed as part of the Athens Resilience Strategy's climate action plan to protect public health and raise public awareness during heatwaves. Measures include installing public water fountains, introducing traffic control measures, promoting the use of a mobile app providing personalised heatwave guidance, expanding the network of municipal 'cool centres' and guiding high-risk populations to them, conducting awareness-raising campaigns, and promoting private sector engagement. Although each city has a unique profile in relation to heatwaves, they do share key characteristics. This means that other cities, such as Istanbul, can benefit from Athens' experience, providing a valuable opportunity for co-learning and co-creation.

Cooling Athens: Assessing the #CoolAthens campaign

#CoolAthens is a public health protection and awareness-raising campaign that is part of the Athens Resilience Strategy's Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan, produced through a unique collaboration between the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) initiative and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group. The Athens Resilience Strategy identifies heatwaves as one of the city's most important challenges, with average summer temperatures projected to increase by 2°C between 2021 and 2050, and by 4°C between 2071 and 2100. Furthermore, the urban heat island effect leads to temperature differences of up to 10°C between the city centre and its suburbs.

Athens joined the 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) network in 2014 as one of 35 cities following a competitive selection process. The resilience-building process was initiated in 2015 with an agenda-setting workshop involving 130 Athenians. In 2016, a Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) was appointed, and an Office for Resilience and Sustainability (ORS) was established to facilitate the process. The ORS gained official status in 2016, becoming part of the mayor's office. Based on the three tools used for identifying the city's critical assets, shocks, stresses, and vulnerabilities (perceptions, assets and risks, and actions), a Preliminary Resilience Assessment (PRA) was released in 2016, shaping the vision for a resilient Athens— open, green, proactive, and vibrant. The Athens Resilience Strategy was created in 2017 via a collaborative process involving a wide range of actors: experts, representatives of

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local, regional, and central governments, city district leaders and other civil society and community ambassadors, platform partners, and the strategy partner. A one-year action plan supporting the implementation of the strategy was launched in May 2018.

The Athens Resilience Strategy is based on four pillars as defined in the Preliminary Resilience Assessment – open city, green city, proactive city, and vibrant city. The #CoolAthens campaign, with its goal of integrating natural systems into the urban fabric, belongs to the ‘green city’ strand. The municipality (including its relevant departments and the ORS) is responsible for making data and services available to reduce the public health risks related to high temperatures. Measures include expanding the network of municipal ‘cool centres’ (dedicated air conditioned spaces for the use of general public), installing public water fountains, and introducing traffic control measures. Awareness-raising actions under the initiative include promoting the use of the Treasure Phone and Web Application (NOA) which provides personalised heat-wave guidance, guiding high-risk populations to municipal ‘cool centres’, linking all heat-related data sources, organising information and awareness-raising campaigns and activities, and promoting private sector engagement. The owners, partners, funding sources and timeframe of each action are clearly defined (Municipality of Athens, 2017).

Conclusion

Increasing cities’ resilience to climate change and reducing its potential negative impacts, including but not limited to heatwaves, is only possible with an effective urbanisation policy. This in turn requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-actor process, with action plans designed in a participatory manner.

Active participation and collaboration between different stakeholders is essential for effective governance as the (natural and social) complexity of climate change requires a multi-actor ‘collective mind’, and actors’ and stakeholders’ participation in the process ensures their ownership of the result. This is crucial for effective implementation (Peker and Aydın, 2019). The term ‘collaboration’ refers to both relationships between actors within cities and between cities themselves worldwide. While cities have unique needs in the fight against the negative impacts of climate change and there can be no one-size-fits-all policy, they also share key elements. This presents a significant opportunity for co-learning and co-creation via global city networks.

This article was produced as part of the Cities as Places of Hope Project presenting research on good practices in cities. The project aims to increase the visibility of city actors on urbanization policies and increase the cooperation among them by showing inspiring examples.

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