Lost in the Rebuild: Social Impacts of Urban Renewal Post-Earthquakes[1]

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Abstract ID: 1289

Introduction

On February 6, 2023, two massive earthquakes devastated southeastern Turkey, registering magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6 respectively. Striking within just nine hours of one another, their combined force was estimated to be equivalent to 2,000 atomic bombs (Calli et al., 2023). The destruction was immense: over 53,000 people lost their lives, more than 100,000 were injured, and close to five million were displaced from their homes (ILO, 2023; Ministry of Interior, 2023). The region faced not only physical ruin but also psychological, social, and cultural upheaval. In response, the Turkish state launched an unprecedented, centralized reconstruction initiative. At the heart of this effort was the Mass Housing Administration (TOKI), tasked with rapidly constructing permanent housing for the displaced (Ministry of Interior, 2024). Within a year, more than 200,000 housing units were reportedly completed, an achievement celebrated as a symbol of administrative efficiency and national resilience.

Yet beneath this veneer of progress lies a profound paradox. Despite the vast scope and speed of the rebuilding campaign, a substantial portion of the displaced population—particularly from the province of Hatay—chose not to return or outright refused to move into the newly built housing units. This hesitance did not stem from logistical delays or lack of access. On the contrary, many survivors in Hatay were allocated homes. Therefore, the research question emerges: Why would people who had suffered such immense loss and hardship reject the opportunity to return to their hometowns and reside in state-provided housing? This question becomes even more urgent when considering that Hatay was one of the hardest-hit provinces and, in parallel, one of the most culturally rich and socially pluralistic regions in the country. The disconnect between physical reconstruction and human return raises critical questions about what it means to "recover" after a

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disaster. Is it enough to rebuild walls and rooftops, or must recovery encompass the restoration of community, culture, and a sense of belonging? This paper seeks to interrogate that very question through a grounded exploration of post-earthquake resettlement in Hatay. Drawing on 80 in-depth interviews conducted in 2024, it examines the lived experiences and narratives of survivors. It aims to reveal the often-overlooked social dimensions of disaster recovery, arguing that meaningful reconstruction must be informed not only by engineering and logistics but also by memory, identity, and the politics of space.

Why Hatay? Cultural Pluralism and the Necessity of Listening

Hatay, a border province situated along the southeastern frontier of Turkey, adjacent to Syria, represents far more than a geographic location, a historical palimpsest of civilizations, a living archive of pluralism, and a testament to the possibilities of coexistence m a region often defined by division (Aydın, et al., 2025). Over centuries, it has accommodated a mosaic of communities including Sunni and Alevi Muslims, Christians of various denominations, Jews, Armenians, Kurds, Turks, and Arab minorities. This religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity was not just co-present but interwoven into everyday life through shared rituals, spaces, and solidarities. Prior to the 2023 earthquakes, Hatay's social life was deeply rooted in neighborhood-based interdependencies: communal festivals celebrated across faiths, multi-generational homes that blended private and public life, and informal systems of mutual aid that blurred boundaries between the secular and the sacred. Courtyards, mosques, churches, markets, and family gardens were not merely physical spaces. They were sites of memory, transmission, and belonging. In this context, urban space functioned as a vessel for cultural expression and social resilience (Aydın, et al., 2025). It provided the architecture not only for housing but for meaning making. For many interviewees in this study, Hatay was not simply a city. It was, as one participant articulated, "a way of living." It represented a microcosm of a pluralistic society where difference was neither marginal nor exoticized, but instead central to identity and urban rhythm.

The trauma of the earthquake, then, was twofold: the literal destruction of lives and homes, and the symbolic rupture of a shared sociocultural world. What followed in the name of recovery, technocratic, standardized housing projects, was perceived by many as an assault on this pluralistic legacy. Rather than rebuilding the relational and spatial conditions that had made Hatay unique,

the new urban forms imposed by the state were experienced as alien, generic, and exclusionary. In this light, the refusal of many survivors to return or accept new TOKİ housing cannot be simplistically interpreted as irrational or oppositional. Instead, it must be understood as a deeply rational form of cultural self-preservation, an assertion that rebuilding must account for more than walls and roofs—it must also restore the conditions for coexistence, rootedness, and agency. To understand this complex interplay between cultural memory, displacement, and resistance, this study turned to qualitative inquiry. Ethnographic and interpretive methodologies were employed to foreground the voices and perceptions of survivors themselves—those whose everyday realities were being reconfigured not only by nature but by state-driven reconstruction policies.

Between June and September 2024, 80 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with earthquake survivors. The interviews prioritized open-ended storytelling to capture the layered emotional, cultural, and spatial experiences of these individuals. Data were coded and analyzed thematically using MAXQDA software, guided by the conceptual framework of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) as articulated by Vanclay et al. (2015). SIA was selected not only for its comprehensive approach to evaluating post-disaster impacts but also for its normative commitment to participatory, inclusive recovery processes. Key dimensions examined included are community cohesion and breakdown, cultural continuity and erasure, governance, voice, and participation, environmental transformation and psychosocial and emotional wellbeing. This methodological approach was not merely a data collection exercise; it was an ethical intervention. In a context where top-down policy had displaced community agency, this research sought to restore voice and visibility to those who had been treated as passive recipients rather than active stakeholders in the reconstruction of their own futures. Through this dual lens—of Hatay's unique social ecology and a qualitative methodology attuned to meaning—the subsequent sections explore the deep, multifaceted social impacts of post-earthquake urban renewal in Turkey.

Findings and Discussion

Before the earthquakes, Hatay's urban life was anchored in extended families, shared courtyards, and informal care networks. Multi-generational co-residence was not only practical but an essential social institution supporting resilience, caregiving, and cultural continuity. These arrangements fostered a culture of spontaneous solidarity, neighbors helping with child-rearing,

cooking, and everyday support. Post-disaster housing fundamentally disrupted this ecology. Survivors were resettled in standardized apartment blocks designed for nuclear families. Enclosed courtyards and shared thresholds were replaced by anonymous stairwells and private balconies. Many interviewees described this shift as moving from interdependence to isolation. As one elderly woman recalled: "*Before, if I needed help, I called across the courtyard and someone came. Now, I don't even know who lives next door.*"

This fragmentation was not incidental. It revealed a policy mindset that prioritized shelter over social cohesion. The resulting environment, while technically adequate, left many feeling disconnected and lonely. This pattern reflects broader research showing that when recovery focuses narrowly on efficiency, it undermines trust and reciprocity (Cernea, 2000). A second theme was the erosion of cultural plurality. For centuries, Hatay's diverse communities—Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others—practiced rituals in shared spaces. Neighborhood squares, communal ovens, and nearby religious sites made cultural difference visible and integrated. In the new developments, homogenous buildings replaced these configurations. One Arab Christian participant observed: *"Our feast tables used to spill into the street. Now there is no street—just parking lots and fences."* For many, the uniform facades and generic layouts symbolized an assimilationist impulse to overwrite Hatay's pluralism. Alevis and other minorities described this as a form of erasure. The built environment no longer supported the practices and memories that sustained identity. From a social impact assessment perspective, this highlights that cultural heritage and plural identities are not optional add-ons but core elements of recovery. Without them, survivors feel estranged even in physically safe spaces.

The third theme concerned environmental change. Pre-quake neighborhoods were low-rise, green, and walkable, with gardens and mature trees. High-rise resettlement imposed barriers to mobility and wellbeing, especially for children, elders, and people with disabilities. Parents described how children once played outdoors but were now confined to small balconies. One elderly man explained: *"I used to walk to the garden every morning. Now I look out from the fifth floor and feel trapped."* Construction dust and poor ventilation contributed to new respiratory problems. The loss of gardens and trees also meant the loss of familiar rhythms and self-sufficiency. In prioritizing rapid construction, planners neglected how the environment shapes health and belonging.

A further pattern was the deep psychological toll. Survivors reported anxiety, sleeplessness, and chronic grief. Displacement compounded trauma, especially for women and elders who faced isolation and economic precarity. One woman said: "*Even if we are alive, we are not living anymore.*" Mental health services were limited, and support often focused on immediate crisis rather than long-term recovery. The sense of living in a "safe but soulless" environment illustrates that psychosocial wellbeing is inseparable from cultural and spatial continuity. A fifth theme was exclusion from decision-making. While reconstruction was presented as a national success, most survivors said they were never consulted about housing design or allocation. This lack of participation deepened alienation. Survivors felt treated as passive recipients rather than active citizens. Research shows that participatory approaches are not merely symbolic—they are essential for legitimacy, trust, and effective recovery (Vanclay et al., 2015).

Finally, the study revealed inequalities embedded in aid distribution. Official frameworks favored documented homeowners, excluding renters, informal residents, and many minorities. This selective recognition created new vulnerabilities and conflicts. Property titles, intended to signal stability, became sources of stress and dispute. These dynamics show that rigid bureaucratic criteria often reproduce social inequalities instead of resolving them. Yet despite all these challenges, survivors demonstrated remarkable resilience. Many resisted cultural erasure by maintaining ties to their old neighborhoods. Some refused to de-register from Hatay. Others returned on weekends to clean ruins, host communal meals, and recreate familiar rituals. This everyday resistance, as Foucault (1978) reminds us, is a form of agency: "*Where there is power, there is resistance.*" These acts underscore that rebuilding is more than replacing structures. It is the struggle to re-root memory, identity, and meaning in a changed landscape.

Conclusion

Rebuilding walls is easy. Rebuilding communities is not. The experience of Hatay shows that disaster recovery driven by technical efficiency but detached from social realities risks deepening wounds rather than healing them. While the Turkish state's reconstruction achieved scale and speed, it largely failed to restore the cultural, emotional, and relational dimensions of life. True recovery requires more than shelter. It demands recognition of heritage, respect for collective memory, and opportunities for communities to shape their futures. Participatory Social Impact

Assessment is not an administrative formality—it is a democratic necessity. The lessons of Hatay are globally relevant as climate change and disasters intensify. Infrastructure matters, but without the social fabric that sustains dignity and belonging, it is only concrete. For recovery to be genuinely transformative, it must center the voices and visions of those who live its consequences.

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