

AN INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE URBAN PLAN FOR THE MUNICIPALITY OF ATHENS

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ABSTRACT

Currently, Greece is in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis and this has had a major impact on the life of the citizens of the country and of course, of its capital. While the successful construction and regeneration of certain museums and sites has been achieved, the degeneration of the city center and the development of grave social problems has escalated. Over the last few years, prosperous neighborhoods have deteriorated and, despite the best efforts of the local and regional authorities, they are now defined by poverty, street crime, and empty buildings.

Under these circumstances, the local governments have to step in and confront the current situation with a comprehensive set of measures and action plans. Athens has developed an Integrated Program and Action Plan to revitalize the city's center, which secured 120million € of EU structural funds and is currently being implemented. The program includes over 150 intervention projects and actions falling under 4 main axes: (a) increase competitiveness and entrepreneurship, (b) improve quality of life, (c) enhancement of the urban environment, (d) management of the social crisis.

The existing program will be further supported by a long-term Comprehensive and Sustainable Urban Development Plan, which will support the city's effort to secure EU funding for the next programmatic period of 2014-2020. This Urban Development Plan will conclude in a comprehensive set of actions in the areas of urban planning, social cohesion, economic revitalization and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Municipality of Athens, Action Plan, Urban Development Plan

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Mr. Yannis Evmolpidis is a Greek Urban Planner with graduate studies and a second Master's degree in Urban Planning and Real estate Development from Columbia University, in USA. Mr. Evmolpidis is the special advisor of the Mayor of Athens in urban planning and regeneration. In this capacity, he is responsible for coordination and management of the municipality's urban redevelopment projects and planning strategies to revitalize the historic city center and enhance quality of life. He has also gained experience in real estate development and asset management. After his graduation, he worked for more than 2 years in urban development projects and land transactions in the United States, specifically in New York metropolitan area. He has worked as a financial analyst, conducting feasibility analyses for mixed-use projects in the US and the Middle East, and was additionally assigned with project management responsibilities for a multistory residential apartment rehabilitation project.

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INTRODUCTION

Athens is the capital and largest city of Greece. The Municipality of Athens has a population of 655,780 (2011) within its administrative limits and a land area of approximately 39 km². The metropolitan area of Athens extends beyond the administrative municipal city limits, with a population of 3.089.698 (2011), over an area of 412 km². The Municipality of Athens is the largest municipality in Greece and is located at the heart of Athens. The municipality has 7 city districts for administrative purposes and a historic center preservation area in downtown Athens. Athens is located in the Attica Region and consists of 35 municipalities.

THE EXISTING CRISIS

Greece is currently in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis. This has had a major impact on the life of the citizens of the country and of course, of its capital. At the national level, unemployment is still rising (Hellenic Statistical Authority), with the current rate reaching 27,2% (January 2013), while youth unemployment (under 25) is even more daunting reaching 59,1%. More specifically, for the region of Attica the unemployment rate for the same period is even higher, reaching 28,4%. Besides unemployment, poverty has also become a major issue. Although the poverty-at-risk rate for Greece has remained relatively stable for the past years at 20%, most recent data for 2010 indicate that some segments of the population have been unequally hit by this trend, such as unemployed women, single parent households and the elderly. It was common knowledge for the past years that the distribution of social welfare benefits in Greece was not that effective. In addition, traditional informal social networks which created a social safety net for Greek households, such as the family, are also collapsing. A new population segment, the "working poor" is a rising trend, namely people that have jobs but have very low income and cannot access basic services, such as education, medical care and housing. Even according to 2010 data which do not depict the most recent developments of the past 2 years, Greece had the 2nd highest rate of working poor in the EU (13,8%) after Romania (Eurostat, 2010).

Amidst this daunting picture, Athens is facing serious problems and challenges. While the successful construction and regeneration of certain museums and sites has been achieved, such as the Acropolis Museum for example, the degeneration of the city center and the

development of grave social problems have escalated. Over the last few years, prosperous neighborhoods have deteriorated and, despite the best efforts of the local and regional authorities, they are now defined by poverty, street crime, and empty buildings. Living conditions for the city's residents and working conditions for its businesses are deteriorating. To some extent this is due to the presence in parts of the city of a large, and still growing, number of illegal immigrants, but conditions are being further and rapidly eroded by the financial crisis and economic depression.

In addition, many of those with work have to live off lower incomes, empty shops are becoming common even in well-known commercial areas, many parts of the city's historic centre are becoming disfigured by graffiti; and economic migrants into the EU, many of them illegal entrants, squat in empty buildings or live in poverty on the streets. The wave of illegal immigration increased exponentially during the period 2000-2010. According to a 2005 report, the number of foreign immigrants living in Greece has quadrupled in the last 13 years. In 1991, immigrants were estimated at 270.000, while in 2004 they were estimated at 1.1 million (ELIAMEP, 2005). According to data from the 2001 census, about 135.000 immigrants live in the Municipality of Athens, this being 17% of the total number of immigrants in the country.

Additionally, citizens are leaving the city, in part due to the previous factors. According to the latest 2011 census of the National Statistical Service, the Municipality of Athens presents a 16.9% decrease of its population which amounts to 655,780 persons instead of 789,116 persons (2001 census). It should also be noted that the Municipality's population according to the 2001 census presented a 3.4% decrease compared to the 1991 census. This decrease is believed to be due to the increasingly intense deterioration of a large part of the city's "historical center" that was witnessed during recent years. Related to this, sales in 2012 went down 25-30% compared to 2011. Also, in the last six months of 2011, 1 in 4 shops has closed down in Athens, and that is approximately 25% of businesses (Athens Traders Association).

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

It is estimated that currently, approximately 70% of the European Union population lives in cities. This number alone is indicative of the growing importance of urban centers. Cities are drivers of economic growth, but at the same time they reflect most imminently the impact of the socio-economic crisis facing today the national governments. In response, the EU is preparing to delegate 5% of the ERDF financing directly to the cities.

Direct investment in cities is further supported by the fact that cities are more efficient when designing and implementing an integrated development strategy compared to national authorities, due to 4 main reasons:

1. From a territorial perspective, the cities have a broader and more integrated range of competencies, which makes it easier for them to manage resources – human, social, economic and environmental.
2. Because of the territorial advantage, from an economic perspective, a most efficient use of financial resources and instruments is feasible and economies of scale are achieved.
3. Politically, there is a higher degree of interaction with the civil society and with the community constituencies. Transparency, accountability and ownership of the programs are better achieved at the local level and lastly,
4. Cities actually do know better what their citizens need.

AN INTEGRATED PROGRAM AND ACTION PLAN FOR ATHENS

As previously illustrated, the city of Athens is the capital of a country that has witnessed firsthand the effects of the economic crisis. Therefore, the special importance of Athens for the reconstruction of the whole country is vital and a key element in a national effort to overcome the daunting challenges of the economic crisis. In response to the existing conditions, the Municipality of Athens developed an Integrated Program and Action Plan. A major element for the success of the program is social innovation and the city's goal to solve its problems by turning them into opportunities. This is done hand in hand and in constant consultation with citizens, local stakeholders and the civil society.

The Municipality is using an integrated investment strategy with both the ERDF and ESF funds, in order to achieve economic, social and sustainable growth, analyzed at a project-specific level. The Municipality of Athens signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Development and the Ministry of Labor, demonstrating the commitment of the national authorities to support this project with up to 120 million Euros in ERDF and ESF funds, within the current programming period, and has created an Intermediate Body which will manage the funds.

The "Re-launch Athens" Program encompasses 4 axes, which include specific projects that focus on smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth:

- Restoring competitiveness of the local economy of Athens is the first axis: A flagship project within this axis is the restoration of abandoned buildings in the center of Athens and their transformation into business incubators which will promote innovation and create jobs for the youth, which is facing an unemployment rate of over 50%. In addition, specific neighborhoods have been identified that face special economic, social and environmental challenges, and incentives have been set, in order to attract investment and achieve the regeneration of these degraded urban areas.
- Upgrading the quality of life of the citizens is the second axis. A flagship project is the promotion of sustainable mobility in Athens, by a series of projects and campaigns, most notably the bike routes and bike rental system, which is currently implemented in many European capitals.
- Regeneration of the urban environment is the third strategic priority. A series of projects of urban regeneration will transform abandoned deteriorated areas of Athens into green spaces and improve the urban landscape. A flagship project within this axis is the Double Regeneration project, which includes the relocation of an old football stadium in an industrial site along with the demolition of the old one for new green public space.
- The Municipality's Social reconstruction plan is the 4th priority. A series of programs is already being implementing that will reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion by promoting the integration of socially vulnerable groups into the labor market. In this effort a Local Action Plan is developed to invest specifically in social economy and social enterprises. The main goal is to provide high quality and sustainable social services to the people mostly in need, such as the homeless, chronically unemployed, immigrants, and so on.

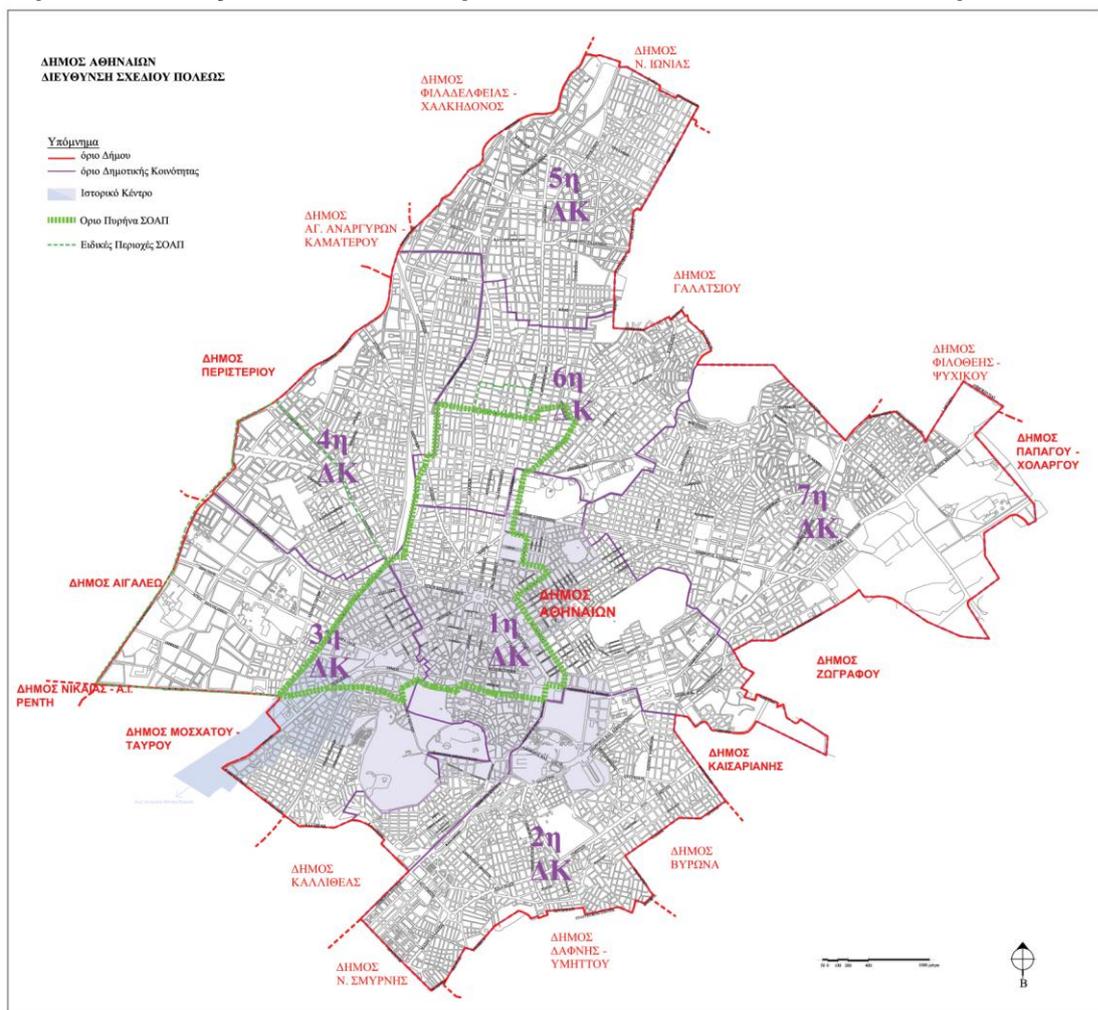
In order to implement this Program, the Municipality established a new Intermediate Managing Authority (IMA) within its Development Agency. The Municipality's IMA is responsible for the overall management of the platform and allocation of available funds in mature projects. In addition, the IMA is preparing a comprehensive strategy to secure European financing for the Municipality in the next programmatic period 2014-2020. The case of Athens constitutes a pilot throughout Europe, where a city has its own Managing Authority.

A COMPREHENSIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR THE CITY CENTER

Building on the “Relaunch Athens” platform, the Municipality is conducting a new Comprehensive and Sustainable Development Plan for the city center. This Plan is not only provisioned by the legal framework enabling the Municipality to monitor and evaluate its progress, but also required by EU financing tools such as the JESSICA (Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas) program.

The new Development Plan will primarily focus on the city’s downtown area, which constitutes the historic and commercial center (Map 1), and also where the majority of the aforementioned problems is concentrated. The scope of the Development Plan is first of all to create an Action Plan for the city center, accumulating the different initiatives and projects undertaken by different government bodies and other institutions. Furthermore, the Development Plan will include a comprehensive set of interventions in the areas of urban planning, social cohesion, economic revitalization and environmental sustainability. The study will extend beyond the illustrated boundary in specific cases, where another set of measures is required, such as industrial areas and residential neighbourhoods. Finally, the scope of the new Development Plan will be long-term until 2020 to support the city's effort to secure EU funding for the next programmatic period of 2014-2020.

Map 1: Boundary of the new Comprehensive and Sustainable Development Plan



The first draft of the study will be published for public consultation process in the summer, where citizens and local groups will be able to express their opinions and shape the Development Plan accordingly.

The Development Plan will be supplemented by JESSICA Plus, an initiative of the Municipality of Athens to establish an Urban Development Fund for its Historic and Commercial Center within the context of the existing JESSICA Program. JESSICA Plus will provide low-interest financing in projects forming part of an integrated plan for sustainable urban development. JESSICA Plus will be accompanied with a set of legal framework changes to enable flexible interventions in underutilized real estate.

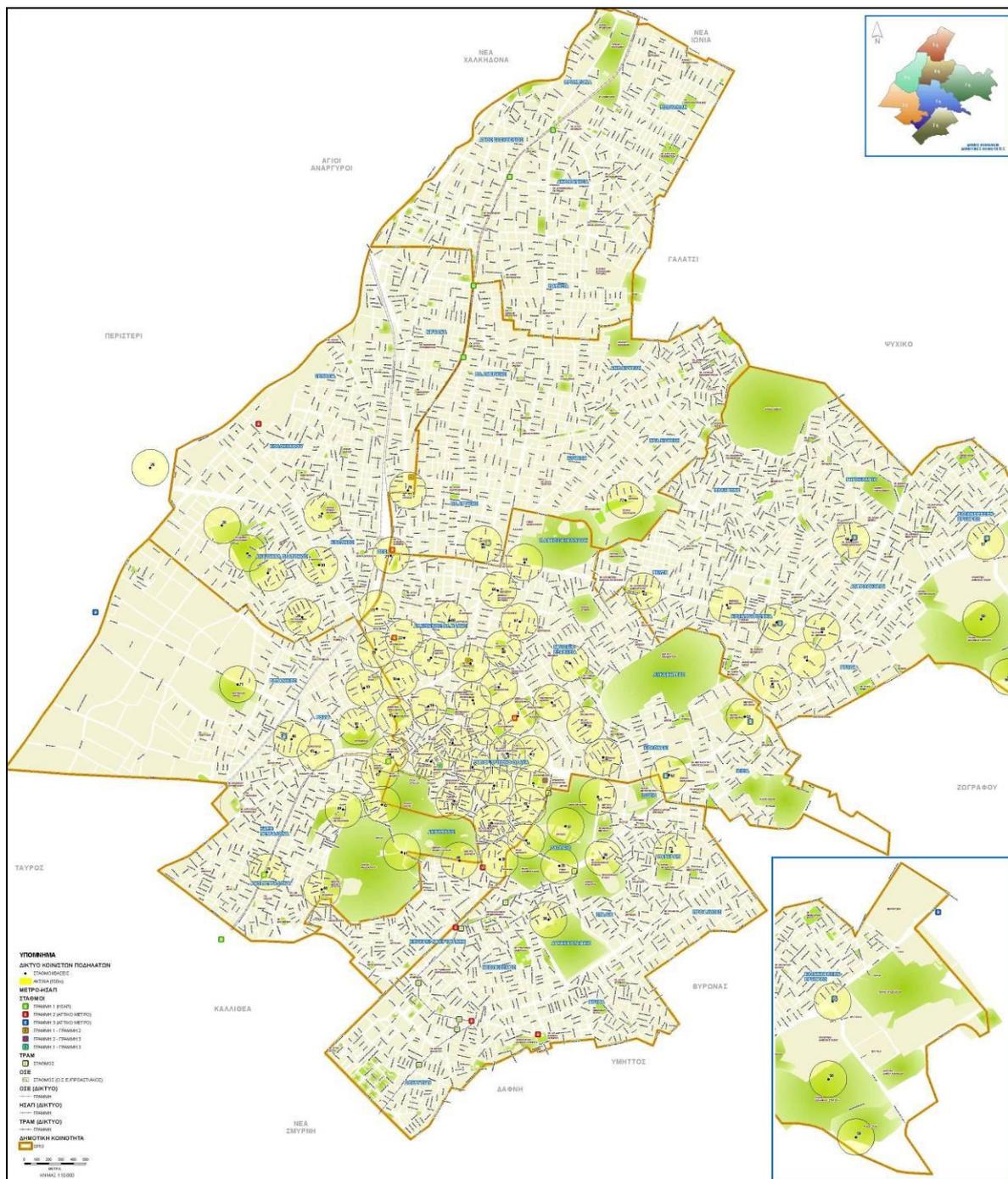
SUSTAINABLE URBAN MOBILITY STRATEGY

The Municipality of Athens has adopted a Sustainable Urban Mobility Strategy in order to promote environmentally friendly transportation for both citizens and goods. This Strategy is a core priority to the “Relaunch Athens” Program, as well as to the new Development Plan. However, it should be noted that the Municipality of Athens has no authority on the city’s public transit network, which is managed by the central government due to the size of the city. Therefore, the Municipality’s Strategy is focusing on:

- Support of the existing public transit infrastructure
- Removal of unnecessary obstacles in public space to enhance pedestrian circulation
- Implementation of a bike sharing scheme
- Comprehensive and controlled parking strategy to reduce private car use and provision for efficient delivery and transportation of goods
- Land use regulation to improve transportation efficiency and sustainability

Two of the most important aspects of the Municipality’s Sustainable Urban Mobility Strategy are the implementation of the bike sharing scheme and the creation of two green streets in the residential neighbourhood of Plato’s Academy. The first will be implemented through an open competition with private companies and is expected to be completed before the end of 2013. The technical provisions call for 1.000 bikes available over 70 stations approximately and will cover most of the city center, spatially allocated within 300 meters from each other (Map 2).

Map 2: Allocation of bike sharing stations



The second is included in the local urban plan of Plato's Academy, which is pending final approval and is expected to be completed by 2014. This is a pilot project for the Municipality, in order to change the streetscape of residential neighbourhoods into a more pedestrian and environmentally friendly approach (Illustration 1). This pilot project was initiated in order to change the urban structure of the city, which is characterized by small blocks and narrow streets.

Illustration 1: Indicative green street design rendering



CONCLUSION

The Municipality of Athens is promoting sustainable urban development through a number of initiatives, as previously described. These initiatives are combined together to form an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the city's revitalization. The complete set of measures and initiatives is expected to be sustainable not only in environmental terms, but also from a financial and efficient perspective, given the limited availability of funds and resources due to the current economic crisis. This programme is expected to be complete when the next programmatic period begins, in order to secure maximum structural funds allocation, along with the necessary maturity to effectively absorb the available resources. In addition, pilot projects are being implemented to change the existing image of the city towards a more environmental and pedestrian friendly destination. In conclusion and as stated before, the cities should and can become the key components to stimulate economic revitalization, in order to overcome the current economic crisis and, thus, further investments should be targeted towards them.

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