



# living heritage

A collective statement for community-driven  
post-earthquake reconstruction in Antakya

January 2024

# A collective statement for community-driven post-earthquake reconstruction in Antakya

This collective statement is the outcome of a public forum organised in Antakya in November 2023, focusing on Antakya's "living heritage".

Living heritage includes tangible and intangible elements such as places, people, practices, knowledge, artefacts, events and memories. It connects the reconstruction process with livelihoods and social practices, planning and land rights, landscape and ecological restoration, memory and belonging.

The forum aimed to facilitate sharing and learning among grassroots groups, civil society actors, and built environment professionals who are working on the city's reconstruction after the February earthquakes. More than 30 participants attended the two-day forum, taking part in activities including site visits, group work, and open discussions.

This statement outlines six main challenges currently affecting Antakya's living heritage and potential ways forward to collaboratively address them. As a first result of this engagement, this statement aims to frame a common ground for people and organisations to come together and explore ways to place Antakya's people and living heritage at the centre of the city's future.

# Main challenges affecting living heritage in Antakya

- 1 Lack of basic infrastructures and increasing depopulation
- 2 Ecological destruction and public health hazards
- 3 Encroachment on natural and collective spaces
- 4 Loss of sense of place, memory, and vernacular heritage
- 5 Displacement, gentrification and touristification
- 6 Personal safety and security



# 1

## Lack of basic infrastructures and increasing depopulation

The majority of Antakya's residents have been forced to leave their homes, with many relocating from the province entirely. The city continues to grapple with a shortage of housing and essential infrastructure, including safe drinking water, food, sanitation, energy, and access to information. Moreover, critical services such as healthcare, education, transportation, and employment opportunities are inadequate, contributing to a continued decline in the population. This issue is particularly severe in temporary shelter areas. The absence of a clear timeline for the restoration of suitable living conditions has created significant uncertainty. Despite the critical role played by civil society organisations in enhancing living conditions post-earthquake, the extent of the destruction exceeds their capacity. This situation makes life unsustainable for those who have stayed and hinders the return of those who have left.

**To help Antakya recover, it is crucial to prioritise rebuilding the facilities that support everyday life. This includes delivering adequate housing and the essential infrastructure and services that meet the community's needs. Improving everyday living conditions is the key to enabling residents to stay in Antakya and those who left to come back.**



## Ecological destruction and public health hazards

Large-scale demolitions and rubble disposal are being carried out without following legal safety measures and in disregard of experts' warnings, despite the presence of toxic agents like asbestos in the rubble. This contaminated rubble is being dumped on farmland, waterways and natural habitats, polluting the air and soil in Antakya's agricultural areas. This threatens the sustainability of natural areas rich in biodiversity and the safety of agricultural products, damaging the local economy and people's livelihoods.. Furthermore, this situation poses a significant risk to public health, affecting current and future generations in Antakya. Despite the calls of NGOs, the authorities in charge have ignored their warnings.

**Public authorities should take urgent action to guarantee Antakya's inhabitants' right to an equitable and healthy living space. There is a need to increase pressure from professional bodies and NGOs to ensure that removal, transport, and storage of debris is carried out following scientific data and the law. Environmental and health-related regulations should be enforced, and responsible private companies should not be allowed to put public health at risk and to destroy the natural habitat of Antakya.**



## Encroachment on natural and collective spaces

After the earthquake, tent and container cities, satellite housing estates, and rubble dump yards have been encroaching on public and natural spaces, including parks, farmland, olive groves, and natural areas. Unsupported self-build constructions, such as prefabs and makeshift settlements, contribute to this trend. This adds to decades of unchecked enclosures and urbanisation, jeopardizing traditional agricultural livelihoods. Uncontrolled encroachment erodes collective spaces and natural environments, and post-disaster emergency interventions risk resulting in a new wave of unsustainable urbanisation, further threatening Antakya's socio-ecological balance. Moreover, outdated urban plans that were in effect before the earthquake are still in force, exacerbating the situation.

**The reconstruction should be an opportunity to address long-standing issues of urban sprawl and unsustainable urbanisation, especially in the current climate crisis. While addressing people's most pressing needs and supporting them in developing their solutions, it is essential to establish planning frameworks and implement measures preventing the appropriation and encroachment of natural and agricultural land, as well as communal spaces.**



# 4

## Loss of sense of place, memory, and vernacular heritage

The disaster in Antakya has disrupted daily life, leaving individuals longing for a “sense of normalcy”. Extensive devastation has deeply impacted the residents’ sense of belonging and shared identity, hindering the preservation and transmission of historical memories to future generations. Furthermore, the absence of familiar landmarks has made navigating the city challenging. This loss goes beyond the destruction of monumental buildings and includes everyday places and vernacular architecture, often neglected in the reconstruction efforts and already significantly harmed by hurried demolitions and debris removal. The collective identity of minoritised cultural groups is especially vulnerable in this context.

**The reconstruction must acknowledge and preserve the memories of Antakya’s inhabitants, the value of mundane elements and everyday practices, and the histories that do not conform to official narratives. Repairing historical monuments in compliance with their original features is fundamental and should be done meticulously. Yet, to restore people’s “sense of place”, repairing Antakya should include popular memories associated with minor spaces and everyday life.**



## Displacement, gentrification and touristification

Many in Antakya fear that once the city is rebuilt, it will not belong to them anymore. Gentrification and touristification processes were already underway in Old Antakya before the earthquake, and the reconstruction risks exacerbating them. Some of the most damaged areas, especially near the city centre, now present opportunities for significant speculation. This prospect is particularly threatening for lower-income residents and minoritised cultural groups who may face being forced away from their neighbourhoods. A reconstruction driven solely by profit, prioritising tourism and higher-income users over pre-existing residents, will strain the relationship between the city and its inhabitants.

**When planning the reconstruction, prioritising the preservation of Antakya's socio-cultural diversity and neighbourhood culture is essential. Mechanisms to include diverse cultural groups, the less well-off, tenants and migrants should be established. Public authorities should facilitate the return of the displaced to their original locations, avoiding further relocations and significant demographic changes.**





## Personal safety and security

Residents who have remained in Antakya face many risks, such as increased crime and theft resulting from abandonment and inadequate lighting, as well as issues of physical hazards generated by improper demolitions, unstable structures and falling debris. Additionally, poor road conditions contribute to the risk of traffic accidents. Apart from the devastation, trauma, and loss of livelihood caused by the earthquake, the absence of personal safety adds another layer of vulnerability for Antakya's residents. This lack of security disproportionately affects the most fragile individuals in the community.

**Ensuring personal security and safety is crucial for the well-being of Antakya's residents. Relevant authorities and organisations should work together to ensure a safe environment for all, as this is essential for making the city livable once again.**

# Ways forward

To repair the city and safeguard its living heritage, it is crucial to place the people of Antakya at the heart of the reconstruction process.

The current reconstruction is being conducted in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner, placing a heavy burden on individual residents striving to rebuild their lives and spaces, as well as on the organisations aiming to support them. This approach reflects the problematic planning and construction of the city before the earthquake, which significantly contributed to the escalation of the earthquake into a large-scale disaster.

There is a clear need for the reconstruction process to embrace a city-wide, multi-stakeholder and inclusive perspective, with civil society playing a significantly larger role in the planning and implementation of Antakya's reconstruction. Achieving this objective will require collaborative efforts from public authorities, grassroots groups, civil society organisations, and professional bodies. We identified three complementary ways forward:

**1**

**Meaningful  
Public  
Participation and  
Accountability**

**2**

**Community-  
based  
Organisation  
and Action**

**3**

**Civil Society  
and  
Professional  
Support**



# Meaningful Public Participation and Accountability

**Public authorities, both national and local, should establish spaces and mechanisms that enable meaningful citizen participation, empowering residents to have a real impact on decision-making at the neighbourhood, area and district levels.**

Government action should be driven by long-term collective interests rather than short-term political and financial gains. The scale of destruction also requires public authorities to collaborate with many other stakeholders. Open and transparent communication and coordination are therefore essential.

**As citizens and friends of Antakya, we demand to be actively involved in the reconstruction process.**

We call on public authorities to listen to the voices of the people and civil society, engage with the public, seek our input, and implement decisions based on this feedback. It is essential that appointed and elected authorities have a deep understanding of local issues and requirements, and that audit and control mechanisms operate effectively.



## Community-based Organisation and Action

**Grassroots groups and community-based organisations have a crucial role in mobilising local residents to participate meaningfully in Antakya's reconstruction process.** The focus should be on organising diverse residents at the neighbourhood, area, and district levels, by establishing neighbourhood assemblies, holding regular gatherings, sharing information, seeking unheard voices, and discussing ongoing plans. Developing tools for inclusive public participation and reflection, including self-critique, is essential to build the critical mass needed to hold public authorities and private actors accountable and amplify local voices.

Community-based organisations, many of which are already active, also need to collaborate within a wider network of local communities, activists, and supporters across and beyond the city. **This way, starting from a small scale, Antakya's people will be able to engage critically in the planning process and shape a reconstruction process that meets their needs and aspirations.**



## Civil Society and Professional Support

**Civil society and professional organisations, already active in Antakya, should work to support meaningful collaboration between public authorities and grassroots groups.** Independent civil society groups should collaborate with grassroots organisations to establish and manage effective communication channels, share information, and foster dialogue between residents and decision-makers on the reconstruction process, including matters related to ecological preservation, urban planning, service delivery, and cultural rights.

Professional bodies, non-governmental organisations, universities, and other non-state actors can use their resources, knowledge and skills to inform residents about their rights, help articulate people's priorities, translate community demands into concrete proposals, and challenge problematic policies and plans. **By doing so, Antakya's civil society and professional groups can play a crucial role in supporting civic mobilisation and informing the engagement of community-based groups with official planning and the state.**

# What makes Antakya is the people!

## Signatories:



Karaçay  
Koordinasyonu



nehna



## Supported by:

