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Azerbaijan's Great Return Programme: Localizing Contemporary City Planning Approaches

Submitted By: State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture of the Republic of Azerbaijan



Organization Profile

Organization Name: State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Organization Type: National government

Website: https://arxkom.gov.az/

Practice Details

Country(ies): Azerbaijan

City(ies): Shusha, Khankendi, Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fuzuli

Start Year: 2022 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Affordability & Financing
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing in Crisis & Displacement Contexts
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Amidst nations that have had to deal with the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction, Azerbaijan stands out as a rather unique case.

The three-decade-long conflict with Armenia, rooted in the Soviet regime collapse, devastated an area of approx. 13,600 km2. During occupation, 12 cities and some 900 rural settlements were destroyed, displacing over 660,000 people. Although most were gradually allocated better housing, many still live in inadequate conditions. In 2020, when Azerbaijan regained access to the area – almost a 5th of the country and heavily contaminated by landmines – the State faced the daunting task: clear hazards, rebuild trunk infrastructure, restore services and livelihoods, construct houses and enable the safe, voluntary and dignified returns of IDPs. The State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture was mandated to lead spatial planning and land allocations, design new settlements, and synchronize housing and public facilities with socio-economic recovery.

Solution Developed

The on-going reconstruction of Karabakh has positioned Azerbaijan as a 'live' laboratory for inclusive, climate-conscious housing and settlement planning.

In 2022, the Government launched the State Programme on the Great Return (2022–2026), set to deliver safe, orderly and sustainable returns – targeting at least 30,000 households in Phase I – and to reintegrate the regained areas into the national economy. A General Plan (2022) guides a sequenced roll-out of city and rural settlement master plans that align zoning, infrastructure, public services, utilities, housing supply, commerce and employment opportunities. Delivery is coordinated through a high-level National Coordination Headquarters that brings together line ministries and agencies under 12 thematic working groups (Urban Planning; Transport/ICT; Energy; Economy; Environment; Mine Action; Return & Social Protection; Education/Culture; Agriculture; etc.) working with municipal leaders and technical partners.

This robust governance backbone, coupled with international expertise, is generating replicable solutions – from serviced land-first housing to smart service centres – that can inform post-conflict recovery elsewhere.

Implementation

Implementation is plan-led and safety-sequenced. While trunk infrastructure gradually advanced across the region, the General Plan prioritised cities and nearby settlements based on demining status, existing and new access corridors and planned locations of service and employment hubs. A systematic delivery sequence applies to every site: starting from risk assessment and area clearance; followed by general/master planning and detailed design with national and international firms; alignment and build-out of roads, power, water, sewerage and ICT; tendering;

phased construction of housing and public facilities; rehabilitation of heritage assets; utilities networks commissioning; and finally, the staged relocation of IDPs, prioritising those living in the poorest conditions and ready to move.

By decree, returning families receive newly built homes—either apartments in mid-rise blocks or standalone houses built on equal-size plots. Release of serviced land is phased to match demographic and socio-economic projections and to keep housing aligned with jobs, schools and health services.

Financing is led by the state budget, complemented by the State Oil Fund, the Karabakh Revival Fund, extra-budgetary sources, public-private investment and selected donor support.

Timelines vary according to mine clearance, terrain and infrastructure complexity. As of August 2025, about 4,000 housing units have been handed over, accommodating more than 17,800 people across 6 cities and 20 villages.

Enablers & Obstacles

1) The Programme is anchored in 'Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities' and backed by a dedicated budget and clear political mandate. A purpose-built coordination structure and a tiered planning system (General Plan → master plans → design codes) generate "plan-ready" housing tied to serviced land. Phasing and formal M&E enable course-correction. Housing allocations prioritise proximity to schools, clinics, jobs and public transport, with accessibility standards (design and barrier-free routes) embedded in new settlements.

2) Extensive landmine contamination restricts ground surveys and forces drone-based baselines that sometimes require redesign and delays. Mountainous terrain, environmental sensitivity and uncertain demographics complicate site selection beyond former settlement footprints. In places, planned expansion overlaps productive farmland, triggering lengthy cross-sector negotiations and adjustments to balance housing growth, service catchments and ecosystem protection.

Results & Impact

Housing-led settlement planning is translating into measurable returns. About 4,000 new homes have been handed over across 6 cities and 20 nearby villages. Overall, 50,000+ residents now live, study and work in the liberated areas, including 17,800 returnees, with security of tenure. Master plans co-locate housing with schools, clinics, public transport and service hubs, reducing travel times and improving access. Vocational training and early job creation (5,300+ jobs) show progress from "shelter" to "livelihoods."

The delivery of trunk road and rail corridors, 50 hydropower plants —and 3 international airports—have unlocked access of construction and private investments. Industrial parks (Aghdam; Araz Valley Economic Zone) tie housing phases to employment catchments. ASAN

and DOST one-stop centres, including Smart DOST in Aghalı, bring social protection and administrative services into new neighbourhoods, strengthening trust and uptake.

The project has become a catalyst for the national design and construction industry, creating opportunities for architectural, urban planning and engineering agencies. Guidance promotes energy-efficient envelopes, solar-ready roofs and solar street lighting; rainwater harvesting (e.g. Shusha) and nature-based slope/watershed measures raise resilience. Heritage assets and restored landscapes are used as anchors of identity and local economies while new urban parks and reforestation are enhancing liveability and climate co-benefits.

Replication & Scale Up

The Great Return Programme's impact is nationwide: new master plans draw in other regions are drawing from on its lessons—higher construction standards, human-centred planning, and stronger sustainability commitments, particularly following COP29. Core elements are replicable to other post-conflict or disaster contexts with dispersed settlements: safety-first sequencing, joint servicing–housing delivery, demographic data-led phasing, and green-energy standards. SCUPA templates, checklists and lot structures can help municipalities accelerate compliant, inclusive and context-sensitive housing.

Scale-up could include: adopting a Serviced-Land-First rule and national housing/settlement and procurement standards; establishing a Housing PMO and Regional Delivery Units; blending public, IFI and climate finance tied to readiness milestones; releasing serviced land in rolling tranches with utility compacts; industrialising construction and logistical hubs; co-phasing schools, clinics and DOST/ASAN; enforcing accessibility; linking handovers to jobs via parks/SMEs; using e-permitting and 30–60–180 day scorecards; embedding green, affordable energy; and strict mine-action sequencing.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

While a full national urban policy framework is pending, the Great Return Programme is shaping national policy debates and practice. In particular: the optimization of norms & standards, and the adoption of a "Serviced-Land-First" rule – codifying the sequence risk clearance > trunk services > housing. Utilities sign joint "Service-to-Plot" attestations that prevent the delivery of buildings with missing connections or public services. Lastly, by bundling affordability, accessibility, service uptake, mobility and jobs, the focus is shifting from 'units built to 'homes that work'.

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Lessons & Takeaways

Key takeways include: (1) A single command structure and disciplined use of data enable fast, coherent delivery; (2) Sequencing is vital: demining first, then services, then housing; (3) Staged handovers, regular key-giving ceremonies and one-stop services (ASAN/DOST) build trust; (4) Link each return wave to jobs via industrial parks/SMEs and agri chains, as staged returns stabilise best when residents can work locally.

In the future, planners could broaden housing and tenure options, while local authorities should monitor by how well the new homes function for families after move-in.