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Storytelling for encouraging climate action in Athens, Greece

A climate story to inspire resilience

Athens uses storytelling as a powerful tool to engage citizens and policymakers in addressing the growing threat of extreme heat. Climate stories help make risks more visible and build support for urban heat resilience efforts.

Key Learnings

- **Awareness Raising:** A climate story is a powerful way to raise awareness and build a sense of ownership about heat-related risks and actions among municipal workers and citizens.
- **Horizontal coordination:** Involving different municipal departments helped create a more complete and collaborative story about heat. The visual format made the message more relatable and engaging, reaching a wider audience than traditional communications.
- **Overcoming Challenges with Collaboration and Scientific Data:** Working closely with the Resilience Office and utilising outputs from existing scientific studies (e.g., urban climate modelling) ensured institutional buy-in and the application of credible data sources.
- **Identifying Risks and Creating Targeted Responses:** The story highlighted indoor heat exposure in vulnerable homes and linked it to city-level planning priorities, helping shape more targeted responses to the urban heat risk.

About the region

Athens is the capital and largest city of Greece, with a population of over 3 million in its metropolitan area. A dense urban core and low tree canopy coverage characterise the city, which faces increasing urban heat challenges. The city is vulnerable to extreme temperatures, and projections indicate they will intensify under climate change. Urban greening, public health preparedness, and citizen awareness are key strategic priorities for developing a climate-resilient city. The city has taken a leading role in institutionalising the position of Chief Heat Officer and implementing a Heat Action Plan. A climate story is one of several innovative ways to engage residents and design adaptive resilience strategies.

Climate Hazards

Extreme Heat

Sector

Urban, Health

Key system

Ecosystem and Nature Based Solutions, Health and Wellbeing

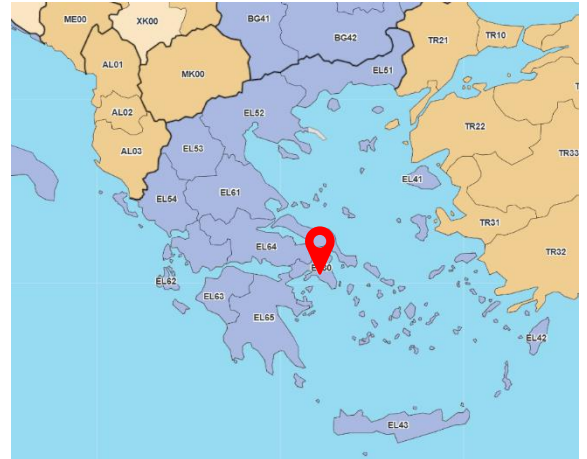


Figure 1: Map of NUTS 2 administrative units of Greece, Eurostat Census 2021. Image Credit: REACHOUT.

Climate Threats

Prolonged and more intense heat waves are one of Athens' main climate threats. Projections show a substantial increase in the frequency and duration of heat events over the next decades. By 2060, heatwaves will increase by four to eight times, depending on CO₂ emissions scenarios. The densely built-up city with limited airflow and green space aggravates heat exposure, especially in vulnerable neighbourhoods with a large share of low-income households, hampering individual adaptation capacity. Those households often lack air conditioning or cannot afford the high energy costs associated with running it. During a heatwave, this leads to elevated indoor temperatures, leaving people highly exposed to heat both day and night. The resulting health risks include cardiovascular problems and a reduced ability to cope with extreme heat. These threats are prompting the city to invest in communication, data tools, and infrastructure to better protect residents.

A climate story as an effective way to tackle heat in Athens

In response to the threat of extreme heat, Athens developed a digital climate story. This is a storytelling approach that combines scientific data, personal experiences, and images to tell the story of rising heat-related risks and response actions for citizens and policymakers. Such response actions can refer to immediate preparedness and relief (climate shelters, awareness campaigns, community services) or longer-term adaptation measures (such as greening the city, using building materials that do not absorb and release heat). The story builds on temperature projections, real-life events, and spatial data to paint a holistic picture of given vulnerabilities and associated opportunities. It highlights how urban planning, public

engagement, and nature-based solutions can intersect, helping to align citizen perceptions and authority decisions. This approach has helped elevate heat resilience as a political priority and strengthen links between citizens, science, and policy. Storytelling has shown the city's commitment, making departments work together and helping citizens understand how to behave during a heatwave. Informing them about cooling spots and climate shelter locations, where they can find protection from extreme heat, protects their health and well-being.



Figure 2: Elissavet Bargianni, Chief Heat Officer of Athens, shares her city's climate story. Image Credit: Sophie van der Horst.

Athens' climate story takes readers into the past and future climates to better understand the necessary adaptation actions required today. An elderly citizen, reflecting on her life in 2030, considers the changing impacts of heat from her 20s to her current age of 70. Heat waves have been steadily increasing in intensity and frequency over the past 50 years. However, when she spends the day with her grandchildren, she finds relief from the heat in the green spaces, beneath the trees, and through other measures that the city implemented in previous years (e.g. municipal clinics, climate shelters), enabling citizens to manage heat waves much more effectively by 2030.

A creative co-creation process, involving individuals from the municipality, consultants, climate service experts, and research partners from the [REACHOUT](#) project consortium, enabled the development of this climate story. It highlights how Athens is tackling heat and protecting its citizens by bringing everyone together around a common approach. The city contributed relevant photos, such as retrofitted urban spaces, as well as key locations, relatable characters, historical climate events, and compelling storylines. At the same time, the research partners provided data and graphics on past and future heat waves. Using

a step-by-step process, the knowledge brokers and climate service experts guided the development of a story incorporating scientific evidence and local relevance, proposing narratives with easy-to-understand text and visuals (Figure 3). The technical expert developed workshops that the city council delivered, engaging diverse departments (Resilience, Planning, Greening, Social Services, Education), which were essential for gathering cross-sectoral insights and building support for the innovative climate story approach. Ultimately, the climate story proved to be not only an effective tool for raising community awareness but also a governance instrument that fosters cross-departmental collaboration.

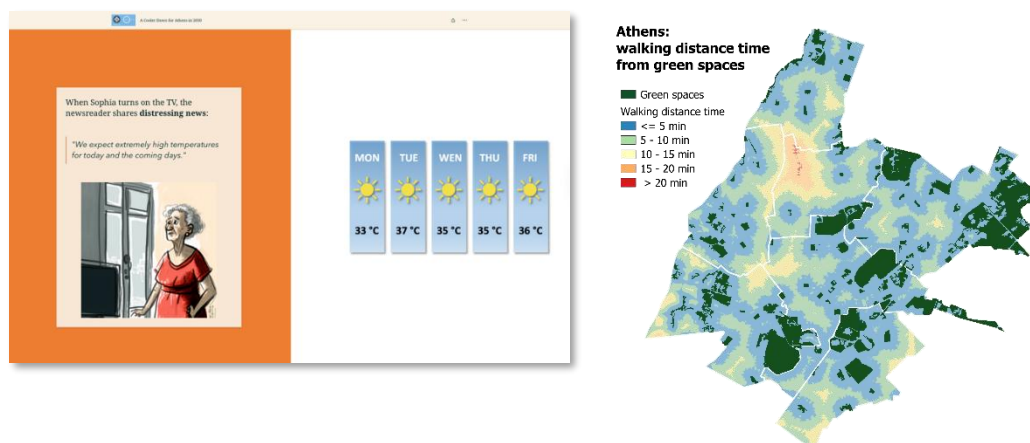


Figure 3: Snapshots from the climate story illustrating the use of photos, visuals, and characters to bring climate change knowledge to life. Image Credit: REACHOUT.

"Athens' climate story unites local places, characters, and events with scientific knowledge and data on climate change. This outcome was achieved through close collaboration with city representatives, a locally embedded knowledge broker, climate service experts, and climate change researchers."

Eva Boon, Climate Researcher / Advisor

Summary

Athens uses storytelling to make climate risks feel more relatable, visible, and actionable for everyone. The climate story illustrates the lived experience of heat, highlights vulnerability in different areas, and connects these insights with planned actions by the city, such as greening strategies, medical support, climate shelters and behavioural advice during heatwaves. By weaving together science, local knowledge, and effective communication, the city is fostering a more inclusive and strategic approach to heat resilience. The climate story has helped raise awareness, engage stakeholders, and support the implementation of targeted urban adaptation measures. It is a replicable example for other cities looking to turn data into meaningful action through human-centred storytelling.

Further information

The work presented in this adaptation story is part of the [REACHOUT](#) project.

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- [A Cooler Dawn for Athens in 2030](#)

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