

Active citizenship in Athens

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Members of the Athens-based Syrian and Greek Youth Forum explain how it provides a platform for active citizenship in the city.

We founded the Syrian and Greek Youth Forum (SGYF) in 2018 to support community-building activities among refugees, asylum seekers, second-generation Syrians and Greek nationals. Our long-term goal is to help these and other communities become fully active citizens. Athens is where we live, work, sleep, love and play – we actively resist the idea that refugees are vulnerable victims or tragic figures. We are citizens. We came together as a team of activists through a shared understanding of the importance and value of acting as a community, particularly through building projects by the community for the community. We research and implement best practices of inclusion, and work in solidarity and collaboration with other migrant and minority organisations and communities.

Urban struggles

The Forum's work is set against an urban backdrop in which various narratives of 'crisis' gather and overlap. In the midst of a difficult economic situation, and the absence of the State in service provisioning, other actors and organisations have to step in. There is a lack of State support for solidarity and activism, but we work with others to build solidarity networks, bringing together multiple perspectives and different areas of activism.

Athens has long been an arrival city, both for those who have recently crossed borders and, historically, for people moving within Greece's borders and migrating from elsewhere. It is common to hear people say that "there is no such thing as a native Athenian" – while an Arabic proverb states that if you stay among people for forty days you become one of them. Meanwhile, border closures and restricted freedom of movement keep people in the city, which in turn demands efforts to build community and belonging.

Of course, these politics and poetics of belonging are met with hostility by some. Xenophobia and racist attacks have been on the rise in a country beset by financial crisis, where there has also been broader criminalisation of immigration, and institutionalisation of racial profiling and detention.¹ Since their election in mid-2019, the New Democracy government has pursued the eviction of refugee squats and has passed asylum laws that violate human rights.

Yet this gives us motivation. Where there is no international non-governmental organisation (INGO) in the middle, new possibilities emerge for direct communication and collaboration between the municipality and local communities.

Activist projects

SGYF is involved in city-level projects such as Curing the Limbo which contributes to efforts to empower communities and help them move beyond the limbo state of uncertainty and inaction that most asylum seekers experience.² We are a named solidarity community in the Curing the Limbo project and we are referred to as Athenians by its organisers in recognition of the value of the community work we do. We have worked hard both to connect and empower the Syrian community in Athens, and then to represent this community at various levels: within local politics, at meetings with representatives from the European Union and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at numerous cultural events, as part of everyday life in Athens, and within the municipality. We have developed a high level of trust within and beyond the Syrian community and have established ourselves as a key resource for Syrians in Athens and elsewhere in Greece.

Individually, we are learning languages and both pursuing and providing education: all tools for active citizenship. We have been

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preparing skills development programmes for over a year, of which several are up and running. We are also involved in various other initiatives in Athens, including: participating in business courses supported by Solidarity Now and Odyssea, two Athens-based organisations focused on social action and solidarity; being part of the Greek Forum of Refugees' political inclusion campaign, receiving facilitation guidance and advocacy training, and information on international and domestic law; running sound recording workshops and producing a radio series;³ offering motivation and awareness courses; giving talks and concerts at schools and festivals on themes of democracy, culture and political inclusion; conducting regular beach and street cleaning; participating in agricultural projects; raising community awareness of environmental matters and solutions; running a culture department, including a Syrian dance programme; and developing and sharing music skills.

We are working on many more projects, which include: producing a template business plan to support people looking to start their own businesses; developing a plot of land outside Athens into a site of sustainable food production; opening a cultural café where language exchanges, creative performances and cultural discussions will take place; finding a shared house for long-term members of SGYF, and for emergency accommodation; working with children to expand the scope of our work for the community; offering further media production and film classes; and providing a sewing and craft programme, and training to repair musical instruments.

We are leading a plan to use existing construction skills within the community to renovate ruined buildings, thereby expanding accommodation options for refugees and reducing the problem of homelessness in the city. And we are in communication with the Ministry of Education to obtain permission to enter the city's refugee camps, in order to help the communities there to find alternative solutions to encampment, and working together in the meantime to improve the situation in the camps. We have built SGYF to this level with no budget – just goodwill,

organisation, hard work and solidarity. We are now in the process of registering as an NGO, to ensure the sustainability of our work in an ever-changing political situation.

Opening up the city

Through our experience in Greece we have gained a deep understanding of the effects and impacts of refugees on the hosting community and vice versa, and are turning this knowledge into action. Our work emanates from the Syrian community, but it is not only for them. Rather, we aim to work and share our resources with other communities, empowering all of us in the process. And this in turn is animated by efforts to be included in the political and cultural life of Athens – demanding greater rights but also embracing our responsibilities and contributing to the well-being of the city.

We watch the city and ask what we can do as citizens. This is what we understand as active citizenship, and this is why we consider SGYF as a platform for citizenship. We aim to motivate and inspire other groups to become an active part of the city, to champion diversity and to empower all of us together. We work to expand solidarities and to open up the city – unmaking borders between citizens and non-citizens, between refugees and hosts.

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1. In 2012 Operation Xenios Zeus expanded 'stop and search' powers for Athens police and led to an increase in the detention of people who had crossed borders to get to Greece. See Rozakou K (2018) 'Solidarians in the Land of Xenios Zeus: Migrant Deportability and the Radicalisation of Solidarity', in Dalakoglou D and Agelopoulos G (Eds) *Critical Times in Greece: Anthropological Engagements with the Crisis* London: Routledge. pp 188–201.

2. <https://curingthelimbogr/en/home>

3. <https://citizensoundarchive.com>



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