

International Committee on Historic Cities, Towns and Villages (CIVVIH)

Statement from CIVVIH regarding the Reconstruction of Beirut

Beirut is one of the oldest known cities along the Mediterranean shores. It was the scene of a civil war for 30 years, while destructions, neglect, speculation have gradually wiped its cultural heritage and remaining historical features..

The country was already in the middle of a severe economic crisis when occurred the explosion in the harbor on August 4, 2020. We are all shocked by this catastrophe and extremely saddened by the tragic event that hit Lebanon's capital. Human losses and injuries were high and hundreds of thousand people became homeless. The explosion led to a large-scale material destruction, including severe damage to heritage assets. According to UNESCO statistics, 600 traditional houses were damaged of which about 60 are in danger of collapsing.

The most severely affected districts are those near the harbor particularly: Gemmayzeh, Mar Mikhail, Rmeil, Jeitawi and Karantina. Those areas include a high concentration of traditional houses from the late 19th c. and early 20th c. They so embody the past image of Beirut, a so singular charm that visitors were frequent, art galleries and restaurants numerous.

Facing this major disaster, the CIVVIH has noted the courage of young professionals, the quick and wise reaction of the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA), of ICOMOS new national Committee and many other cultural institutions. International organizations like UNESCO pledged their support and Lebanese authorities have forbidden the selling of traditional houses, as well as demolition without DGA authorization. Surveys were immediately undertaken and general reports about building damages are already available.

This should be an excellent start, but the process would certainly be long. The CIVVIH would like to propose its support and assistance to ICOMOS Lebanon and other concerned parties. As professionals, its members may at the moment just mention some

of the additional conditions usually needed for large-scale urban rehabilitation and reconstruction:

1. Mobilized professionals include representatives of a variety of skills: Architects, urban planners, engineers, archaeologists, landscapers, sociologists, economists, lawyers, historians, etc.
2. Urban and social projects and activities are undertaken under the umbrella of a dedicated and efficient coordinating legitimate authority.
3. Communities (owners, inhabitants and stakeholders) should be involved in the process of decision-making at different levels (building, street, district, etc.).
4. A strategy may be elaborated according to emergencies, available resources and logical succession of works and aim at fostering a substantial involvement of community.
5. A toolkit of regulations may be used for funding, ownership, heights, perspectives, shapes, materials, colors,
6. Area planning may provide a detailed local visual and social coherence between different kinds of buildings and urban spaces. Some public staircases are already a success.
7. Other issues may include raising awareness, illustrated guidelines, advisory services, provision of materials and scaffolding, fund raising, incentives, etc.

Such a rehabilitation and reconstruction may model the sense of identity and belonging of generations to come. This is why the CIVVIH would be happy to discuss such issues and their possible suitability in Beirut, with partners and interested parties. Other forms of assistance may also be considered.