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Implementation of the normative and operational activities of UN-Habitat, including reporting on its programmatic activities in 2023 and the implementation of subprogrammes, flagship programmes and technical cooperation activities

Preliminary report on the status of the development of the efforts to reconstruct the human settlements in the Gaza Strip**

Report of the Executive Director

I. Introduction

1. The report is in response to Decision 2023/5 of UN-Habitat's Executive Board which in paragraph 6. *Urges the Executive Director in this context to use all the tools at the Executive Director's disposal to engage, including through collaboration with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), in recent urban crises, such as in the Gaza Strip¹, without prejudice to the identified urban crises and conflicts reflected in the annex to the present document, and requests the Executive Director to submit to the Executive Board, at its first session of 2024, a **comprehensive and up-to-date report on the status of the development of the efforts to reconstruct the human settlements in the Gaza Strip.***

II. Scope of the report

2. This report is only a preliminary report taking into account the situation on the ground. The war in the Gaza Strip is still ongoing with no durable ceasefire reached². The scope is further limited due to the fact that no field-based assessments are possible, and the report relies on ongoing remote-sensing assessments and consultations with a wide range of stakeholders supporting the response in the Gaza Strip (see annex). The report is based on data available as of 15 March 2024 and as such the data will require frequent updating.

3. The report is based on a mission of UN-Habitat's acting Emergency Director from 5 to 12 February 2024 to Cairo and Amman, follow-up online consultations and inputs from the Regional

* HSP/EB.2024/1.

** The present document has not been formally edited.

¹ The terminology employed in this document, including but not limited to the terms "State of Palestine", "Palestine", "Government", "country" and "national", is without prejudice to the status of Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT): the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip as recognized by the United Nations.

² As of 20 March 2024.

Office for Arab States and UN-Habitat's Special Human Settlements Programme for the Palestinian People. A visa request to the Israeli authorities to travel to Jerusalem and Ramallah was submitted on the 17th of January but did not receive an answer. All planned meetings for that portion of the mission were conducted online from Cairo.

4. The report highlights significant challenges and uncertainties in planning for recovery and reconstruction efforts in the context of Gaza. Key concerns include the unpredictable political and security landscape post-conflict. The immediate focus remains evidently on the humanitarian response, advocating for the creation of conditions conducive to allow sufficient access. As per the request of the Executive Board, this report is called upon to look beyond the current acute humanitarian phase and explore pathways going forward.

III. Assessing the impact of the war on the human settlements in the Gaza Strip

5. A detailed assessment of the impact of the war on the human settlements in the Gaza Strip is fundamental to guide efforts to reconstruct them. In order to do so, it is first important to summarize the main urban challenges in the Gaza Strip pre-war as the starting point, before mapping out the intermediate results of the ongoing assessments and what more needs to be done going forward.

A. Urbanization challenges in the Gaza Strip pre-war

6. The recent Common Country Analysis developed by the UN Country Team in the Occupied Palestinian Territory³, the Status Report on the Achievement of Goal 11 in Palestine⁴ and the 2023 data of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics⁵ give a good overview of the development challenges in the Gaza Strip. In addition, following the war in 2014, UN-Habitat published an urban profile of the Gaza Strip⁶. Further information can be found in the analysis done in preparation for the national urban policy⁷ and the national spatial plan project. Elements important for this report and the way forward are summarized below.

1. A highly urbanized strip:

7. The current population is estimated at 2.23 million, including 1.49 million refugees, with a high growth rate of 2.7%.

(a) The Gaza Strip is highly urbanized at 74%, with a high urbanization rate of 3.1% per annum.

(b) The average population density across the Gaza Strip is 5,853 people/km² with a peak of 9,683 people/km² in Gaza City. The density in the refugee camps themselves is even higher with Jabalya Camp having 10,000 people/km² and Ash Shati Camp with over 50,000 people/km².

8. Gaza has five governorates comprising twenty-five municipalities, four joint councils, and eight refugee camps. Across the Gaza Strip, 299 distinct neighbourhoods can be identified.

(a) The percentage of land available for use in the Gaza Strip is 35 per cent of the total area, with the exception of the determinants of the National Spatial Plan (NSP), which are: natural reserves, streams, and areas of biodiversity, and excluding built-up and restricted areas. In addition, the pre-war buffer-zones created by Israel, reduced the useable land. Access to farming land within 300 meters of the perimeter fence separating Gaza from Israel is largely prohibited, while presence for several hundred meters beyond this distance is risky

(b) The Gaza Strip was already facing a chronic shortage of 19,020 housing units pre-war, excluding the replenishment of the damaged housing units as a result of conflict. Pre-war the housing stock consisted of 186,156 apartments and 403,259 housing units. There is however a slow shift to a higher percentage of apartments. While there are no slums in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, slum-like conditions do exist in several Palestinian neighbourhoods, especially in the refugee camps,

³ United Nations Common Country Analysis for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.pdf.

⁴ Status Report on the Achievement of Goal 11 in Palestine.

⁵ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

⁶ Urban Profile Gaza UN-Habitat (2014).

⁷ National Urban Policy for Palestine | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org).

dominated by informal housing⁸. UNRWA had initiated camp improvement programmes building on experience from across the region.

9. The constraints on land-use, the high densities and the housing shortage are key factors to consider when planning transitional shelter solutions and conceptualizing ‘building back better’.

2. Territorial fragmentation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and isolation of the Gaza Strip:

10. The reality of the Occupied Palestinian Territory is one of territorial fragmentation due to the geo-political conditions on the ground. The Occupied Palestinian Territory is fragmented physically, economically, socially and politically, posing significant barriers to good governance and overall planning. Due to the strict closure regime on movement and access of people and goods into and out of Gaza, the Gaza Strip is isolated from its surroundings, both by land and sea, severely weakening the economic ties between the West Bank and Gaza. Following the end of hostilities in 2014, under Israeli control, some commercial transfers from Gaza to the West Bank resumed and, from March 2015, exports to Israel. In August 2021, exports to Egypt started for the first time, and Egypt had engaged directly in housing production in the Gaza Strip⁹.

11. Territorial fragmentation and the isolation of the Gaza Strip severely limits its sustainable reconstruction options and future sustainable urban development. This will require further analysis.

3. Diverse typology of neighbourhoods across the Gaza Strip

12. Based on data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), UN-Habitat has aimed to update the info on the built environment footprint in the Gaza Strip, focusing on the typology of buildings across the different neighbourhoods and municipalities, using available satellite images of May 2023 as a reference point for pre-war data. This data was enriched with a surface height model to extract the heights of the buildings from radar imagery (GHS-V) and used as an indicator for the typology of these structures. This allows to quantify the number of housing units per damaged building and provide a more detailed understanding of housing recovery needs in terms of numbers and type of buildings.

13. The Gaza Strip has 288 recognized neighbourhoods, by PCBS as per the Population, Housing and Establishments Census in 2017. To cover the urban growth and expansion after 2017, additional neighbourhoods have been suggested, increasing the total number of neighbourhoods to 299 and the following distribution per governorates as follows: North Gaza: 36, Gaza: 32, Deir Al Balah: 91, Khan Yunis: 95, Rafah: 34. The diversity of neighbourhoods across the Gaza Strip is quite important as it impacts options for recovery and reconstruction. Single family houses for instance offer opportunities for self-help reconstruction while apartment buildings can only be done by contractors. Some of the elements to consider setting out a typology of neighbourhoods to facilitate the work on recovery and reconstruction are:

Building density, per cent of multi-story apartment buildings versus per cent single family houses, per cent of public buildings, and nature and access to basic services.

14. Across the neighbourhoods in the Gaza Strip, the pre-war challenges related to access to services can be qualified as follows:

(a) Only 39.5 per cent of households have access to safely managed water resources, depending largely on water supplies from Israel, in addition to water wells, which are increasingly depleted and polluted. The recent focus has been on increasing capacity through seawater desalination plants in Deir Al-Balah, as well as expansion of the Southern Gaza desalination plant for Khan Younis and Rafah.

(b) Only approximately half of electricity demand was met before the current war and largely dependent on Israel, and to some extent Egypt, in terms of direct supply and importation of fuel for the electricity plant in Gaza. The energy crisis in Gaza was already dominated by power cuts of up to 18-20 hours a day which impeded the delivery of basic services in Gaza, including wastewater collection and treatment as well solid waste collection services.

(c) Solar energy production at scale is difficult through the limited availability of land. Wind energy, as another renewable resource could potentially be harvested offshore. There is great

⁸ State of Palestine, Palestinian National Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in 2020: Summary Report (2021).

⁹ Page 18, United Nations Common Country Analysis for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.pdf.

opportunity for natural gas supply. The Gas for Gaza project¹⁰ is designed to supply enough natural gas to generate 600 MW and could be online in 24-36 months as engineering is near completion.

15. The Gaza Strip also depends on Israel for communication services, leaving Gaza limited to the use of outdated 2G technology. The telecommunications infrastructure is not capable of supporting opportunities for a more modern economy, including e-services that would help overcome restrictions on movement and access.

16. The diversity of neighbourhoods and their pre-war conditions needs to be properly understood to guide response, recovery, and reconstruction, including options for building back better. Further work is needed to identify and quality a typology of neighbourhoods.

4. The Gaza Strip is four times poorer than the West Bank

17. The GDP per capita in the West Bank was 4,197 USD in 2022 with a 13.9% poverty rate which is almost four times higher than the Gaza Strip with 1,208 USD and a 53.0% poverty rate¹¹. The World Bank itself estimates that the conflict had pushed poverty in Gaza up to 59.3 per cent in 2021¹².

18. A Multi-Sector Needs Assessment¹³ was developed for the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 2021 illustrating that Gazans were more vulnerable than those in the West Bank across all sectors, and in particular shelter and housing (54 per cent versus 24 per cent).

19. The dire socio-economic situation of the Gaza Strip needs to be an important starting point to inform response, recovery and reconstruction. Most of Gaza's economic and productive capacity is affected by the war and its re-activation needs to be central to any strategy going forward. How to do this the most effectively, advancing towards a green economy, needs to be mapped out, learning also from other contexts.

5. Increasing pressure on the environment and natural resources¹⁴

20. Climate change, population growth and depletion of resources are putting increasing pressure on the environment and natural resources (ex. Wadi Gaza Wetlands). Areas have already been mapped out that require protection, including streams, biodiversity areas, natural reserves, and archaeological sites of a total area of almost 5,000 dunums.

21. Groundwater abstraction in Gaza is at unsustainable levels and the quality no longer complies with WHO standards for domestic use, mainly due to seawater intrusion and sewage infiltration. Part of the problem is that the population has responded to water scarcity by expanding the drilling of private wells. Moreover, the treatment of wastewater is a major issue. While the construction of three new wastewater treatment plants has reduced pollution of both the sea and the Gaza coastal aquifer, additional infrastructure is needed to keep pace with demographic growth and urbanization.

22. Finally, flooding in the Gaza Strip is a recurrent problem mostly in the eastern parts that currently see the highest degree of displacement.

23. Environmental protection concerns need to be fully integrated into the response, recovery and reconstruction planning as they will limit what is possible where and should help shape how to build back greener. Flood vulnerability needs to be included in assessments, in particular for transitional shelter solutions.

B. Current understanding of the damage to human settlements

1. Large-scale destruction based on ongoing remote-sensing damage assessments

24. The current war in the Gaza Strip has already caused a scale of damage that far exceeds the damages after previous armed conflict between Israel and Hamas and other militant groups in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021. As before, Israeli strikes have damaged residential and commercial buildings and infrastructure, particularly health and educational facilities. It has also damaged water and sanitation, road, energy and communications networks.

¹⁰ See Draft Action Document Template and Instructions (europa.eu).

¹¹ United Nations Common Country Analysis for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.pdf.

¹² World Bank, Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (17 November 2021).

¹³ 2021 Multisectoral Needs Assessment | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory (ochaopt.org).

¹⁴ UNEP, State of Environment and Outlook Report for the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2020 (Nairobi, 2020).

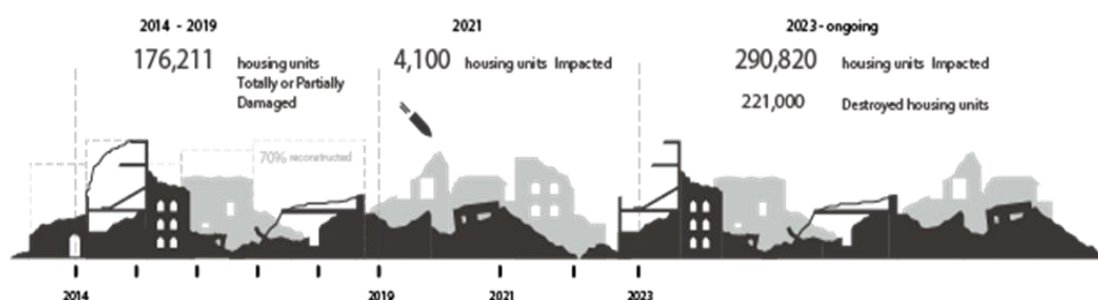
25. For the UN system, the main damage assessments, through remote sensing are done by UNOSAT. The World Bank, United Nations and European Union have conducted an interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA), using a standard methodology to do a rapid calculation of physical damages across different sectors, economic losses, and recovery needs at the sectoral level due to conflict. As of March 2024, according to satellite imagery analysis, UNOSAT¹⁵ identified 31,198 destroyed structures, 16,908 severely damaged structures and 40,762 moderately damaged structures, for a total of 88,868 structures. These correspond to around 35% of the total structures in the Gaza Strip and a total of 121,400 estimated damaged housing units. 30% of the damaged buildings are in Gaza City. This represents more than 60 per cent of Gaza's housing stock has been damaged or destroyed so far. The RDNA summarizes the costing of the damages as follows as of March 2024:

Table 1

Comparative summary of monetary damage by sector in the Gaza Strip for the 2014, 2021, and 2024

SUMMARY			
Sector	Damages (US\$)		
	2014	2021	2024
Social Sectors			
Housing	\$ 780,000,000	\$ 144,874,400	\$ 13,298,711,234
Health	\$ 24,000,000	\$ 12,869,276	\$ 276,833,207
Education	\$ 35,000,000	\$ 3,063,111	\$ 341,240,413
Cultural Heritage	\$ 1,200,000	\$ -	\$ 319,396,500
Social Sectors Total	\$ 840,200,000	\$ 160,806,787	\$ 14,236,181,354
Infrastructure Sectors			
Municipal Services	\$ -	\$ 24,972,143	\$ 19,647,080
Transport	\$ 42,000,000	\$ 19,549,400	\$ 357,971,802
Water and Sanitation	\$ 33,000,000	\$ 13,540,400	\$ 502,711,379
Energy	\$ 58,000,000	\$ 15,145,000	\$ 278,522,125
ICT	\$ -	\$ 3,550,181	\$ 90,225,476
Infrastructure Sectors Total	\$ 133,000,000	\$ 76,757,124	\$ 1,249,077,862
Productive Sectors			
Finance	\$ -	\$ 450,904	\$ 8,173,838
Commerce, Industry, and Services	\$ 144,000,000	\$ 40,000,000	\$ 1,655,485,695
Agriculture	\$ 266,000,000	\$ 42,500,000	\$ 628,779,865
Productive Sectors Total	\$ 410,000,000	\$ 82,950,904	\$ 2,292,439,399
Cross-Cutting Sector			
Environment	\$ -	\$ 17,500,000	\$ 411,300,368
Cross-Cutting Sector Total	\$ -	\$ 17,500,000	\$ 411,300,368
Grand Total	\$ 1,383,200,000	\$ 338,014,814	\$ 18,188,998,983

26. The results of the current interim RDNA indicate that the damage already exceeds 13-fold the accumulative damage after the 2014 conflict. Housing represents 73% of the damage in 2024 so far compared to 56% in 2014. Notable is also the much higher damage of cultural heritage in 2024.



27. Major infrastructure projects in Gaza, many implemented with considerable international development assistance, have been damaged or destroyed.

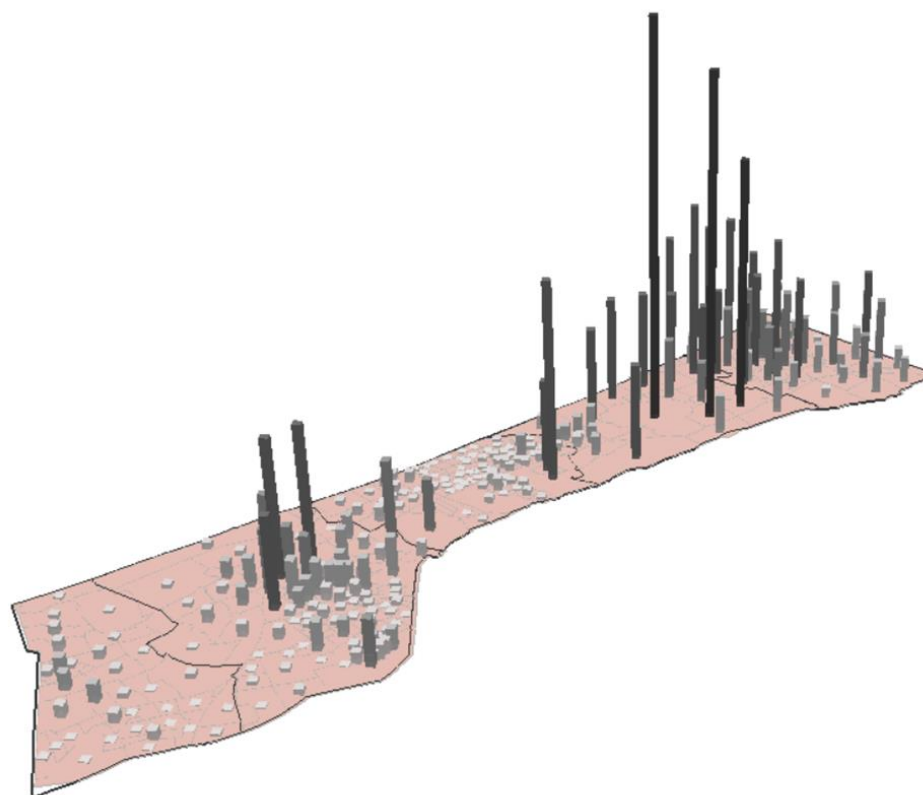
28. In addition, damage in certain neighborhoods is so extensive that the original road network and properties cannot be easily identified. This is further aggravated by Israeli military interventions creating new roads through existing properties, including a major road 16 dividing northern Gaza, including Gaza City, from the south of the enclave.

¹⁵ UNOSAT.

¹⁶ Reported on as the "Netzarim Corridor" by CNN.

29. Around 6,000 structures fall within the recently declared buffer zone of one km of the perimeter fence separating Gaza from Israel. As of 10 February 2024, 62 per cent of these structures are affected due to the ongoing conflict and 87 per cent of the affected structures are completely or severely damaged.

Figure 1
Affected structures per neighborhood

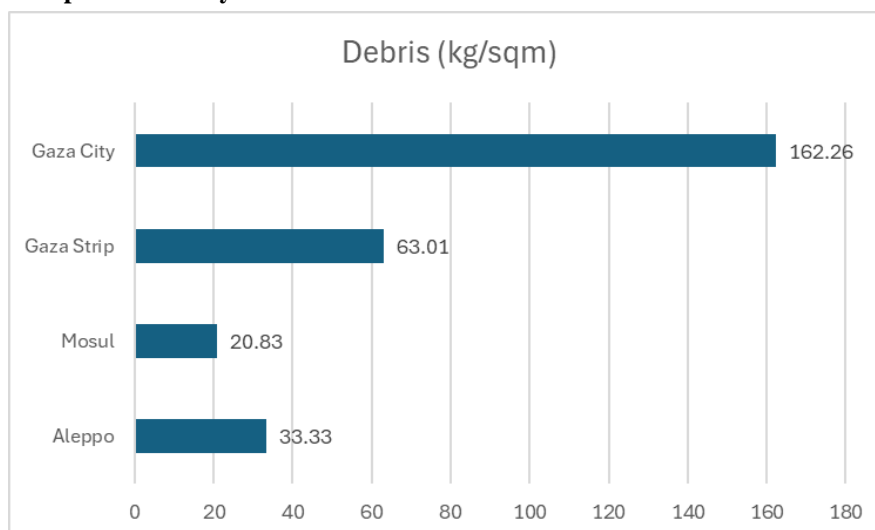


2. Estimations on debris and construction materials

30. UN-Habitat, jointly with UNEP, has initiated preliminary estimations on debris to be cleared at neighbourhood level. The quantification of conflict-generated debris in Gaza, as of 7 January 2024, integrates UNOSAT damage assessment with May 2023 building data, employing zonal statistics and height models from SRTM and ALOS World 3D. Assuming a 3m average building height, it estimates 1 tonne of debris per square meter, visualized on a 250m-wide hexagonal grid. As per the 7th of January 2024, the total debris estimated stands at a total of 22.9 million tonnes, with 3.2 million tonnes attributed to damaged roads. Only 5% of the neighbourhoods were unaffected, while the rest experienced varying levels of debris; 5% of the neighbourhoods reported more than 300 kg/sqm of debris.

31. Debris removal will be a major challenge considering its scale. To visualize this, a comparative analysis is made with Mosul (Iraq) and Aleppo (Syria) after the height of the conflict there. An even more telling image is the 1,7 million trucks it would take to haul debris away, or a line of 18,000 kms stretching 160 times around Gaza's borders.

Table 2

Comparative Analysis of Conflict-Generated Debris in Selected Arab Cities**3. Economic impact**

32. In Gaza, GDP took a drastic fall, plummeting over 80 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2023—from around US\$670 million in the third quarter to approximately US\$90 million in the fourth quarter¹⁷. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the entire population in the Gaza Strip is estimated to be acutely food insecure, while a quarter of its population faces catastrophic hunger and starvation.¹⁸

4. Large-scale damage to cultural heritage

33. UNESCO has initiated preliminary damage assessment¹⁹ for cultural properties through remote sensing and analysis provided by UNITAR/UNOSAT. As of 7 March 2024, UNESCO has so far verified damage to 41 sites since 7 October 2023 (including 10 religious' sites, 22 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 2 depositories of movable cultural property, 3 monuments, 1 museum and 3 archaeological sites).

5. Ongoing large-scale displacement across the Gaza Strip

34. Displacement since the start of the war has been very dynamic and has reached an unprecedented scale, currently affecting 1.7 million people or 75% of the population. This is fuelled by the Israeli military operations, which included strong appeals for populations to move from one area to the other and preventing returns to some areas. The main displacement has been from the North of the Gaza Strip to the South. Overcrowding in the South has increased by almost 200 per cent overnight, from 4,531 person per sq.km to 8,900 person per km².

6. Challenges with current assessments

35. Firstly, the limitations of remote-sensing damage assessments are well-known. This is particularly true for severely damaged and moderately damaged structures. Ground-truthing is necessary through trained engineers to check on the soundness of structures and damage invisible on a satellite image (ex. damage to foundations or load-bearing structural elements). This can further increase the number of unsafe buildings and is critical to determine in which buildings initial repairs are possible to allow partial returns.

36. Secondly, estimating the presence of explosive remnants of war in the different neighbourhoods is another major obstacle to further assessments, possible initial return of people to their neighbourhoods and initial repair and recovery activities. As noted by the Secretary-General in

¹⁷ PalestinianEconomicNote-Feb2024-Final.pdf (worldbank.org).

¹⁸ In November 2023, the Humanitarian Country Team released an updated Flash Appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). This appeal emphasized the dire state of Gaza, necessitating approximately US\$1.2 billion to cater to the essential needs of 2.7 million people across the OPT, Gaza, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, until 31 December 2023.

¹⁹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment>.

his letter to the President of Security Council (6 December 2023, S/2023/962), “explosive remnants of war are rendering areas uninhabitable”. This will require site-specific risk assessments neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

C. Way forward

1. Update urban profile of the Gaza Strip

37. Building also on the experience in assessing the damage of cities such as Homs (Syria) and Mosul (Iraq), UN-Habitat has developed an urban recovery analysis framework to develop urban profiles of affected urban areas.²⁰ Through urban profiles, up to date, holistic documentation and multi-sectoral and integrated analysis of the impact of the crisis in urban areas is possible, synthesizing information and insight from existing sources and priority sectors, supplemented by direct field research.

38. The urban profile made after 2014 will need to be updated to understand the impact of the war across the Gaza Strip. This process can be iterative as more data and analysis becomes available.

2. A neighbourhood-based approach to assessments

39. Both the Palestinian Authority, and other stakeholders consulted seem to agree that a neighbourhood-based approach would be very useful in the Gaza Strip. This aligns with the UN Country Team’s intent to advance an area-based approach to the response in the Gaza Strip. It would allow to recognize the diversity of neighbourhoods across the Gaza Strip, both in their composition pre-war and the diversified impact of the current war. This can then be the basis for a tailored community-based response that allows to prioritize what needs to happen where in an integrated manner to facilitate return and recovery wherever and whenever possible.

40. Urban and neighbourhood functionality helps to qualify and index the unequal impact of conflict across neighbourhoods. It rates the functionality of the housing stock, and the related accessibility (road network), quality and reliability of basic services (incl. water, electricity); all essential to have a ‘functioning’ neighbourhood. This also considers the pressure on the urban systems due to potential displacement induced surge in population densities. The level of functionality can help to determine 1) what the minimum conditions are to allow return; 2) what priority interventions are needed to restore a minimal functionality; 3) and allow for an area-based and participatory approach to recovery planning.

41. UN-Habitat has started aggregating the damage data at the neighbourhood level, working towards an atlas of neighbourhoods with an index of neighbourhood functionality, as a basis for area-based approaches to immediate response, including transitional shelter solutions, and later on, recovery planning.

3. Identify options for transitional shelter solutions

42. UN-Habitat has also started mapping all possible sites for transitional shelter solutions. Transitional shelter sites in Gaza are identified using a multi-stage geospatial analysis, incorporating satellite imagery and land suitability assessments to evaluate their capacity for IDP accommodation and shelter installation. Criteria assessing each site’s compliance with required standards are applied, though the analysis faces limitations due to restricted on-field assessments and data scarcity, suggesting reliance on satellite data and consultations with local authorities for comprehensive insights. This mapping will be further detailed in close collaboration with the Shelter Cluster (led by the Norwegian Refugee Council) and the Gaza Site Management Working Group (Co-led by UNRWA and ACTED). The next step is to complement the remote assessment with further site visits to further determine potential densities, fire safety measures, site gradient, drainage options, connectivity to services, land ownership status, etc.

4. Start to map out housing, land and property challenges

43. Following the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, a comprehensive HLP response plan should be initiated, spanning immediate to mid-term interventions aimed at addressing the urgent needs of IDPs and the broader challenges of debris management, land and property documentation, legal assistance on HLP rights, restitution and compensation for IDPs, and housing recovery strategy formulation.

²⁰ Urban Profiling Toolbox toolbox_v11.pdf (unhabitat.org).

44. In the immediate aftermath (0-3 months post-ceasefire), efforts should focus on providing transitional shelter solutions for IDPs, ensuring safety, hygiene, and privacy in collective centers, and addressing basic needs such as food, clean water, and sanitation. Health, education, and psychosocial support should be prioritized, along with vocational training and gender-based violence prevention.
45. Concurrently, debris removal became a critical task to clear the way for new construction and minimize injury risks. This involves assessing the debris extent, developing removal strategies, recycling, and engaging local communities in the cleanup process.
46. Between 0-6 months, restoring or establishing documentation and registration systems for land and properties becomes crucial, involving assessing existing records, rebuilding and digitizing registries, and engaging with communities to verify ownership.
47. From 3-6 months post-ceasefire, the plan should shift towards legal assistance on HLP rights, updating legal frameworks, establishing legal aid services, and strengthening land rights management. Additionally, the process for restitution and compensation for IDPs began, focusing on assessing property rights, providing legal support, and determining compensation for losses.
48. Simultaneously, a strategic approach to housing recovery and reconstruction should be developed, considering the affected population's needs, spatial planning, and environmental considerations. This includes setting construction standards, coordinating with infrastructure development, and ensuring compliance with international human rights standards and local laws. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be established to assess progress and impact, integrating these efforts with broader development initiatives for long-term community recovery and resilience.

5. Environmental assessments

49. It will be important for UNEP to conduct as soon as possible a similar Environmental Assessment of the Gaza Strip as done following the escalation of hostilities in December 2008 – January 2009²¹, including mapping environmental concerns at the level of the neighbourhoods.

IV. Principles derived from lessons learned from previous response and reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere

50. This is not the first time that conflict in the Gaza Strip results in severe damages to the human settlements, noting previous armed conflict between Israel and Hamas and other militant groups in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021. Each had their own plan and approach to recovery:

- (a) The 2009-2010 *Palestinian National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza*, following the Gaza War that started when Israel launched a large military attack on Gaza Strip on 27 December 2008.
- (b) The 2014 *National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza*, circulated at the Cairo conference following the 2014 Gaza war.
- (c) The 2015 *Detailed Needs Assessment (DNA) and Recovery Framework State of Palestine: Gaza*, which followed the Cairo conference and developed a more comprehensive approach.
- (d) The 2021 *Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RNDA) and the Roadmap for Relief, Economic Recovery and Reconstruction in Gaza Strip*, following the Israeli incursion into Gaza in 2021.

51. Although, actors consulted repeatedly pointed out that the damage of the current war far exceeds the damages of previous occasions, it was generally agreed that it would be good to map out principles derived from lessons learned from previous response and reconstruction efforts. Experience with reconstruction in the region (ex. Syria, Iraq, Lebanon) can also yield further lessons and insights. Several actors are drawing lessons from previous recovery efforts²².

²¹ Environmental Assessment of the Gaza Strip following the escalation of hostilities in 2008 - 2009, UNEP.

²² Lessons Identified from Previous Recovery and Reconstruction Efforts in Gaza, Office of the Prime Minister, Palestinian Authority (February 2024).

A. Institutional capacity must be rebuilt and localized

52. Careful considerations are needed in terms of setting up new structures (2015 Gaza recovery plan) or leaning on existing government institutions (2009 Gaza recovery plan). It is important to ensure sufficient institutional capacity and broad buy-in of any arrangement. This is not only relevant for central coordination but also for the necessary local government level capacity and/or local joint field offices to guide decentralized coordination and implementation. In Lebanon, UN-Habitat set up Regional Technical Offices²³ in 2007 with the aim to empower Unions of Municipalities in emergency response and support reconstruction. In Gaza, after the conflict in 2009, UN-Habitat set up technical support centers, including mobile units to provide technical assistance to self-help reconstruction.

B. Use of urban recovery frameworks

53. Considering the highly urbanized nature of the Gaza Strip, it is important to complement the methodology of national recovery plans to more urban-focused recovery frameworks. Based on experience in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere, UN-Habitat has drafted a methodology for urban recovery frameworks²⁴. The analysis of previous recovery plans²⁵ in Gaza also points to the need for a stronger focus on policy guidance on critical issues and financing mechanism tailored to the different needs (incl. self-help).

C. Impact of insufficient funding and need for balanced funding across sectors

54. None of the previous recovery plans were fully funded, slowing down recovery overall. In addition, some sectors, in particular housing, have been systematically underfunded (ex. housing 21% after one year post 2009, with no funding for environmental repairs). This requires constant prioritisation and making trade-offs to achieve results with optimal use of limited budget resources. The reality has been a sectoral approach, with decisions driven by donors often outside the recovery management process. A more area-based approach and better understanding of which actions can help unlock further recovery (ex. restoring basic functionality of services) is needed. Use of data-portals, such as used in Iraq and Yemen²⁶, can be useful to guide this work.

D. Contextualization of the approach to support return to neighbourhoods and recovery whenever and wherever possible

55. Experience from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon also points to the imperative to contextualize the approach to the diverse needs of people, neighbourhoods and urban areas. This includes the importance of adapting a neighbourhood lens and to support return and recovery whenever and wherever possible, rather than aiming for uniform planning and implementation.

E. Support self-help and self-reliance as much as possible, enabled by local governments and local housing actors

56. The experience in the region, including in Gaza, points to a great capacity for self-help reconstruction. It allows us to tailor the response to the needs of families, and mobilize all available assets. After 2009, UN-Habitat initiated self-help reconstruction in Gaza which included financial incentives to build back greener.

F. Fast-track reinvigoration of the local private sector and local economy to support recovery and reconstruction

57. In the Gaza Strip, previous rehabilitation interventions to the damaged housing units supported efforts to strengthen the local economy by using local building materials and employing skilled labourers. This can be expanded to the provision of transitional shelters, rather than relying solely on ready-made solutions from abroad, maximizing the local value chain. Evidently, the capacity of the private sector needs to be measured against the scale of needs, the quality and speed of delivery.

²³ Regional Technical Office (RTO) | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org), Lebanon (2007).

²⁴ Urban recovery framework | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org).

²⁵ Lessons Identified from Previous Recovery and Reconstruction Efforts in Gaza, Office of the Prime Minister, Palestinian Authority (February 2024).

²⁶ Urban Data portal (unhabitat.org) Yemen or UN-Habitat Mosul Portal (unhabitatiraq.net) Iraq.

G. Impact of Israeli restrictions on import of reconstruction-related goods and equipment

58. The general constraints on Palestinian trade, the timely and routine entry of goods, materials and equipment into Gaza have been for the last decade severely impeded by a complex system for coordinating their entry and limited capacity on both sides to efficiently manage this system. The existing systems also significantly impeded the private sector. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism that has been in place would need to be simplified or replaced to ensure sufficient access at scale.

V. Pathways from acute humanitarian response to recovery and reconstruction

A. Scenarios

59. The outcome of the war is still very unclear and will largely define 1) if and how Gazans will be able to return or some level of displacement will be protracted; 2) the scale and speed of return, recovery and reconstruction; and 3) to what extent sustainable urban development can be achieved at all and how it could enable a viable two-states solution.

60. Below a few diverse scenarios are sketched which are hard to assess at this point but only serve the purpose of exploring pathways from the acute humanitarian response today to transitional shelter solutions; return, recovery and reconstruction and longer term sustainable urban development.

61. Some additional critical factors will shape the potential pathways:

- (a) Political conditions of a lasting ceasefire, related governance of the Gaza Strip and security restrictions
- (b) Capacity of the UN and its implementing partners to operate, to be able to scale technical support, and address various practical operational challenges (incl. visas)
- (c) Speed of clearance of explosive remnants of war and debris
- (d) Level and nature of access to the Gaza Strip for people and goods critical for recovery and reconstruction
- (e) Level of restoration of basic services from outside Gaza (water, electricity, fuel, communication) or temporary alternative independent solutions
- (f) Donor commitments and availability of financing, relative to scale of the needs and the timeliness of the response

62. The following scenarios are considered to guide further thinking:

- (a) **If** the conflict within the Gaza Strip continues for a long period and security arrangements do not allow return to large parts of the Gaza Strip, **then** displacement will become protracted for most, and transitional shelter solutions, mostly prefab, will be the only go to option to improve the living conditions, without a meaningful way forward towards recovery and reconstruction.
- (b) **If** peace prevails, return is possible across the Gaza Strip, but if restrictions of movement remain in place including on lists of goods and equipment, including “dual use” materials, and the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is extended **then** we revert back to the situation post 2009 and post 2014, severely affecting the scale and speed of recovery and reconstruction, protracting displacement for many, in particular as the damage is already ten-fold compared to 2014.
- (c) **If** the political conditions, governance and security arrangements allow a (temporary or permanent) corridor with the West Bank, and/or in addition access from Jordan and Egypt, **only then** it would be possible to have a clear pathway from transitional shelter solutions, to return, recovery and sustainable reconstruction, allowing to move forward with the required speed and scale.

B. Transitional shelter solutions

63. As the conflict becomes increasingly protracted, and if we remain stuck in scenario A, this displacement will remain large scale and protracted; the need for transitional shelter solutions becomes inevitable to move beyond the tent solutions, to ensure a minimum of protection and facilitate furthermore organized area-based humanitarian response. Today 212,000 families cannot return as

their housing units have been destroyed. This will require larger sites for transitional shelter solutions and moveable shelter solutions with reversible impact on their so sites so people could move onwards closer to their neighbourhoods of origin as we move into scenario B. In scenario A, extra-ordinary measures will be needed to allow the access of transitional shelter prefab solutions at scale. The use of collective centers (in schools and other public buildings) will need to scale down as to restore education and other services.

64. In scenario B, assuming return to all neighbourhoods will be possible, transitional shelter solutions should be found as close as possible to their original location. By identifying micro-sites, where possible in the neighbourhoods of origin, the restoration of services can service both those in transitional shelter solutions and those that can return to their housing units. From experience and consultations, this is the preferred option of the displaced, supported by the Palestinian Authority. The typology of neighbourhoods and the related neighbourhood functionality index will allow a tailored and diversified transitional shelter solutions response. It will help to prioritize interventions to restore basic functionality where it is the easiest as to fast-track return whenever and wherever possible. It will facilitate and accelerate also initial self-help repair and recovery, diversifying transitional shelter solutions, through partial repairs or onsite solutions. The main challenge will remain access of needed building materials and equipment at scale and with the necessary speed, keeping in mind the very restrictive capacity of the current crossing points. The report is taking note of extra-ordinary measures being considered such as maritime humanitarian corridors.

65. Scenario C, in particular a potential corridor to the West Bank, would open up additional transitional shelter solutions, including hosting solutions in the West Bank. It would also open the door for a full mobilization of the private sector capacity in the West Bank speeding up transitional shelter solutions and recovery and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. This would be further scaled and accelerated if access from Egypt and Jordan is possible.

66. In both Scenario B and C, transitional shelter solutions and spatial arrangements still risk being protracted, depending on some of the critical factors listed above, including the speed to clear debris and explosive remnants of war, the available funding and the available private sector capacity to rebuild. Further analysis is needed but this can easily still take 3 to 5 years. The lay-out of the sites and the quality of the transitional shelter solutions will need to take that into account, including options for further extensions and upgrading. In addition to restoring water and electricity networks, alternative solutions to provide off-grid service solutions might be needed in the short term.

C. Return, recovery and reconstruction

67. Under scenario A, the expectation is that people will still try to return whenever and wherever possible. Small-scale self-help options to recovery and reconstruction for single family housing might emerge, leaving families from damaged multi-story apartment buildings in the cold. Key questions will be how to organize site assessments and clearance for explosive remnants of war and which financing will be available. It will be important to seize any opportunity to restore functionalities in neighbourhoods, to support self-help recovery and reconstruction and even where possible pilot reconstruction initiatives, testing options for building back greener, healthier and more sustainable.

68. Under scenario B, it will be important to focus on ensuring the mechanisms to facilitate access of goods and equipment, can maximize scale and speed, allowing recovery and consequent reconstruction to take place. The lessons learned from the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism will need to be updated and assessed against the scale of the damage and reconstruction needs. Under this scenario, return, recovery and reconstruction are likely to happen at different speeds across the Gaza Strip. Scenario B should create the space for large-scale multi-country mobilization to fast-track clearance of explosive remnants of war and debris. Out-of-the box thinking will be needed to recycle debris in an environmentally responsible way. The strategy for recovery and reconstruction will need to be diversified accordingly, anchored around a neighbourhood-based approach and the related capacity to restore functionality in the neighbourhoods.

69. The current understanding is that only scenario C would create the conditions for a comprehensive approach at scale to return, recovery and reconstruction, fully incorporating principles of building back better. Another consideration also is that a clear roadmap to a viable Palestinian State is likely to unlock the larger scale financing needed and would allow to reboot much quicker the Palestinian economy.

D. Long-term sustainable urban development: building back greener, healthier and more sustainable

70. Under scenario B, as past experience has shown, long term sustainable urban development would remain elusive. Further analysis is needed to estimate what the capacity for further sustainable growth is taking into account fast rate population and urbanization growth rates and limited available land. In addition, there is a need for extra space to dedensify existing overcrowded neighbourhoods in particular in refugee camps. A question has been raised if a quicker shift to apartment units should be incentivized during the reconstruction, combined with urban designs that improve the sustainability of the neighbourhoods.

71. Scenario C would open the possibility of a further full integration of the Gaza Strip into a National Spatial Plan for Palestine, underpinning the viability of a Palestinian State with a clear territorial strategy. The spatial, social, environmental and economic sustainability would be easier to achieve as an integral functional part of Palestine, unlocking also the economy of the West Bank and the wider region.

E. Existing policy guidance for the reconstruction of human settlements in the Gaza Strip

72. The sustainable urban development of the Gaza Strip can find guidance in existing national policy and planning documents of the Palestinian Authority. This in return can help to inform recovery and reconstruction efforts. Further analysis is needed to extract relevant elements from the National Urban Policy, adopted in 2023, is aligned with the National Development Plan (2021 - 2023) and sector strategies' priorities are directly aligned with the NUP and the attainment of SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. A National Spatial Plan is under development. Natural assets have been identified that are not suitable for urban growth. A Strategic Framework for the Housing Sector was drafted in 2009, jointly with a National Housing Strategy Paper. A national housing policy is pending. There is also an overall lack of public spaces in Gaza and of planning policies to address the shortage. UN-Habitat's global guidance²⁷ on sustainable neighbourhoods could be adapted also to the Palestinian context.

VI. Next steps

73. As stated at the beginning, this could only be a first preliminary report, considering that the war is still raging and the outcomes of the war are unpredictable, a follow up to this report is possible, as the assessments become more detailed, and the likely scenarios become clearer.

74. Depending on the latter, assumptions can be further tested and strategies on transitional shelter solutions, return, recovery and reconstruction detailed. It will be important that political negotiations are informed by a deeper understanding of their potential impact on the pathways from the current acute humanitarian crisis, to transitional shelter solutions, return, recovery, reconstruction and ultimate sustainable urban development.

75. Essential is to anchor pathways forward as of now in the neighbourhood-based approach, facilitating prioritization and coordination of sectoral interventions, in view of supporting return and recovery whenever and wherever possible and of diversifying the response to tailor to the different types of neighbourhoods across the Gaza Strip.

76. In the background, it will be important to encourage reflections on what building back greener, healthier and more sustainable Gaza Strip can look like, in collaboration with the Palestinian Authority.

²⁷ A New Strategy of Sustainable Neighbourhood Planning: Five principles - Urban Planning | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org) and MY Neighbourhood | UN-Habitat (unhabitat.org).