

# Community Involvement as the Foundation of Gaza Reconstruction

Liel Maghen <sup>1</sup>  
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## Insight Paper<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that the reconstruction of Gaza cannot succeed without Palestinian agency, rights, and meaningful participation. Drawing on comparative experience and field based insights, it shows how externally driven models tend to reproduce dependency and fragility rather than support long term recovery. It emphasizes the need to anchor reconstruction at the neighborhood level, develop participatory planning mechanisms, and address housing, land, and governance issues early in the process. It also highlights the importance of linking humanitarian action with political frameworks and rethinking transitional spaces as foundations for community life. Ultimately, reconstruction is not only about rebuilding infrastructure, but about restoring the social and institutional fabric of society. Its success will depend on whether Gazans are able to shape their own recovery from the outset.

### A. Introduction: Understanding the Centrality of Community Involvement in Gaza Reconstruction

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Comparative experience shows that reconstruction can reshape societies in profound ways. But when it is driven from the outside, when communities are reduced to passive recipients, and when rights and participation are not embedded from the outset, the outcome is predictable: Reconstruction ends up reproducing the very inequalities, dependencies, and grievances that led to conflict in the first place. **Thus, the reconstruction of Gaza will not succeed without the meaningful participation, rights, and agency of its people.**

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<sup>1</sup> **Liel Maghen** is a policy practitioner and researcher specializing in regional diplomacy, sustainable reconstruction, and political economy in the Middle East. He serves as Senior Policy Fellow at Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and is currently a fellow at LUISS University in Rome, focusing on Mediterranean cooperation and security.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on the first session of the Gaza Reconstruction Roundtable Series which brought together practitioners, policymakers, urban planners, humanitarian workers and scholars from Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Europe, and international institutions.

In the absence of trusted local institutions, genuine participation, and transparent governance, even well-funded efforts struggle to take root. What may appear as progress often proves fragile, unsustainable, and disconnected from the realities on the ground. In Gaza, this challenge is even more acute. Today's proposals for rebuilding the Strip largely follow a familiar top-down logic, driven by international agendas, geopolitical bargaining, and technical planning dominated by external contractors. Gazans often appear as a category to be managed rather than as political and social actors shaping their own future. **This gap between ambition and local ownership is both a strategic and a moral failure**, one that must be confronted from the very beginning of the post-war reconstruction process.

The destruction in Gaza today is far beyond previous rounds of conflict, forcing planners to rethink familiar models. It demands new forms of neighborhood-driven planning, participatory design, and approaches that operate simultaneously across scales—street, block, neighborhood, district, and region. Yet the political and administrative frameworks needed to support such community-anchored recovery remain fragile or absent. The lack of clear housing, land, and property rights; the displacement of entire neighborhoods; and the erosion of governance systems pose profound challenges that must be addressed early.

In this context, community involvement is not an accessory to reconstruction rather it is at its foundation. Rebuilding homes, infrastructure, and services cannot be divorced from rebuilding social structures, trust networks, rights frameworks, and local governance. Physical reconstruction without social legitimacy is unsustainable. Reconstruction succeeds or fails depending on its ability to anchor itself in the communities it aims to support.

## **B. Scenarios and Strategic Opportunities**

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Gaza is facing three potential scenarios for reconstruction. The **first** is a continuation of the traditional top-down reconstruction model, dominated by international actors and characterized by limited local ownership, while strengthening processes of dispossession. The **second** is a hybrid technocratic model, where coordination bodies play a central role but community involvement remains constrained. Both scenarios risk repeating past failures, generating mistrust, and reinforcing dependency.

The preferred scenario is one in which reconstruction is **anchored in rights, dignity, and community-level ownership**. Such a model places neighborhood planning at the center, strengthens local governance, and intentionally includes youth, women, and marginalized communities. Transitional camps become governance platforms rather than humanitarian storage zones. Housing, land, and property rights frame the entire process, ensuring displaced people are not further dispossessed. And the Gaza–West Bank system is treated as an integrated political and economic space, not as separate or competing entities. This approach offers the greatest potential for

long-term stability, legitimacy, and resilience—and aligns with lessons from other post-conflict settings.

## C. Key Insights

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Reconstruction in Gaza stands at a critical juncture. Comparative experience and recent discussions point to several shared lessons that should shape any future approach. At its core, reconstruction must be grounded in Palestinian agency, where community engagement is not treated as a procedural step but as the foundation of long-term impact. Early recovery must be guided by dignity, rights, trust, and transparency, with transitional spaces designed not as sites of containment but as platforms for governance, empowerment, and social cohesion. Gaza cannot be addressed in isolation from the West Bank, as fragmentation undermines both political viability and economic recovery. At the same time, a serious reckoning with the failures of previous reconstruction rounds is necessary, including political gridlock, external dominance, and the absence of a long-term vision. Moving forward, the goal should not be to restore what existed before, but to adopt a Build Forward Better approach that integrates sustainability, climate resilience, circular construction, and local ownership, responding to Gaza's density, environmental constraints, and evolving demographic realities.

### ***Rights, trust, and protection must be embedded from the start***

Years of experience in post-conflict environments demonstrate that participation cannot exist without rights. When the beneficiaries for reconstruction are not clear and declared, it can become another tool for dispossession. People fear losing property, status, or access to land, they resist relocation—even to more adequate housing. Past reconstruction missions in Gaza repeatedly suffered from this disconnect between local priorities and externally imposed plans. Local governance systems—municipalities, local councils, community organizations—must be strengthened and protected from political pressure, while granting local a framework for their stake within the reconstruction process. Transparent mechanisms for consultation, prioritization, compensation, and grievance redress are not optional; they are preconditions for meaningful participation. Otherwise, reconstruction becomes an administrative exercise rather than a social and political project .

### ***Humanitarian Action and Political Frameworks***

Community led approaches have already begun to emerge in Gaza out of necessity. Local initiatives such as Damour's Green Shelter model, developed with engineers and community members, point to a shift away from basic emergency responses toward more dignified and participatory forms of transitional shelter. Despite severe constraints on materials, movement, and stability, these efforts highlight a central reality. Gazans are both capable and willing to shape their own recovery, provided they are given the space, security, and institutional support to do so.

These experiences also expose deeper questions around fairness and distribution. Standardized aid models, such as allocating equal support per tent, fail to reflect differences in household size, displacement histories, and levels of loss. What is required is not only material assistance, but processes that are transparent, trusted, and attentive to dignity and rights.

Palestinians have consistently demonstrated resilience, creativity, and the ability to self organize. The core challenge is not a lack of capacity, but a lack of enabling conditions. Movement restrictions, administrative barriers, and interruptions to aid flows limit even the most basic forms of humanitarian response. At the same time, the psychological toll of prolonged conflict, including the erosion of identity, stability, and future horizons, shapes how communities engage with recovery efforts.

In this context, humanitarian action cannot be separated from the political environment in which it operates. Reconstruction does not take place in a vacuum. It both influences and is constrained by the political arrangements governing Gaza. Without a framework that ensures access, protection, and a degree of institutional stability, community involvement risks remaining symbolic, with little impact on actual decision making or long term outcomes.

### ***Urban Recovery at the Neighborhood Scale***

Urban recovery in Gaza should begin at the neighborhood level, where social ties, identity, and everyday life are rooted. This requires moving away from centralized planning toward participatory mechanisms that give communities a real role in shaping priorities, design, and sequencing. Tools such as community mapping, neighborhood committees, and co design processes can help align technical planning with local knowledge.

Work by UN Habitat shows that Gaza's neighborhoods differ significantly in their capacity to absorb return, with some retaining enough cohesion for early recovery while others require deeper intervention. Building on this, the transition from camps to communities becomes critical. Transitional sites should not function as spaces of containment, but as early stages of urban recovery, with governance structures, services, and economic activity embedded from the outset.

However, this approach depends on unresolved questions of return, housing, land, and property rights. Without clarity on these issues, participation risks becoming symbolic, and reconstruction may drift toward externally driven models detached from social realities. Anchoring recovery at the neighborhood level is therefore not only a planning choice, but a condition for preserving community life.

## D. Key Recommendations

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There are several strategic recommendations for policymakers, donors, and implementing agencies:

1. **Anchor reconstruction in Palestinian agency, rights, and meaningful participation from the very beginning.** Rights frameworks, especially for displaced people, must guide relocation, compensation, and community planning.
2. **Adopt a multi-scalar planning model**, beginning at the neighborhood level and extending to district and regional scales, with strong municipal leadership and Palestinian institutional ownership.
3. **Embed transparent, protected mechanisms for community participation**, including grievance mechanisms, social audits, and inclusive consultations insulated from political coercion.
4. **Transform transitional camps into community platforms**, integrating governance systems, social services, economic activities, and youth engagement into the early recovery process.
5. **Learn explicitly from past failures**, conducting a structured review of why previous Gaza reconstruction efforts collapsed and how to avoid replicating those patterns.
6. **Ensure coordination structures align with Palestinian priorities**, preventing international mechanisms from overshadowing local governance, institutions, or civil society.
7. **Link reconstruction to political frameworks**, recognizing that economic, social, and humanitarian recovery cannot be detached from political agreements and governance reforms.
8. **Advance a Build Forward Better approach**, integrating sustainability, circular construction, micro-grids, and climate resilience into all planning decisions .

## E. Conclusion: Toward a Rights Based Reconstruction Vision

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Reconstruction in Gaza is not only a technical task of rebuilding what was destroyed. It is a political and social process that will shape the future of the territory and its people. As this paper has shown, approaches that sideline local agency, weaken rights, or detach planning from lived realities tend to reproduce fragility rather than resolve it.

A different path requires placing Palestinian agency at the center, grounding recovery in clear rights frameworks, and rebuilding trust through transparent and participatory processes. This includes planning at the neighborhood level, linking humanitarian response with governance, and ensuring that transitional spaces evolve into

functioning communities. It also requires confronting unresolved questions of return, housing, land, and property as early as possible, rather than postponing them.

The early recovery phase offers a narrow but decisive window to set these foundations. If used well, it can shift reconstruction away from cycles of dependency and toward more stable, locally anchored systems. If missed, it risks repeating patterns that have already proven unsustainable.

The path forward begins with listening to the people of Gaza and creating the conditions for them to shape their own recovery. Reconstruction will ultimately be measured not only by the infrastructure it delivers, but by whether it restores the social, political, and institutional foundations of community life