

The Gaza Phoenix Recovery Framework: An overview

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Abstract

Developed amid the destruction of Gaza's built environment and of life, social networks, and cultural and institutional fabric, this paper introduces the Gaza Phoenix Recovery Framework as a locally led model for recovery. The framework challenges donor-driven reconstruction paradigms that have been shown to marginalise affected communities, as well as approaches that focus exclusively on the post-war period while neglecting recovery during the crisis itself. Grounded in local knowledge, engagement with local administrations, and networked interdisciplinary expertise, the framework pursues recovery by addressing simultaneously the material, social, heritage, and institutional spheres, understood as essential and intertwined components of a dignified, resilient, and just future.

Keywords

Locally led recovery, Reconstruction, Bottom-up, Local agency, Crisis-phase planning

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Background

Soon after the October 7th Israeli genocidal war on Gaza, drawing on extensive experience in conflict and post-conflict contexts, a predictable, recurring pattern could be anticipated: reconstruction would be swiftly captured by international and regional actors, while the communities most affected would be marginalised. Yet nothing could have prepared us for the scale of destruction — an annihilation unprecedented in history. Beyond collapsed buildings and shattered infrastructure, entire communities were erased, social networks obliterated, and the psychological, cultural, and social fabric of life profoundly disrupted. This magnitude of loss underscored an imperative long recognized but rarely acted upon: Palestinians must define the recovery of their own land before external actors impose visions divorced from historical, cultural, and social realities.

In response, along with a few like-minded colleagues, a small pool of initiators coming from different trajectories within international projects mobilised Palestinian experts across Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora to collaboratively design a reconstruction framework grounded in local agency and expertise. The resulting Gaza Phoenix Recovery Framework (hereafter, “the Phoenix”) emerged from an interdisciplinary and intergenerational coalition of historians, architects, engineers, urban planners, economists, lawyers, public policy analysts, sociologists, and cultural practitioners. Their combined expertise merges technical precision with deep socio-cultural understanding, producing a recovery vision that is rigorously grounded, contextually informed, and strategically forward-looking. From the outset, professionals from Gaza’s municipalities worked closely with the consortium to translate this vision into actionable strategies, ensuring that local capacities, knowledge, and

priorities shaped every aspect of the plan. The framework was formally inaugurated by Gazan municipalities in January 2025, marking a milestone in locally led, collaborative reconstruction.

The Phoenix confronts a recurrent global pattern: post-conflict reconstruction is frequently monopolised by war economies and institutional actors. As substantiated by a vast and longstanding scholarship, International agencies and NGOs often dominate funding through bloated operational structures, fragmented mega-programmes, and priorities centred on institutional visibility rather than local impact, leaving affected communities marginalised, dependent, and disempowered (Harvey & Lind, 2005; Murray Li, 2007; Chang et al., 2010; Sakue-Collins, 2021). In Gaza, where regional and international interests converge sharply, such capture threatens to transform recovery into further dispossession — not only of land, but also of memory, narrative, agency, and the capacity to determine one's own future. Therefore, the Gaza Phoenix Recovery Framework was developed on a fundamental assumption: when local communities do not lead reconstruction, rebuilding extends the violence that preceded it.

Setting a different paradigm: Rooted, dialogical, collaborative

The Phoenix was born two months into the 7th October war to respond to the instance of protection and support for Gaza's civic society. As such, from the beginning it qualified as a technical tool with no political connotation, but the defence of the essential rights of civilians and of their territory. This is the common basis necessarily shared by all contributors to the Phoenix, who join the activities as independents.

The framework rests on the determination to challenge this scenario. Amid annihilation and unparalleled destruction, the Gaza Phoenix Gaza Recovery Framework pursues recovery through restoring demonstrates that recovery through the parallel and must restore life as decisively as it rebuilding structures. Its principles, criteria and guidelines rest on an underlying rationale that asserts that dignity, memory, and resilience are as essential as physical reconstruction, ensuring that rebuilding strengthens social cohesion, preserves cultural heritage, and safeguards institutional continuity. By integrating technical rigour with locally rooted knowledge and collaborative action, the Phoenix framework proposes a model for post-conflict recovery that is credible, transformative, dynamic, collaborative, and socially anchored, establishing a precedent for reconstruction that honours the past, safeguards the present, and shapes a just, resilient future for Gaza.

Extensive engagement with academics, professionals, youth, civil institutions, grassroots organisations, and municipal experts ensures that the framework consolidates diverse perspectives into a coherent, actionable roadmap. By embedding local knowledge and social priorities at every stage, the Phoenix transcends purely technical approaches, fostering reconstruction that is socially anchored, culturally resonant, and politically intentional.

The Phoenix was developed entirely on a voluntary basis by specialists with enduring ties to Gaza and the broader Palestinian context, hence contextually affirming that Palestinians are the most knowledgeable custodians of their land and the only legitimate authors of its future. Rejecting the notion of Gaza as a *tabula rasa*, the Phoenix rests on a nuanced understanding of the territory's lived history, spatial structures, cultural practices, and remaining assets, challenging externally imposed templates that erase context, undermine capacity, and replicate extractive patterns.

By including immediate wartime safeguards alongside long-term recovery strategies, the Phoenix aims to extend protection for material and immaterial heritage while destruction and violence unfold, securing, to the extent possible, the survival of urban assets and preparing the social and institutional conditions essential for meaningful reconstruction.

The Gaza Phoenix operates on a budget-0 system, with participants contributing on a wholly voluntary, non-remunerated basis, and outputs funded by contributors themselves. This working paradigm deliberately defies the dominant fund-based mechanism of projects of this kind. While the independent and non-monetary system emplaced by the Phoenix posits some limitations and challenges - from the necessarily part-time dedication of its experts, to the lack of a strong institutional backing lobbying and endorsing the plan-, the longstanding and far-reaching outcomes achieved so far estimated at around 2.000.000 EUR worth by several agencies, set a viable alternative, more accessible to smaller realities, freer from clientelisms and, especially, fairer to the local communities and their places of belonging. As such, the Phoenix offers an alternative to other contexts challenged -now or in the future- by similar crises, regardless of the extent to which the Phoenix will succeed in implementing its visions.

From the outset, the development of the Phoenix Framework followed a multi-stage, participatory process. It began with internal brainstorming meetings that established the foundational principles. These were followed by in-depth analyses of Gaza's social, infrastructural, and environmental conditions, a critical review of past reconstruction experiences, and lessons learned from relevant international models. The team also revisited pre-war municipal development plans and projects that local actors across the Gaza Strip had already envisioned.

Together, these inputs provided a comprehensive foundation for shaping a recovery framework that is both contextually grounded and forward-looking.

This process recognised early on that reconstruction in Gaza would not follow a smooth or linear trajectory. Given the settler-colonial nature of the Israeli regime of control, the extensive devastation of the built and natural environment, and the fragmentation of Gaza's social fabric, the team understood the need to move beyond ad hoc responses. Instead, the framework is built on clear principles and actionable guidelines that withstand political uncertainty and operational instability.

The central vision of the Phoenix Framework is to articulate a locally rooted, credible, and sustainable path toward Gaza's recovery. It advocates for a process that not only addresses material reconstruction but also revitalizes social, economic, and ecological life, enabling Gaza to transition toward a just and resilient future. To operationalise this vision, the plan is structured around six core planning criteria: wartime resilience, local agency and social cohesion, circularity and sustainability, productivity, mobility, and heritage preservation. These criteria emerged from iterative consultations with local planners, engineers, architects, and thematic experts, reflecting a commitment to design a pragmatic yet transformative framework.

The Phoenix rationale: Structure, principles, main aims

Building on this foundation, the Phoenix Framework envisions a roadmap for rebuilding that is organized around three interlinked stages: the emergency phase, the stabilization phase, and the long-term reconstruction and development phase. These are not conceived as isolated or sequential packages. Rather, they represent a continuum of

actions, structured to ensure that short- and medium-term interventions do not undermine long-term objectives. Seamless integration between phases is a defining feature of the plan, especially given the highly dynamic and constrained context of Gaza's political and logistical environment.

Within each phase, the framework identifies key actions across essential service sectors—such as housing, water, energy, mobility, and public health—while insisting on intersectoral coordination. For example, energy strategies are linked to waste management and environmental rehabilitation; water infrastructure is addressed in relation to sewage systems, land reclamation, and food production. These multi-sectoral intersections enlighten and shaped what the framework calls the “components” of masterplans or policies, offering planners and decision-makers an integrated toolbox for sectoral planning that aligns with broader recovery goals.

While the emergency and stabilisation phases are constructed as action-oriented frameworks focused on immediate and medium-term needs, the long-term reconstruction phase offers design- and planning-based recommendations. These outputs are conceived to be used as consultative and discussion tools rather than pre-packaged solutions. These are intended to guide urban designers, architects, and policymakers in laying the foundations for Gaza's sustainable and autonomous future.

In the long-term phase, spatial interventions are organised across four interconnected scales: the regional, urban, neighbourhood, and architectural. These scales are not treated as separate or hierarchical silos, but as a coherent and synchronised continuum of intervention, ensuring consistency from strategic territorial planning to detailed architectural design. For example, in addressing green infrastructure, the Phoenix begins at the regional scale by considering the Gaza Strip and its surrounding ecological

systems, then translates these principles into urban networks, neighbourhood-level spaces, and finally into architectural design guidelines, embedding environmental strategies across all levels of planning and design.

The structure of the Phoenix Framework document is composed of three main bodies. The first outlines the principles, methodology, team composition, and guidance for using the document. The second presents the reconstruction roadmap, divided into the three recovery stages, and includes sector-specific actions and strategies. The third comprises annexes that offer theoretical insights and extended policy recommendations for use by government actors and institutional planners.

Ultimately, the Phoenix is more than a technical document. It is a strategic, political, and institutional roadmap—one designed for use by municipal authorities, ministries, professionals, and planning practitioners engaged in the spatial and economic recovery of Gaza. It offers not just tools for rebuilding, but a vision of decolonial recovery rooted in local agency, structural justice, and long-term sovereignty.

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