# A critical examination of current planning practices in post-conflict housing reconstruction in Iraq.

## Abstract

**Purpose** – post-conflict housing reconstruction is complex, requiring careful planning to meet displaced population's needs. However, the urgency for reconstruction often leads to failings, due to lack of appropriate planning practices. To address this gap, this research examines planning practices implemented by international aid agencies in post-conflict countries, to reveal current shortcomings and challenges.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with expert practitioners from key stakeholder involved in the planning stages of housing reconstruction in Iraq. The practitioners include AEC Specialists, (UN)-Led Policymakers, and senior representatives from INGOs, Donors, and researchers.

**Findings** – post-conflict housing reconstruction often relies on standardised planning yet faces challenges from time constraints and complex conditions. This study identifies poor stakeholder engagement, limited communication, and weak social-cultural integration as key factors behind ineffective, misaligned projects. In Iraq, donor constraints, limited local cooperation, and lack of context-specific assessments hinder outcomes. The findings highlight the need for context-sensitive, community-driven approaches to improve information dissemination, stakeholder engagement and resource allocation.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings were collected from limited sample of reconstruction experts in Iraq, and challenges in other regions may vary. Thus, the research findings may not be applicable to other conflict-affected settings but provide valuable insights for similar post-conflict settings.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to knowledge by examining the current planning practices of housing reconstruction in Iraq, addressing gaps in the literature. It advances understanding within the domain of planning post-conflict reconstruction by recommending improvements in contextual assessment, information management, and stakeholder engagement.

**Keywords** – Post-conflict Reconstruction (PCR), Housing projects, Project Planning, International Aid Agencies, Iraq.

**Paper type** – Research paper

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing body of evidence presents the urgency to plan, develop, and implement effective housing reconstruction strategies to assist conflict-affected communities (Haigh and Amaratunga, 2011; Anilkumar and Banerji, 2021). Delivering quality housing units to the displaced populations is crucial for national development, reducing vulnerability and supporting long-term peacebuilding initiatives (Davidson et al., 2007; Ismail et al., 2014).

Housing destruction is a major consequence of conflicts. In Iraq alone, nearly 138,000 units have been damaged or destroyed displacing over 3 million people (UN-Habitat, 2020). Similarly, in Syria, more than 1.2 million housing units have been rendered unhabitable, displacing over 6.7 million individuals (UN-Habitat, 2021). The resulting housing shortages have strained local economies, increased unemployment and heightened social tensions. Despite the urgency for reconstruction, post-conflict housing reconstruction programs in Iraq, such as the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) led by UNDP have struggled with insufficient funding, bureaucratic delays, and limited community engagement (UNDP, 2022). In cities like Mosul, absence of a comprehensive plan led to fragmented efforts, with some areas receiving more attention than others. Comparable challenges exist in Syria, where political instability has hindered aid and material flow (UN-Habitat, 2021), prompting small-scale, community projects to dominate reconstruction.

Ultimately, donor-imposed time constraints and urgency to rehouse displaced populations have led to standardized and rushed planning approaches, resulting poorly designed housing schemes (Afolabi et *al.,* 2018). Excluding end-users and local preferences from planning has exacerbated social divides, contributing to cost overruns, stakeholder dissatisfaction and project abandonment (Sadiqi et al., 2016; Chang-Richards et al., 2017; Bahmani and Zhang, 2022). Through interviews with expert practitioners, this research examines how international agencies approach the planning stage of post-conflict housing reconstruction in Iraq.

# 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 The Planning Stage: Definition

The planning stage of post-conflict housing reconstruction is the initial and crucial phase where key decisions are made regarding resources, design and engagement. It typically includes needs assessment, damage evaluations, stakeholder consultation, resource allocation and development of project plans and timelines (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006; Hidayat and Egbu, 2013).

This stage is fundamental in determining structural and social success of projects. Ensuring compliance with safety standards, legal frameworks and socio-cultural needs. Saleh et al. (2021) emphasize that

early planning must address local conditions and challenges to enhance relevance and community ownership. Early consideration allows for identification and mitigation of potential risks, minimizing costly delays or complications later in the project lifecycle.

## 2.2 Post-conflict Housing Reconstruction and Policy Frameworks

Multiple international and national policy frameworks guide post-conflict reconstruction. UNDP emphasizes that reconstruction should not be limited to housing delivery, but also align with broader goals, such as job creation, infrastructure development and social cohesion (UNDP 2022). Similarly, UN-Habitat's *"Considerations for a Housing Sector Recovery Framework in Syria"* highlight the importance of participatory planning and community-led design processes (UN-Habitat, 2021).

At a national level, Iraq's National Development Plan (2024-2028), outlines broad reconstruction objectives, with limited operational focus on housing (Ministry of Planning, Republic of Iraq, 2024). International agencies often fill this gap by deploying their own planning models, yet these may neglect local capacities and preferences. The *"Early Recovery and Livelihoods Programme"* by IOM promotes inclusive planning frameworks that call for collaboration between local communities, local authorities and international stakeholders (IOM, 2023). Such approaches highlight the need for long-term engagement to ensure culturally appropriate and sustainable outcomes. Despite the existence of these frameworks, the literature reveals a significant research gap regarding how these planning practices are applied in real-world post-conflict contexts, particularly in Iraq (Iskandarani et al., 2023).

## 2.3 Challenges in Current Planning Post-Conflict Housing Reconstruction Projects`

In post-conflict settings, planning of housing reconstruction projects is often driven by professional judgment of international aid agencies. These agencies have implemented standardized planning procedures for reconstruction. For example, UNDP and UN-Habitat have used standard frameworks in Iraq and Syria (including, needs assessment, damage classification, and resource allocation) (UN-Habitat, 2021; UNDP, 2022). However, these approaches often involve limited participation from local communities and insufficient consideration of local conditions, needs, and challenges (Hamideh, 2020; Saleh et al., 2021).

The challenges identified (Table 1) align with existing literature on post-conflict housing reconstruction. For example, Davidson et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of community participation in ensuring project success, while Bilau et al. (2018) identify resource management as crucial in preventing delays and cost overruns. Similarly, Saleh et al. (2021) emphasize the role of effective communication and information dissemination in aligning reconstruction efforts with local

needs and priorities. While this study identifies local participation, resource management, and communication as the primary challenges in post-conflict housing reconstruction, it is important to acknowledge that post-conflict environments are inherently complex, and political and environmental factors have also been significant barriers to successful (Jha, 2010; Tzafakis, 2016). However, focus on participation, resource management and communication reflect their prominence in the literature and relevance to the planning stage.

| VARIABLE | CRITERIA | SOURCE |
|---|---|---|
| Stakeholder Engagement | Inclusive approach; Involvement of local communities, government authorities, and international agencies; Understanding local cultural, social, and geographical factors | Harfst (2006); Davidson et al. (2007); Roosli et al. (2018); Islam et al. (2018); UN-Habitat (2021); (IOM, 2023). |
| Resource Management | Efficient allocation of funding, materials, and labour; Focus on specific areas or neighbourhoods | Bilau et al. (2018); Ayad (2011); Fayazi et al. (2017) |
| Communication and Information Dissemination | Clear and consistent information dissemination among stakeholders; Effective communication enhances project outcomes | Chang-Richards et al. (2017); Saleh et al. (2021); Bahmani and Zhang (2022) |

Table 1: Different variables that influence planning practices in post-conflict housing reconstruction projects (Source: Author).

## 2.3.1 Participation of local communities

Inadequate community engagement during planning can leave individuals feeling marginalized, fostering social divide and resentment, as the affected population may perceive the project as imposed by international counterparts rather than collaborative. Without effective participation, trust is weakened peacebuilding is undermined and social vulnerability is heightened (Davidson et al., 2007; Bilau et al., 2018). Ophiyandri et *al.* (2016) distinguishes between challenges in including communities and stakeholder capacity. The first involves time constraints in forming representative community organizations. The second concerns limited stakeholder understanding of participatory methods and lack of strategy support. Sadiqi et al. (2016) and Earnest (2015) argue participation limits often stem from communities being unable, unwilling, or lacking knowledge. However, local communities must be informed and empowered to mobilize their creativity, desires, resources, and capacities (Chang-Richards et *al.,* 2017). El-Masri and Tipple (2002) further emphasize engaging local authorities to strengthen dissemination on culture and social knowledge to relevant actors.

## 2.3.2 Resource Management

Westgaard et al. (2010) argue that acquiring knowledge requires increased resources and time in the early phases, which positively impact project cost and quality. In post-conflict environments, many communities have usable resources, such local materials and labour, which are often socially acceptable (ILO, 2010). However, shortage of local professionals and poor resource management can lead to quality defects, cost overruns and delays (Boen, 2006). Damaged infrastructure further hinders reconstruction by limiting material transport and access to water and energy (El-Masri and Tipple, 2002). Over 50% of water and sanitation facilities in conflicted-affected regions have been destroyed (World Bank, 2023) Similarly, Davidson et al. (2007) note that lacking social infrastructure like schools and hospitals limits community return. Addressing these issues requires effective financial oversight (Ophiyandri et *al.,* 2016). Without coordination, improving infrastructure and professional capacity remains difficult. Funding typically comes from international donors, but mistrust between stakeholders can restrict it and impose conflicting requirements (Fengler et *al.,* 2008). Poor oversight and limited resources hinders reconstruction (Jha*,* 2010). Therefore, maintaining donor commitment requires mitigating corruption risks and ensuring transparency (Tzifakis, 2016). Sufficient mobilization and disbursement of resources during planning can reduce waste and disputes (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006). Effective resource management and trust help deliver quality housing that meets community needs while maintain donor support (Davidson et al., 2007; Bilau et al., 2018).

## 2.3.2 Communication and information dissemination

Generally, ineffective communication between stakeholders at project planning can result in transfer of inconsistent information to complete tasks (Boton and Forgues, 2017). Deviation occurs due to poor communication, inadequate documentation, insufficient input information, lack of coordination, weak decision-making, and shortages in technical knowledge (Fuadie et *al.,* 2017). In post-conflict environments, reconstruction projects were often managed, planned, and reported in an ad-hoc manner (Rathmell, 2005). Additionally, project initiators, typically international aid agencies, tend to bring their own policies, practices and procedures while excluding local knowledge (Smoljan, 2003). The primary cause of this issue lies in the urgency to relocate the displaced population and tight timelines for fund utilization. This leads to substandard housing units that fail to meet local requirements (Afolabi et *al.,* 2018). Enhassi et al. (2009) identified that success factors for reconstruction programs depend on early-stage decisions, including clarity of mission, understanding stakeholder aims, and determining a feasible project plan and procedure agreed upon by all key stakeholders.

# 3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyse planning practices and challenges in post-conflict housing reconstruction. A theoretical framework was developed by the authors, grounded from the literature but not based on a specific model. Instead, the framework synthesises three recurring variables influencing planning practices, from key studies in reconstruction planning and recovery: stakeholder collaboration (Davidson et al., 2007; Islam et al., 2018), resource management (Ophiyandri et al., 2016), and information dissemination (Chang-Richards et al., 2017). These variables are summarized in Table 1 (Section 2.3) and visually presented in Figure 1. The framework guided the research design, interview questions and thematic analysis. Rather than testing a fixed model, the framework served as an interpretive tool for analysing expert insights and identifying recurring challenges. This approach enabled the development of recommendations to improve future planning practices. The research questions were designed to systematically explore the planning stages and their associated challenges providing a basis to guide this study:

1. What are the current planning stages undertaken by international aid agencies in post-conflict housing reconstruction projects?
2. How do international aid agencies communicate and engage with local communities and stakeholders during the planning process?
3. What are challenges faced by international aid agencies in managing resources during the planning stage?
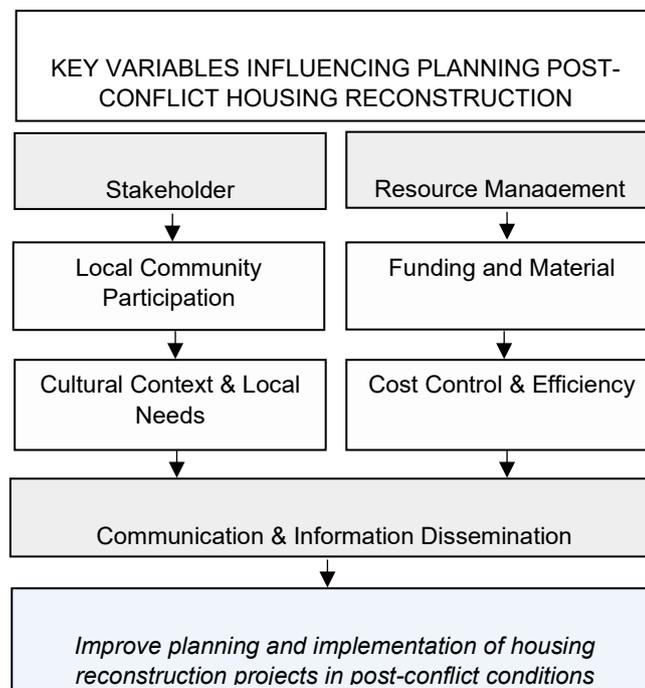


*Figure 1: Theoretical framework for planning post-conflict housing reconstruction projects (Source: Author).*

## 3.1 Case Selection Rationale

The study focused primarily on Iraq due to its (1) extensive post-conflict housing reconstruction needs (2) high involvement of international aid agencies and (3) well-documented challenges in planning and implementation (UNDP, 2022). Among Middle Eastern countries, Iraq represents a unique context that combines owner-driven and donor-driven reconstruction efforts, a formalized national development strategy, and large-scale displacement. The decision was supported by the availability of expert informants and direct project involvement in Iraq. While the study primarily focuses on Iraq, it also included interviewees from Lebanon and Syria. These countries were selected as comparative cases due to their shared post-conflict conditions, international engagement and emerging planning frameworks.

Although their reconstruction initiatives are not as extensive as Iraq's, Syria and Lebanon offered valuable context to compare findings, especially where similar planning considerations and donor structures were present (e.g., centralized aid coordination, cultural norms). However, due to limited data access and fewer expert interviews, their contributions remain supportive rather than central to the study's conclusion. Including these regional cases allowed the research to reflect on Iraq's planning challenges in broader Middle Eastern settings, especially in terms of governance structures, community participation and planning processes. Table 2 presents the background of the interviewees.

| Participants | Location | Stakeholder Group | Organisation | Position | Reconstruction Approach |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | UNDP (FFS) | Stabilization Specialist / On-ground Project Manager | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 2 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | UNDP (FFS) | Stabilization Specialist / programme coordinator | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 3 | Iraq | UN-LED AGENCIES | UN-HABITAT | Technical Advisor | Not Applicable |
| Participant 4 | Lebanon | AEC SPECIALIST | UNRWA | Head of Design Unit | Partipatory-Approach |
| Participant 5 | Syria | INGO | SOS Chrétiens d'Orient | Head of Commission | Partipatory-Approach |
| Participant 6 | Iraq | DONOR | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency | Funding Manager for UNDP/FFS | Not Applicable |
| Participant 7 | MENA | DONOR | Tana | Director Consultant for Bilateral Donors | Not Applicable |
| Participant 8 | MENA | DONOR | WORLD BANK | Lead Disaster Risk Management & Resilience Coordinator | Owner-driven |
| Participant 9 | MENA | UN-LED AGENCIES | UNCHR | Shelter Officer | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 10 | Syria | UN-LED AGENCIES | UNCHR | Shelter cluster coordinator | Owner-driven |
| Participant 11 | MENA | INGO | Shelter Cluster/ Canadian Red Cross | Global focal point for Information Management /Shelter Advisor | Owner-driven |
| Participant 12 | MENA | RESEARCHER | Doha Insitiute of Graduate Studies | Director of the Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies | Not Applicable |
| Participant 13 | Iraq | UN-LED AGENCIES | UNMAS | Chief of Mine Action Program | Not Applicable |
| Participant 14 | MENA | INGO | NRC (Noreigan Refugee Council) | Global Lead for Shelter | Owner-driven |
| Participant 15 | Iraq | INGO | NCCI (NGO Coordination Body for Iraq) | Advocacy and Policy Advisor | Not Applicable |
| Participant 16 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | IOM | Infrastructure Coordinator/CM | Owner-driven |
| Participant 17 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | UNDP (FFS) | Senior Programme Officer | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 18 | Lebanon | RESEARCHER | American University of Beirut | Architect/ Academic | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 19 | Iraq | UN-LED AGENCIES | IOM | Housing Program Officer | Owner-driven |
| Participant 20 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | UNDP (FFS) | Engineer Analyst | Contractor-driven |
| Participant 21 | Iraq | AEC SPECIALIST | UNDP (FFS) | Engineer | Contractor-driven |

*Table 2: List of Participants involved in the semi-structured interviews (Source: Author).*

## 3.2 Data Collection

The information used in this research was elicited from semi-structured interviews with participants who were purposively selected based on their roles and experience to ensure representation across international and local agencies. Interviews were conducted virtually via secured platforms due to geographical and security constraints. Expert practitioners were selected based on their knowledge of planning post-conflict housing reconstruction projects and had worked with donor agencies, INGOs, LNGOs, academics, local authorities, communities, and AEC specialists. A total of 21 interviews were conducted: 11 from Iraq, 3 from Syria, 2 from Lebanon, and 5 regional policymakers. Community interviews were excluded due to security and logistical constraints. Engaging with affected communities would have required local security approvals and physical presence in unstable regions. Additionally, this study prioritized institutional-level planning with community-level insights captured indirectly through experts' accounts of engagement challenges.

The interviews aimed to capture participants' perspectives on the planning stages of post-conflict housing reconstruction, including stages, stakeholder roles and challenges. The questions were designed to address the research objectives and gaps. The semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility, enabling participants to provide detailed insights. The responses identified patterns, challenges and best practices. Key questions include:

- What are the main challenges in planning post-conflict housing reconstruction projects?
- How do international aid agencies engage with local communities?
- How effective is communication between international aid agencies, local communities and NGOs in planning housing reconstruction projects?

## 3.3 Data Analysis

Interview data was transcribed and analysed using NVivo 12 software. A thematic analysis was adopted, and information obtained from the interviews was transcribed, coded, and categorised under pre-identified and emerging themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Both deductive codes (informed from the literature) and inductive insights (emerging from the interviews) were used to generate a structured interpretation of the data. This dual approach allowed the research to explore expected patterns while also uncovering context-specific challenges. Figure 2 summarises key interviews insights based on the main variables from the literature and discussed in the discussion section.
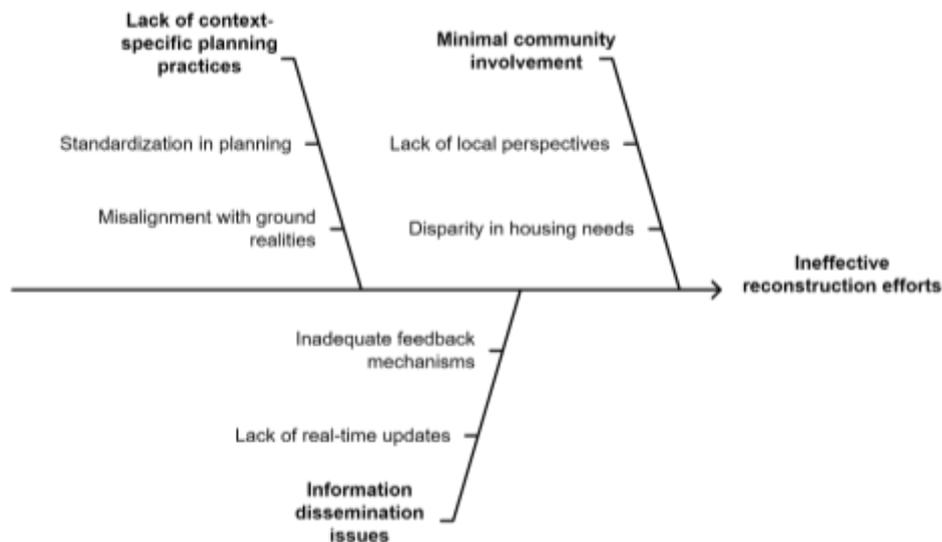


*Figure 2: Summary of key findings from interviews (Source: Author).*

The interviews ran between 60–90 minutes and were conducted in English. The interviews were recorded, and ethical principles regarding consent, anonymity and data protection were followed. While prior research often relies on document analysis, this study uniquely integrates direct insights from stakeholders active in planning.

## 4. INTERVIEW RESULTS

This section presents the current planning practices in post-conflict housing reconstruction as established by international aid agencies, and highlights challenges identified by participant interviews.

The results reflect real-life experiences and provide in-depth insights which are summarized in Figure 3.

### 4.1 International Agreement for Housing Reconstruction

Ideally, the government of any country should take initiative to carry out reconstruction programs. However, in most post-conflict countries, they lack the capacity to plan and deliver housing projects and rely on international agencies to initiate and plan interventions, typically supported by donor funding and INGOs. This was reflected by Participant 6, Funding Manager at a Swedish donor agency, a key donor for UNDP's Housing interventions in Iraq:

> *"it's fundamentally a task of the government. However, that just may or may not work, where the government can't do it because they don't have the capacity."*

The ability of post-conflict countries to receive assistance depends on international agreements. The post-conflict status of a country depends on many variables, including conclusion of war, transition from emergency to development, international recognition of a functioning government, and creation of a foreign policy. Participant 3, Technical Advisor of urban recovery and reconstruction at UN-HABITAT for Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, stated:

> *"In countries such as Syria, there's not a lot of reconstruction being done. Because reconstruction and rehabilitation really fall in domain of development. And there's a lot of red lines for donors, because some donors don't want to be seen supporting the central government."*

### 4.2 Initial Needs Assessment

The first stage in planning involves conducting an initial needs assessment. This comprises vulnerability criteria, returnee, and land ownership identification, and site clearance and accessibility. To initiate projects, a needs assessment is established based on a selection criterion. Working groups implement a needs analysis to finalise the criteria and prepare the planning proposal. In Northern Syria, Participant 10, Senior coordinator for shelter at UNCHR, stated:

> *"There is the humanitarian analysis, which is where gaps are identified, such as who's vulnerable, who do we need to prioritize in a context of limited resources".*

In Iraq, Participant 1, Stabilization Specialist/ On-ground Project Manager at UNDP (FFS), stated:

> *"Will go out and look on the ground and see where the returnees are going to, and then we'll pick the village that we're going to work at, and then we do an initial assessment of the village or town."*

Several AEC specialists, UN-led agencies, and NGOs active in Iraq and Syria, noted that the assessment is often conducted with municipal governments, and/or NGOs to identify neighbourhood needs. Once cost estimates are completed and funds are available, the project begins. At this point, beneficiaries are not contacted until a neighbourhood is selected. Reconstruction proceeds only when sufficient funds are secured.

### 4.2.1 Vulnerability Criteria

A beneficiary selection is prepared by the working group to determine who receives support. Housing reconstruction is distributed among the most vulnerable families, with criteria based on social and economic factors, such as number of women, children, disabled, single headed households and employment status. In Iraq, Participant 16, infrastructure coordinator at IOM stated:

> *"We will not select everyone. We must use this vulnerability criteria and we use that to select beneficiaries based on many different criteria."*

Beyond poverty alleviation, which donors consider the most crucial aspect of providing shelter, participants within AEC's specialist group believe the criteria were influenced by budget constraints imposed by donors. This poses significant challenges in housing distribution, resulting in increased social resentment and division. As Participant 1, Stabilization Specialist/ On-ground Project Manager at UNDP (FFS) in IRAQ explained:

> *"You've got a budget; you can't do everybody. So, you've got to prioritize. Those normally are people that can't or won't have the ability to build a house back themselves."*

### 4.2.2 Returnee and Land Ownership Identification

Returnee and land ownership identification is part of the selection criteria set by working groups for housing reconstruction interventions. Areas with an increasing number of returnees are picked for reconstruction. There have, however, been cases of participants, deployed on ground, having trouble getting in touch with owners since they may have fled the area, which resulted in project delays or waste of funds. As Participant 3, a Technical Advisor of urban recovery and reconstruction at UN-HABITAT for Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, stated:

> *"You must find the owners first. They're often in other places. This whole process of retrieving or getting in touch with the owner, is a long one and can be really something that holds up a project."*

A common practice to identify returnees was to send engineers on-site and document where returnees are going. As further reported by Participant 1, a Stabilization Specialist/ On-ground Project Manager at UNDP (FFS) in IRAQ:

> *"...they can put up a tent, which helps us know that people have returned. But other than that, it's our selecting through our criteria as to which ones we can do."*

Reconstruction of housing cannot commence without identifying land and property ownership. Several participants reported difficulty conducting permanent housing reconstruction in areas where ownership is unclear due to destroyed records. Legal ownership is confirmed through different data sources and with help from local authorities, community, and their leaders. However, the process of locating and contacting the owner was a barrier to project completion. This issue stemmed from manual mapping methods used for data documentation and retrieval.

### 4.2.3 Site Clearance and Accessibility

The clearance of debris and explosive hazards sites is an essential component in housing reconstruction programmes, set during the initial needs assessment. Without clearing residential areas reconstruction and ensuring site accessibility, beneficiaries cannot return to their homes, nor can working groups and technical specialists initiate reconstruction. Partnering with national authorities to improve mine action at project planning alleviate security clearances and land ownership disputes while increasing local capacity for long-term development. Health and safety at sites were restriction faced by AEC Specialist and UN-led agencies stakeholders. Issues included debris removal and explosive hazard checks. In some cases, AEC-specialist faced challenges in areas with unclear security clearance.

## 4.3 Damage Assessment and Classification

The damage assessment and classification represent the second stage of planning practices agreed upon by international aid agencies. This is conducted to evaluate level of damages to each property. The assessment is based on a classification system with four categories: light, medium, severe or destroyed. Structural stability and safety are essential components in determining whether the property is safe for rehabilitation. Initially, satellite imagery is used to categorize housing damage, followed by physical assessments conducted by field engineers. However, in Iraq, participants within the AEC specialist and UN-led agency groups reported that poor data availability has hindered reconstruction. This was attributed to the use of manual methods for documenting classification and absence of data from government and international entities. As stated by Participant 2, a Stabilization Specialist Program Coordinator at UNDP for housing reconstruction in Iraq,

> *"There was nobody, nor the government or international partners had any data on sort of street-by-street levels of damage… our engineers took the end-users in cars, and we went neighbourhood by neighbourhood to map and coordinate all the damage levels and all the needs."*

Furthermore, these standards are intended to initiate cost-effective interventions and avoid unequal distribution of reconstruction programmes. It was viewed by several participants as a starter house to help restore livelihood. However, the classification system has also heightened social exclusion and partiality. While budgetary constraints motivated a standard design, these were not crafted with cultural consideration, resulting in basic fixtures and fittings only. Consequently, the urban-cultural fabric of the area was distorted. This was a major implication noted by various participants. Participant 5, a Senior Member at SOS Chritiens d'Orient at French-based INGO, deployed in Syria, stated:

> *"Each country has its own style we must respect. There is a system, a style. In the case of Wadi al-Nasara, the area has been deformed, their system was 2 floors, a red pyramid-like rooftop and instead of the country being harmonic with nature, it looks horrible now, with 4-5 floor high rise block buildings.*

### 4.4 Local Authorities and Community Consultation

Discussions with the community commence following the assessment of initial needs and development of selection criteria. These discussions encompass how the community can contribute, along with their roles and responsibilities. This involves collecting data on household number, income sources, and damages levels. While working group provides basic housing, beneficiaries may enhance their housing through personal financial contributions. Community leaders and/or mayors are consulted to verify ownership and in some cases act as community representative to the working group. Regarding local authorities' consultation, beyond initiating reconstruction requests in certain neighbourhoods, they also endorse standardised housing categories. However, AEC specialists the in Iraq have noted that local authorities are often uncooperative as portrayed by Participant 16, infrastructure coordinator at IOM in Iraq:

> *"The thing is from the government side we should have better support. That is one of the main issues we are facing when working in some communities. We need support from the government and units to improve coordination and provide more facility."*

This is because, as indicated by participants within the academic group, working groups tend to exclude local authorities from planning. This is due to limited capacity of local governments, many of which lack technical skills, budget control, or autonomy to contribute. In some instances, local authorities were reportedly unwilling to engage, citing political tensions, corruption or lack of incentives.

Conversely, international aid agencies were seen as operating in a top-down manner, often hesitant to adapt their standardized planning to local administrative frameworks. However, consultation must reflect actual capacity of local institutions and available. As Participant 7, a Senior Consultant for Bilateral Donors at a donor consultancy agency based in Copenhagen stated:

> *"I think you really need a proper assessment process, if you don't know the community, you will not understand the local context. They may say one thing but only as you get to know the context you realize that there are other factors influencing why you are not successful. So, it's really an iterative process that needs to be respected".*

## 4.5 Allocation of Funding

Several participants in the UN-led agency stakeholder group reported that funding frequently passes through central allocation structures. These involve large pooled funds contributed by country donors, managed by the UN, and distributed. As donor funding is typically allocated to humanitarian needs, and housing reconstruction falls between humanitarian and development efforts, securing housing-specific funds is difficult. In response, participants have stressed the need for better fund management during planning, as highlighted by Participant 14, a senior member for Shelter at the Norwegian Refugee Council (INGO):

> *"The largest injection of funding for humanitarian crises is when it is a new crisis and not when it's a long-term crisis which become forgotten. It's about capitalizing on that injection of money at the beginning and trying to put that to best use."*

Obtaining donor funding has been described as a lengthy process, involving demonstration of competence, successful implementation, and delivering results. However, due to high costs of housing reconstruction, donors often impose budget constraints, requiring significant investment in resources and infrastructure. Consequently, the standard design and classification system overlooked cultural context, resulting in social distress due to inadequate housing. This reliance on donor funding, as highlighted by the UN-led agency and AEC specialist stakeholder group, significantly impacted housing delivery. Donors frequently impose restrictions and short-term contracts due to corruption concerns, as stated by Participant 6, Funding Manager at a Swedish donor agency, a key donor for UNDP's Housing interventions in Iraq:

> *"By building a house anywhere, there's a corruption risk. That's a risk we consider. It's expensive. So, there's always this question of what other things could this money do? If Building houses doesn't reach the people."*

Various donor restrictions and preferences hinder social cohesion, affecting recovery and peacebuilding

goals. As presented by Participant 13, Chief of the Mine Action Program at UNMAS in Iraq, the implications of short-term donor contracts are evident:

> *"Once the one-year funding is over, the contract with the contractor is also over. That is reality, everything is driven by the money available. If we don't have money, we can't do anything. We build the capacity, provide job opportunities, bring in a contractor, they hire staff, they train staff for a year. And then they will let go of the staff."*

### 4.6 Procurement

Several participants within the AEC specialist group outlined the procurement process: once the damage assessment and classification are completed, the bill of quantity (BOQ) is designed. The BOQ is then sent to the service centre for tendering, with contractors applying and selected within a specified timeframe. Local private sectors execute the project, while international engineers oversee and monitor the work. Participants also highlighted challenges such as price inflation and lengthy procedures, impacting the quality and timely delivery. Due to delay in government approval, by the time estimates are bid, market prices change, requiring additional donor funds. This was reported as difficult to obtain. Participants 20 & 21, AEC specialists in Iraq, suggest more proactive stakeholder involvement to improve efficiency and prevent delays, including local authorities maintaining updated market rates. As Participants 21, an Engineering Analyst at UNDP in Iraq for housing reconstruction projects, stated:

> *"Usually, it ruins the whole process, we spent a lot of time and effort to finalize one housing project comprised of many houses. And then ultimately it fails because our estimates are old that they cannot dictate the current market situation".*

## CURRENT PLANNING PRACTICES

**STAGE 1**

**Establish international agreement to plan housing projects**
- As most post-conflict countries do not have the capacity to plan and deliver housing projects therefore rely on international agencies such as un-sponsored organisations to initiate and plan interventions.
- The ability of post-conflict countries to receive international assistance to initiate housing reconstruction interventions, commence development and receive donor funding depends on international agreements to achieve post-conflict status. This can be gained through the following criteria:

      1) The conclusion of war, transition from emergency phase to development,
      2) Presence of a functioning government that is accepted by the international community
      3) The creation of an international foreign policy.

**STAGE 2**

**Initial Needs Assessment**
- The initial needs assessment in accordance with the planning stages and criteria agreed upon by the international aid agencies.
- Planning housing reconstruction projects depends on the stability, accessibility, and security of the environment to plan long-term developments
- The initial needs assessment comprises of vulnerability criteria, returnee, and land ownership identification as well as site clearance and accessibility.

Vulnerability Criteria:
- A beneficiary selection is prepared by the working group to determine who receives support
- Housing reconstruction intervention is distributed among the most vulnerable families and the vulnerability criteria is based on social and economic factors, such as number of women, children, disabled, single headed households and employment status.

Returnee and Land Ownership Identification:
- Returnee identification is part of the selection criteria set by working groups for housing reconstruction interventions. Areas that have an increasing number of returnees are picked for housing reconstruction.
- land ownership is another aspect of the selection criteria set by working groups at the initial needs' assessment. Legal ownership of a property is confirmed through different data sources and with the help of local authorities, the community, and their leaders to verify the identity of the owner.

Site Clearance and Accessibility:
- Without the clearance of residential areas for reconstruction and rehabilitation and sufficient accessibility to the site, beneficiaries cannot return to their homes and livelihoods, nor can working groups and technical specialists access the area to initiate reconstruction.

**STAGE 3**

**Damage Assessment and Classification**
- The assessment is based on damage classification in accordance with a set of criteria which comprises of four categories: light damage, medium damage, severe damage or destroyed.
- The structure stability and safety are an essential component in the damage assessment and whether the property is safe to rehabilitate.

**STAGE 4**

**Local Authorities and Community Consultation**
- The consultations with the local community include how the community can assist, as well as their roles and responsibilities during construction.
- Information is collected through surveys from the community regarding the number of family members within a household, income sources, design preferences and level of damages.
- Local authorities' are also consultation to initiate the request to conduct reconstruction in neighbourhoods and to endorse the standard classification of the housing.
- Community leaders and/or mayors are consulted to verify ownership as well as in certain cases act as a supporting representative of the community to the working group

**STAGE 5**

**Allocate Funding**
- Funding goes through different central allocation structures. These are usually big pool funds that country donors contribute to, which is managed by the UN system and then gets distributed over various working groups.
- Donor funding is a lengthy process which involves proving competence, demonstrating good implementation, and delivering results to the local communities.
- Often donors tend to impose budget limitations on housing reconstruction because it is a costly sector that requires investment in resources and infrastructure

**STAGE 6**

**Establish Procurement**
- Once the damage assessment and classification is concluded the bill of quantity (BOQ) is designed.
- The BOQ is established based on the approval of the drawings, through the estimates prepared by the engineers. The BOQ will be sent to the service centre to be advertised for tendering, and different contractors will apply and be selected within the specified timeframe
- Often local private sectors are conducting the projects and international engineers are supervising and monitoring the work of local contractors.
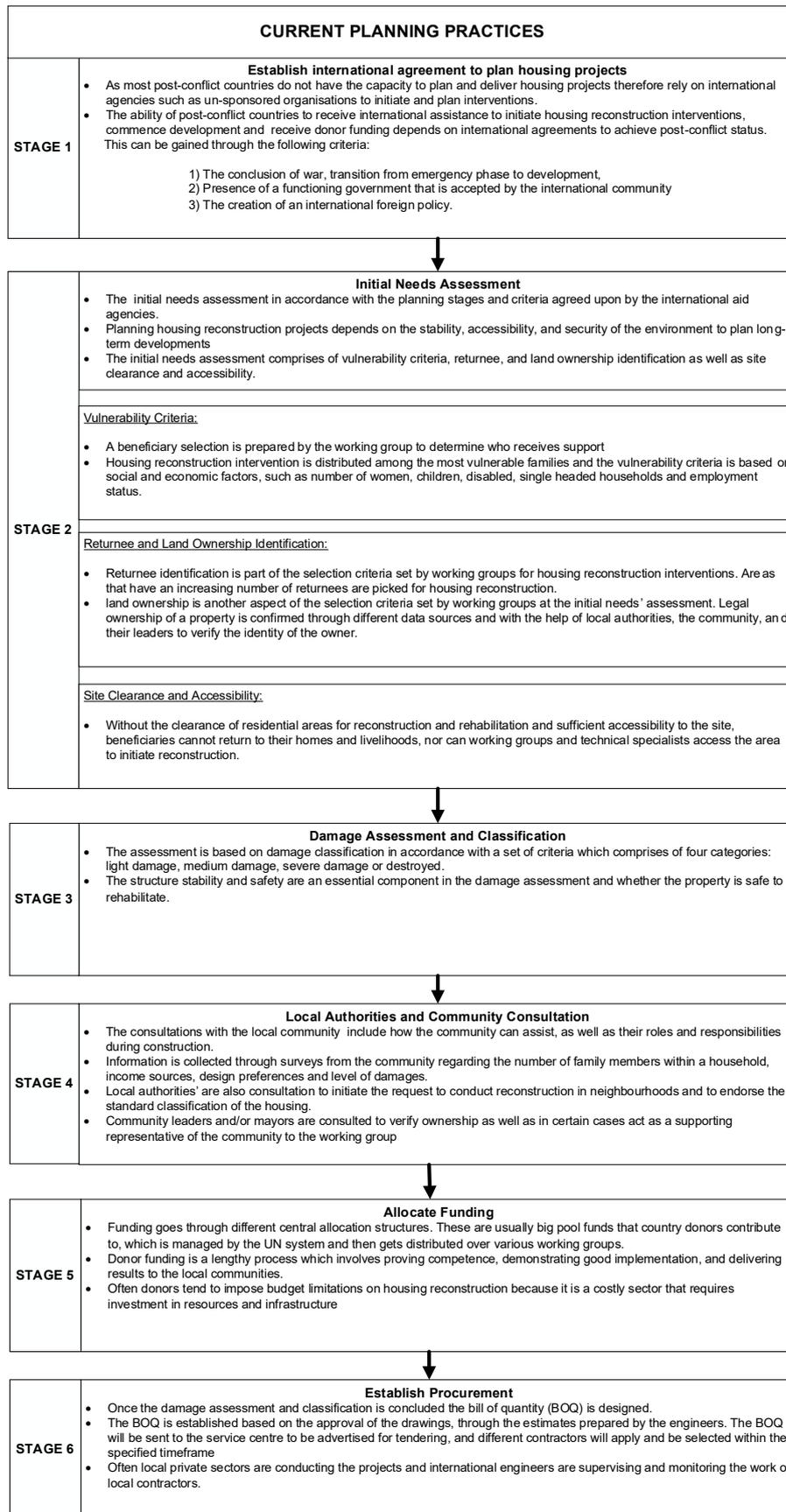
*Figure 3: Summary of current stages of planning in post-conflict housing reconstruction projects as presented by expert practitioners (Source: Author).*

# 5. DISCUSSION

This discussion section interprets the findings relating to the research objective: to critically examine the planning practices adopted by international aid agencies during post-conflict housing reconstruction in Iraq. Housing reconstruction projects are essential for restoring post-conflict environments and building resilience in impacted populations (World Bank, 2017). Despite efforts by international agencies to standardise planning practices, several challenges persist when relying on top-down models. A fundamental issue with standardised approaches is insufficient consideration of the unique social, cultural, and geographical conditions. While streamlined process may be efficient, failing to localize strategies can lead to poor housing designs, weak stakeholder engagement and delays.

Based on the study's findings, three core challenges were identified: insufficient participation of local communities, ineffective information dissemination, and poor resource management. These highlight the need for context-sensitive, community-focused practices, supported by collaborative engagement between International and local stakeholders. Enhancing communication, adapting planning, and ensuring inclusivity are critical steps to improving the planning and delivery of housing reconstruction projects.

The following sections are structured around three key themes identified from the interviews, context assessment, information management, and stakeholder engagement. Which corresponds to the broader planning challenges. Each theme is critically analysed to existing literature, experiences, and followed by recommendations.

## 5.1 Contextual Assessment

The findings from the interviews reveal significant challenges in contextual assessment during the planning stage of post-conflict housing reconstruction. Standardised large-scale planning has led to difficulties in identifying returnees and land ownership, restricted health and safety practises, and inadequate housing design standards. These challenges stemmed from limited community involvement throughout planning. Unclear land ownership and returnee identification have resulted in recurrent problems, resource distribution and causing uncertainty among displaced individuals. Constraints on health and safety have compromised the well-being of both the community and working groups. Insufficient design standards, from limited contextual insight, resulted in housing that fails to meet community needs and cultural preferences. Considering these constraints, a community-centred approach is essential for long-term durability, prioritizing local knowledge, engagement, and context-sensitive planning. Roosli et al. (2018) emphasize that understanding cultural, social and geographical factors ensures alignment with the local needs. However, interviews indicate that international aid agencies often overlook these factors, leading to poorly designed outcomes. For example, Participant 5, a Senior Member at SOS Chritiens d'Orient noted:

*"Each country has its own style we must respect. There is a system, a style. In the case of Wadi al-Nasara, the area has been deformed, their system was 2 floors, a red pyramid-like rooftop and instead of the country being harmonic with nature, it looks horrible now, with 4-5 floor high rise block buildings.*

These findings align with Ayad (2011) argument on area-based development, where planning must be tailored to specific locations. The failure to adopt this approach in Wadi al-Nassara resulted in culturally inappropriate housing. Focusing on smaller geographical scopes such as neighbourhoods, areas and towns improve contextual understanding and planning. Similarly, Harfst (2006) calls for an integrated, inclusive approach addressing region-specific challenges. This was not fully realized in Iraq, as many participants reported that the local communities and authorities were excluded, hindering stakeholder cooperation. Participant 16, infrastructure coordinator at IOM in Iraq:

*"The thing is from the government side we should have better support. That is one of the main issues we are facing when working in some communities. We need support from the government and units to improve coordination and provide more facility."*

These findings highlight the need for international aid agencies to adopt context-sensitive planning practices that prioritize local stakeholders' needs and preferences, aligning with the UN Habitat's (2021) reconstruction framework, which emphasizes participatory planning. A regional focus improves planning by increasing stakeholder participation, enhancing information dissemination and fostering better understanding of contextual challenges. Additionally, it ensures efficient resource allocation to meet regional needs, resulting in better resource management.

## 5.2 Information Management

The findings reveal significant challenges in information management during the planning stage of post-conflict housing reconstruction. Coordination across multiple stakeholders hinders efficient information exchange. Many participants reported poor communication and information dissemination, often leading to delays and inefficiencies. This highlights the importance of accessible, transparent information for donors to assess accountability, sustainability, and financial contributions. As Chang-Richards et al. (2017) noted, data scarcity is a major impediment in planning of post-conflict housing projects. This has contributed to rigid bureaucratic structures, further delaying procurement. For example, Participant 21 an Engineering Analyst at UNDP in Iraq, stated:

*"Usually, it ruins the whole process, we spent a lot of time and effort to finalize one housing project comprised of many houses. And then ultimately it fails because our estimates are old that they cannot dictate the current market situation".*

This aligns with Saleh et al. (2021) who argue that up-to-date information is essential for effective planning. Without reliable data, decision-making is affected, causing project delays and cost overruns. Furthermore, any project modification requires lengthy approvals processes, reducing adaptability. Similarly, Chang-Richards et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of data availability and management in reconstruction. As Participant 2, Stabilization Specialist Program Coordinator at UNDP, noted:

> *"There was nobody, nor the government or international partners had any data on sort of street-by-street levels of damage… our engineers took the end-users in cars, and we went neighbourhood by neighbourhood to map and coordinate all the damage levels and all the needs."*

These findings demonstrate the urgent need for improved data management systems and streamlined communication channels between international and local stakeholders to enhance the efficiency of housing reconstruction (Bahmani and Zhang, 2022).

## 5.3 Stakeholder Engagement

Planning housing reconstruction projects necessitates a comprehensive needs assessment to understand the community. Overlooking these factors can result in project failure. Stakeholders differ across locations, making it essential to identify their roles and gaps. Inadequate stakeholder involvement can lead to disputes and development challenges. International implementing agencies often lacked contextual knowledge and were engaged too late, prioritizing speed over understanding. Many participants reported a lack of engagement with local stakeholders. For example, Participant 7, a Senior Consultant for Bilateral Donors stated:

> *"I think you really need a proper assessment process, if you don't know the community, you will not understand the local context. They may say one thing but only as you get to know the context you realize that there are other factors influencing why you are not successful. So, it's really an iterative process that needs to be respected"*

This aligns with Davidson et al. (2007) who argues that community participation is essential for successful housing reconstruction, as insufficient contextual assessment leads to projects that fail to meet community needs. Bilau et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of local authorities in the planning process to ensure effective coordination and resource allocation. However, as Participant 16, an infrastructure coordinator at IOM in Iraq, noted:

> *"The thing is from the government side we should have better support. That is one of the main issues we are facing when working in some communities. We need support from the government and units to improve coordination and provide more facility."*

Additionally, IOM (2023), stresses that inclusive planning involving all stakeholders is essential to improve reconstruction. The findings highlight the need for coordination and collaboration at the outset of planning to ensure clear role distribution, enhance contextual understanding, introduce relevant resources and strengthen local engagement. Similarly, Islam et al. (2018) argue that stakeholders' roles must be clearly defined and integrated into planning. This approach leverages the capacities and expertise of different local actors to enhance planning and execution.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The planning stage of post-conflict reconstruction projects represents a key opportunity to lay the groundwork for well-organized and community-focused reconstruction efforts. This study examined the methods international aid agencies used in Iraq, revealing three persistent challenges: ineffective dissemination of information, poor resource management, and insufficient stakeholder participation. These issues arise from the urgent need to rehouse the displaced population and adherence to standardised planning practices, which often overlook Iraq's governance context and community-specific needs. This leads to rework, delays, cost overruns. Insufficient stakeholder engagement hinders project development, and absence of community engagement exacerbates social tensions and financial costs. Tailoring planning activities to local needs enhances stakeholder satisfaction, promotes engagement, and recognise diverse needs. This can be achieved by aligning planning activities within neighbourhoods or towns to improve socio-cultural understanding and support reconstruction outcomes.

The findings promotes flexible, adaptive planning practices that respond to challenges of each post-conflict setting. In Iraq, destruction has created an urgent need for housing, but poor coordination between international aid-agencies and local authorities has hindered progress. In Syria, ongoing conflict and political instability prevented large-scale projects, prompting smaller community-led initiatives. These findings emphasise re-evaluating community engagement during planning. International aid agencies should adopt more community-focused practices that improve information dissemination, engagement and resource use. This will support better housing delivery.

While the findings apply to Iraq, the lessons offer insights to other post-conflict settings. However, the results cannot be generalized to the Middle East and require further analysis. This study can support field experts, policymakers, and international aid agencies aiming to improve post-conflict housing delivery. It lays the groundwork for improved planning and provides valuable resource for future research. Future studies should explore community-level perspectives, cross-country comparisons and long-term outcome evaluations.

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