



Master Thesis

Sustainable Development and Regional Planning Strategies

(A Case Study of Azerbaijan's Liberated Territories)

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how effectively the reconstruction initiatives of Azerbaijan in the liberated territories align with contemporary regional planning methods and global Sustainable Development Goals. The Azerbaijani government initiated an extensive reconstruction program in the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, alongside the objective of relocating the displaced population, reconstructing infrastructure, and adopting “smart” and “green” development methods across regions such as Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Shusha. The present research examines the alignment between national recovery goals and global sustainability standards. Post-conflict adaptability, stakeholder involvement, spatial planning, inclusion of renewable energy, and sustainability in the environment constitute significant focuses for the study. Although the findings demonstrate major improvements, especially in the fields of energy transitions and infrastructure, they also point to shortcomings in community involvement, monitoring, evaluation, and alignment with SDG indicators. In order to place Azerbaijan’s progress and difficulties in perspective, comparative analysis and insights from different post-conflict regions are utilized. The research study contributes to a more extensive discussion of sustainable post-conflict recovery and makes policy recommendations for promoting inclusivity and robust regional planning in unstable environments.

Introduction

Background of study

Following decades of territorial occupation and conflict, the Republic of Azerbaijan has launched one of the most significant post-conflict recovery initiatives. A fresh phase of national development was marked by the liberation of the territories after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, with a priority of recovering damaged regions, revitalizing essential infrastructure, and resettling displaced individuals (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.; President.az, 2021). These programs operate within the overall scope of the “Great Return” strategy and are strongly related to the “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development” national development plan (President.az, 2021). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN, encompassing these international standards into both regional and national development (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.).

Besides the physical endeavor of rebuilding infrastructure, reconstruction of previously occupied regions such as Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fuzuli, and Shusha is a strategic investment in resilience, sustainable development, and regional equality. The government has given high priority to principles such as community-based construction, sustainable energy integration, and efficient urban planning (AzeMedia, 2021; Rehimov, 2021). Along with restoring conditions to their normal state, these initiatives attempt to develop a modern, inclusive, and sustainable urbanization design that other post-conflict nations might employ as a guideline. Nevertheless, there are significant challenges resulting from the project’s scope, complexity, and immediacy. A gap persists between the ideals of policy and its true implementation because of challenges consisting of mine removal, environmental degradation, institutional cooperation, and adequate service delivery (Mine Action Review, 2023; UNEP, 2022).

Recovery efforts are additionally affected by the wider geopolitical context. Azerbaijan must consider ongoing diplomatic disputes, dynamic alliances, and international development requirements as it undertakes a regional and reintegration strategy. In consideration of these complicated settings, it is vital to examine not only the efforts of Azerbaijan to rebuild the liberated regions but also their adherence to the global standards, sustainable development concepts, and resilience in the long run.

Description of the problem

Development and reconstruction strategies in Azerbaijan's liberated territories encounter a variety of obstacles, regardless of an effective combination of national targets and external assistance. The enormous damage during the war and the later mismanagement during the occupation make recovery considerably more challenging. Road construction, housing development, demining, environmental restoration, and public service delivery are all aspects of the substantial reconstruction activities that are required as the infrastructure is either non-existent or in a dire state (Abdul, 2024a; Diplomat Magazine, 2024).

Moreover, despite the initiatives like "Azerbaijan 2030" and the "Great Return" strategy present an extensive framework, transferring them into visible, practical, and durable outcomes remains challenging. The formulation of policies and their ground-level execution frequently lag considerably. Development is hindered by conflicting institutional assignments, bureaucratic ineffectiveness, regional capability problems, and inadequate stakeholder engagement (The World Bank, 2022; OECD 2022a). In addition, social structures, the accumulation of human capital in remote and rural locations may be overlooked while influential infrastructure projects such as highways and airports obtain substantial investment (Abdul, 2024a).

Connecting local restoration efforts with the worldwide standards like the SDGs is a further major challenge. As an example, whereas green energy and smart village programs have been effectively launched, there continues to be a shortage of integration and scalability into an overall framework (Johnson et al, 2021). Additionally, environmental restoration frequently lags behind urbanization, although environmental destruction inflicted by prolonged war and ineffective management demands immediate intervention (UNEP, 2022).

For an assessment of the efficiency and inclusiveness of development initiatives, robust and accessible monitoring and evaluation procedures are also inadequate (Government of Azerbaijan & United Nations Country Team, 2020). This weakness renders it challenging to carry out adaptive management and to modify strategies according to new requirements or shifting circumstances.

Research question and objective

This research examines to what extent the reconstruction initiatives of Azerbaijan in liberated territories conform to international best practices and sustainable development goals. The main research question leading to this study is: To what extent do Azerbaijan's reconstruction efforts in the liberated territories align with global sustainable development goals and regional planning best practices?

This primary question is complemented by the subsequent sub-questions:

- Which major themes are included in Azerbaijan's national development frameworks and planning documents?
- How are the efficiency and rebuilding efforts observed by local stakeholders?
- What kind of constraints and gaps in implementation impede these targets from being achieved locally?

- In what ways does Azerbaijan’s post-conflict recovery measure against global standards for participatory planning, climate adaptation, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability?

The goal of this study is to deliver an in-depth evaluation of Azerbaijan’s reconstruction strategies by employing comparative assessment, stakeholder observations, gap evaluation, and thematic document analysis. Vital strengths, ongoing challenges, and prospective opportunities for improvement can all be recognized with the support of this.

Importance of the study

This research matters from a national and global standpoint. At the national degree, it presents an assessment based on evidence about Azerbaijan’s continuous reconstruction efforts, illustrating aspects that might need modification and identifying whether policy objectives are being achieved. As Azerbaijan proceeds to incorporate its liberated territories, it is essential to guarantee that growth is not just efficient, but also robust, inclusive, and sustainable. Consequently, lawmakers, planners, and development allies associated with the reconstruction strategy of the nation can utilize this research as a reference.

At the crossroads of sustainable development, geopolitics, and national planning, Azerbaijan’s narrative presents an exceptional case study for post-conflict recovery on an international level. The results of the study might assist other nations striving to achieve global development requirements while navigating similar recovery approaches in the context of economic and political situations. In addition, it contributes to the increasing academic knowledge on planning resiliency, regional integration, and sustainable development after a conflict.

This research combines national ideals with international demands by carefully examining policy frameworks consisting of “Azerbaijan 2030”, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs),

and the “Great Return” strategy, as well as international norms such as SDGs, OECD guidelines, and UN-Habitat directives. It offers an extensive understanding of post-conflict recovery in practice through integrating the perspectives of policy, implementation, and participants.

Scope and limitations

The recovery efforts in Azerbaijan’s liberated regions after the 2020 conflict are the sole focus of this study, with a particular emphasis on regions like Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fuzuli, Lachin, and Shusha. It evaluates strategic frameworks, national policy papers, and organizational summaries from global agencies such as the World Bank, OECD, and UNDP. Furthermore, this study encompasses input from relevant experts in development policy, urban development, and reconstruction.

Nevertheless, a few restrictions must be considered. Initially, since reconstruction remains ongoing and accessibility to some project sites is limited, the availability of the primary field information is a constraint. Also, despite being accompanied by a thorough document analysis, the volume of interviews conducted was low. Thirdly, the region’s constantly shifting political landscape may affect the way sustainable development plans are. Thus, results could evolve as new policies are passed, or external factors change. Lastly, all attempts to ensure accuracy in methodology and resource reliability, availability, or translation problems may limit certain information.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, a thorough evaluation of Azerbaijan’s reconstruction efforts is made achievable by the methodological triangulation of document analysis, interviews, and global standards.

Thesis structure

The organization of the thesis intends to convey the multi-faceted nature and interrelationships of Azerbaijan's post-conflict recovery. In the first chapter, the general statement of the issue, research question, importance, scope, and layout of the study are described. In the next chapter, a relevant literature review on sustainable development goals, regional planning, and post-conflict reconstruction is provided. This contains a conceptual framework based on the literature on global development, sustainability designs, and planning theory. The third chapter covers the research methodology, giving details on the qualitative research approach utilized, which includes thematic document analysis, interviews, and comparative assessment. The fourth chapter presents a thematic study of significant international reports and national strategy documents. It highlights significant themes such as returnee reintegration, institutional incorporation, smart development, and environmentally friendly infrastructure. Then chapter 5 expands on this by including inputs from interviews and presents an authentic viewpoint on how policies are being executed. After this, a comprehensive review of implementation challenges realized across multiple reconstruction processes ensues. Utilizing SDGs, OECD, and UN-Habitat recommendations and planning principles as benchmarks, the following chapter culminates with a comparison of Azerbaijan's initiatives against global standards. The last chapter presents policy recommendations for reinforcing Azerbaijan's recovery approach, summarizes key findings, and directly answers the research question.

This systematic approach guarantees that the thesis not only recounts but also thoroughly examines the opportunities, challenges, and processes that accompany reconstructing a territory as intricate and historically loaded as Karabakh, with insights that transcend well beyond the borders of Azerbaijan.

Literature Review

A thorough examination of the body of literature in a variety of related fields is required for comprehension of how Azerbaijan's restoration efforts in liberated regions align with sustainable development and regional planning practices. This overview of the literature aims to provide the theoretical and analytical basis for the research question of this paper: To what extent do Azerbaijan's reconstruction efforts in the liberated territories align with global sustainable development goals and regional planning best practices? Consequently, this chapter has three purposes: first, to give an introduction to the main concepts and frameworks of sustainable development and regional planning; second, to examine scholarly viewpoints on SDG integration to post-conflict reconstruction; third, to determine the way these concepts have been discussed in Azerbaijan and generally, in South Caucasus region context.

This chapter's structure is broken down into several subsections. It starts with an overview of sustainable development, its concept, history, basic principles, and implementation under the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. In the context of post-conflict regions, the challenges and opportunities faced by the application of these goals are discussed. Then it moves on to examine how regional planning contributes to reconstruction, encompassing spatial, social, and infrastructural aspects that promote a sustainable restoration. Bringing focus onto the South Caucasus, the section addresses how sustainable development and regional planning are affected by local political and environmental variables. The chapter ends with a summary of gaps in the literature that the present research intends to address.

This review must be conducted for a variety of reasons. To begin with, studies regarding the incorporation of sustainable development into post-conflict reconstruction is currently in its early stages (Wang et al., 2024). Furthermore, even though the concept of regional planning is studied in more stable environments, there is insufficient information on how it is implemented in more politically sensitive or post-conflict contexts (Marley et al., 2020).

Subsequently, considering its alignment with SDG targets, the contemporary usage of the concepts such as “smart villages”, green infrastructure, and renewable energy paths encourages academic inquiry (Macid et al., 2023). Finally, examining this through a case study assists in connecting both theory and practice and provides a fresh empirical perspective to the literature that is limited to the post-conflict context.

This chapter sets the foundation for a context-based analysis in the succeeding chapters by investigating both regional and global viewpoints.

Conceptual background of “sustainable development”

After the release of the Brundtland Report in 1987, the concept of “sustainable development” became known worldwide with the definition “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This definition of the concept implies how crucial it is to achieve a balance between environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity in order to guarantee sustainability in the long run (Mondini, 2019).

Widely recognized dimensions of sustainable development are environmental, social, and economic sustainability which can influence human existence and the planet simultaneously (Ersoy, 2024). Environmental sustainability encompasses the preservation of natural resources to reduce the potential risk of environmental harm. As natural resources are finite, it ensures that human interaction with the planet is managed responsibly. Social sustainability relates to the improvement of human life at an inclusive and cohesive level. Ensuring social equity and having access to necessities are standard principles of social development. Lastly, economic sustainability aims to promote financially fair and feasible growth that does not have a negative influence on social equity and environmental preservation (Ersoy, 2024).

Although the concept of sustainable development is widely known, it received criticisms for being ambiguous and having an absence of actionable specifics (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015). A number of scholars argue that the concept is too broad to give precise advice and guidance on how to implement policies which results in difficulty in executing its ideas. Moreover, critiques point out that the concept is not able to address the underlying reasons for environmental and social problems and often disregards the complexity of global inequalities. Hence, these criticisms suggest that more accurate indicators are required to direct sustainable development properly and effectively (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015).

The SDGs in post-conflict settings

On September 2015, at the United Nations Summit, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted which included 17 goals with 169 corresponding objectives for “people, planet and prosperity” (UN, n.d.). These goals were designed to be globally applicable; however, post-conflict regions create particular challenges for them to be implemented due to breakdowns in society and institutions and physical damage. Even in these circumstances, critical chances are present to rebuild the regions by prioritizing sustainability and equality (World Public Sector Report, 2018).

The recovery of post-conflict regions includes not only physical and architectural reconstruction but also rebuilding resilience and trust in communities and governance. Some of these goals, notably, SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), present a comprehensive framework to effectively direct these endeavors. When these goals and national restoration efforts in post-conflict regions align with each other, reconstruction becomes rapid as well as inclusive and resilient (World Public Sector Report, 2018). In the case of a post-conflict setting, SDG 16 becomes more important via establishing and maintaining the rule of law, decreasing corruption, and recovering government institutions.

These are crucial to building public trust and fostering the necessary environment that supports growth. Solid and functional institutions and a safe environment are building blocks to have long-term gains from investment in service and infrastructure (World Public Sector Report, 2018). In a similar fashion, SDG 11 underscores the necessity of taking inclusion, safety, and sustainability into account as top priorities in the reconstruction process of urban settings. Access to necessities such as health care and education, displaced individuals, and inadequate housing must be considered, as well (Mohieldin & Ijjasz-Vasquez, 2024). These initiatives are supported by SDG 9 which promotes innovation, inclusive industrialization, and strong infrastructure. It has heightened importance especially when it comes to places where economic and industrial infrastructure and urban settings have been damaged during the conflict. Taking the reconstruction of the infrastructure with environmental preservation and climate issues into account, the nations may “build back better” (Hallegatte et al, 2018).

The relevance and application of SDGs in Azerbaijan’s liberated territories are apparent. Soon after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, Azerbaijan commenced extensive reconstruction projects. These projects include the relocation of internally displaced people and the rebuilding of public infrastructure such as rebuilding roads and cities (The Great Return: Azerbaijan’s Post-Conflict Revival Model, n.d.). To show commitment to these projects to be aligned with SDGs, the Azerbaijani government aims to implement “smart city” and “green energy” notions in recent urban development initiatives in cities such as Fuzuli and Aghdam (Azerbaijan to Implement Smart Village Project in Aghdam, 2024).

Despite the best efforts, several challenges prevail in post-conflict regions. One of the major issues is land contamination which endangers human safety. It also impedes the main objective of SDG 16 which promotes justice, peace, and strong institutions (Shiriyev, 2023). Another challenge that jeopardizes inclusiveness and makes the planning phase ineffective is logistical difficulties and the lack of accurate data. In order to promote resilience and fair

development in post-conflict regions, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights the necessity of comprehensive recovery strategies that tackle both urgent humanitarian demands and sustainability in the long run (UNDP, 2023).

In conclusion, post-conflict recovery projects include pursuing SDGs as a way of not only restoring what was destroyed but also addressing existing weaknesses and inequalities.

Aligning the reconstruction projects with SDGs, in Azerbaijan's case, can encourage long-term stability, resilience, and inclusivity.

Regional development and sustainable recovery

The role of regional planning in attempts for post-conflict recovery is pivotal when it comes to balancing space, a sustainable environment, and a feasible economy. In order to foster a cohesive society and achievement of long-term development goals, it proposes a framework for the systematic utilization of land, natural resources, and infrastructure. The concepts and principles of regional planning and development, its particular application to post-conflict situations, and the significance of inclusive and fair planning, development of infrastructure, and spatial integration in obtaining sustainable results are examined in this section.

Regional planning is recognized as the systematic arrangement and coordination of several components that include the usage of land, infrastructure, economic growth, and environmental management throughout the designated geographic area (Glasson & Marshall, 2007). It attempts to promote fair development across local boundaries by addressing geographical disparities and encouraging connectivity. Regional planning's fundamental principles consist of equity, integration, subsidiarity, sustainability, and long-term strategy (Suri et al., 2018). The people involved in planning use these principles as guidelines for development projects to make sure initiatives are in line with social, economic, and environmental goals.

The concepts of reconciliation, establishing peace, and social integration must also be considered in regional planning. As stated by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), spatial planning is needed to encourage safety, stability, and potential for vulnerable populations (United Nations, 2016). It is also necessary for local authorities, displaced populations, and civil society stakeholders to participate together in the planning.

Destroyed institutions, infrastructure, displaced people, and sometimes disputed land ownership make regional planning challenging and complex in a post-conflict context.

Despite this, various examples from nations damaged by conflicts show how regional planning can effectively contribute to sustainable recovery. The post-genocide rebuilding of Rwanda where the government established a decentralized land management and development strategy is one notable example. The integration of poverty reduction and infrastructure development with planning was rendered feasible through projects such as the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme and the Land Tenure Regularization program (Ansoms & Rostagno, 2012). Likewise, after the Yugoslav wars, the reconstruction initiatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina included spatial planning to regulate ethnic disparities and restore and rebuild the urban centers and the transportation (Tsenkova, 2006). The UNDP places a strong emphasis on an area-based recovery approach in Iraq which encourages a locally led and needs-driven reconstruction strategy in ISIS-affected locations (Iraq Crisis Response and Resilience Programme (ICRRP), 2018). Alongside physical reconstruction, this method enabled community-responsive, adaptable initiatives that targeted social cohesion and governance. These cases highlight how important it is for regional planning to be inclusive, context-sensitive, and conflict-aware. As a top-down strategy is insufficient, a bottom-up strategy allows regional planning to be more effective, engages local stakeholders, and promotes credibility.

Spatial planning is an essential component of regional planning that aims to manage settlements and the utilization of land in order to achieve a balance between environmental protection and economic growth. In post-conflict regions, spatial planning aids in coordinating effective reconstruction and reduces the danger of uncontrolled development and potential conflict by designating areas for agriculture, housing, conservation, and industry (Barakat & Zyck, 2009). Infrastructure investments can be guided by strategic spatial planning which can also support harmonious urban-rural relationships and guarantee that growth does not intensify the existing inequalities.

Another crucial aspect of regional planning is infrastructure. Water, sanitation, electricity, roads, schools, and healthcare institutions are vital for long-term development as well as immediate recovery. In post-war Liberia, for instance, under the Poverty Reduction Strategy, road networks were considered essential for service providing and delivery wherein the top priority was given to the infrastructure development (International Monetary Fund, 2012).

Effective regional planning includes both institutional and spatial integration. Institutional integration refers to the collaboration at various levels of government and sector, whereas spatial integration pertains to the psychological unity throughout terrains, including lines of communication and transportation routes. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, the execution of spatial planning aimed to link national development objectives with Eastern provinces that were previously affected by conflict (Hettiarachchi, 2017). However, criticisms of this endeavor highlight the necessity of more local involvement and planning that favors reconciliation. The spatial and institutional integration is particularly relevant to South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan's post-conflict regions. Spatial planning that prioritizes equity and connectivity is especially needed because of the region's mountainous terrain, dispersed populations, and historical issues.

As there is an ongoing reconstruction process in the liberated territories, Azerbaijan can acquire valuable lessons and insights from international best practices. A strong emphasis is placed on holistic planning frameworks that incorporate governance, social development, and safety with physical reconstruction in the United Nations' "Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction" (United States Institute of Peace et al., 2009). For the purpose of ensuring that reconstruction satisfies regional requirements and maintains state authority, these recommendations emphasize the value of early and continuous communication with the local population.

The role of technology and data provides further significant insight into today's regional planning. In regions affected by conflicts, remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are increasing in usage to assess destruction, allocate resources, and evaluate the reconstruction process. For instance, to determine the most essential infrastructure investments and minimize planning errors, in Afghanistan, spatial data strategies were utilized. (Korkovelos et al., 2017; World Bank Group, 2020). Another valuable example to learn from is Colombia's implementation of a peace agreement where regional planning tools aided in the development of rural locations. Integration of social, economic, participatory planning, and infrastructure targets are in the focal point of the Territorial Focused Development Program (BAPP, 2023). Hence, Azerbaijan faces both challenges and opportunities in the sense that liberated regions are like an empty canvas for determined and sustainable planning, but also present risks for possible land disputes, politicization, and environmental deterioration.

To summarize, regional planning is an essential and indispensable aspect of implementing the reconstruction process sustainably in post-conflict situations. It offers an integrated, comprehensive, strategic framework that guarantees improvement in infrastructure, socio-economic cohesion, and regional equity. For Azerbaijan's liberated regions, incorporating

global standards into regional planning, while considering local conditions and sensitivities, can better connect and align with Sustainable Development Goals. The next section will examine how these planning initiatives connect with wider South Caucasus strategies for sustainability.

Regional planning and sustainable development in the South Caucasus

As environmental problems and socio-political dynamics evolve, the South Caucasus which comprises Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, has put a more substantial emphasis on regional planning and sustainable development. Even though each nation has its own agenda, coordinated initiatives related to promoting sustainable development and regional planning have been present. The Sustainable Caucasus platform is one of those initiatives that promotes collaboration among regions to solve regional and developmental issues that are mutual. By exchanging data and information and concerted action on policy, the platform combines academic institutions, government agencies, and civil society groups in order to promote environmental preservation, sustainable land utilization, and social and economic resilience (Who We Are - RECC – Caucasus, n.d.).

One complementary initiative to this is the UNDP's Peace and Development program in the South Caucasus. This program assists local communities and institutions and UN country delegations, to integrate sustainable development with peacebuilding and emergency planning (Peace & Development in the South Caucasus, n.d.). Particularly, in the regions affected by conflict, these programs and initiatives are essential in building institutional capacity and encouraging collaboration across borders.

At the national level, Armenia has made progress on poverty reduction, sustainability in cities, and clean energy. Related to these, in the 2021 Sustainable Development Report, Armenia made progress in SDG indicators by scoring 71.8 (South Caucasus countries in

Sustainable Development Report, 2021). In addition, Georgia's sustainable development has focused on improving public transportation and urban mobility. Implemented by GIZ, the initiatives such as Mobility4Cities assist local governments with carrying out the strategies related to sustainable transportation. This program focuses on lowering carbon gas emissions, improving connectivity, and promoting general welfare which is in line with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (GIZ, 2021).

Conversely, Azerbaijan has placed high priority on sustainable use of energy, agriculture and rural development. As part of its dedication to environmentally conscious and inclusive development in rural areas, the ECOserve program, another program that is supported by GIZ, targets energy-efficient methods and biodiversity-friendly agriculture (Azerbaijan, n.d.). A major objective of Azerbaijan's broader reconstruction initiatives is to incorporate sustainable development concepts such as environmental restoration, renewable energy, and smart infrastructure with present urban planning in the liberated territories after 2020 (Azerbaijan, n.d.).

Despite the best efforts and initiatives, the South Caucasus region still faces several challenges. Deforestation, unsustainable land use, excessive grazing, and inferior agriculture methods are examples that have led to significant soil degradation. Environmental health and food security are at risk because of desertification which has harmed more than 50% of the South Caucasus and climate change worsens these situations (SOUTH CAUCASUS | Wb, n.d.). This necessitates an increase in resilience by integrated regional planning and collaboration.

Similarly, urban development encounters difficulties, especially in post-conflict regions. Reconstruction of infrastructure demands a balance between long-term sustainability and the urgent requirement for economic revival and growth (Machaidze, 2024). Moreover,

environmental damage resulting from industrial contamination, mining, and inefficient waste management persists in hindering sustainable development in the region. Poor implementation of environmental policies and legislation and limited public understanding related to sustainability issues aggravate these problems (Machaidze, 2024).

One way to balance environmental protection and economic growth is through the opportunity of tourism. Applying environmental standards and sustainability criteria throughout tourism enterprises establishing eco-tourism strategies, and strengthening local capabilities are primary goals of the USAID South Caucasus Regional Tourism Development Program. This program also supports regional collaboration, cultural heritage, and long-term prosperity (Webintelligence, 2024). Research states that when sustainability is incorporated into national tourism policies, tourism procedures aligned with SDGs can significantly contribute to biodiversity preservation and fair economic development (Martins et al., 2025).

As integration of infrastructure is another component of regional planning, the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) and similar projects have focused on enhancing transportation links and encouraging trade. Keeping the original focus on economic development, TRACECA now acknowledges the importance of environmental protection and adaptation to climate change in the construction of infrastructure and therefore, integrates sustainable development goals into the planning process (Development of Sustainable Transport – One of the Main Objectives Within the Framework of Implementation of Initiatives in the TRACECA Region. TRACECA ORG, n.d.). Moreover, regional collaboration, sustainable economic development, and effective governance have taken advantage of European partnerships. To achieve broader consistency and alignment with the SDGs, the EU strategy for the South Caucasus emphasizes coordinated spatial planning, investments in renewable energy sources, and changes in policy (Kirilov, 2010).

In summary, even though Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia have different social and environmental issues, they are dedicated in their efforts for regional collaboration and sustainable development. This is proven by the progress in energy conservation, agricultural sustainability, urban transportation, and eco-tourism. Nonetheless, it is imperative to overcome the challenges related to environmental degradation, organizational limitations, and territorial disputes to achieve the SDG targets and endorse a sustainable and resilient South Caucasus.

An overview of the literature gaps

The available literature on the South Caucasus regional planning and sustainable development offers critical knowledge about national policy and unique industry efforts. Nevertheless, there remain a few important gaps that hinder the practicality and comprehensiveness of the study.

Firstly, the insufficiency of comparative investigations that evaluate Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia's initiatives within an integrated framework is present. The majority of the studies prefer to concentrate on individual countries, therefore, chances to discover shared prevalent issues and joint approaches are overlooked (GIZ, 2025). An international transfer of knowledge can benefit from a comparative assessment that identifies best practices.

Secondly, the lack of research on how environmental protection integrates into regional planning persists in the literature. Although national policies acknowledge the environmental issues and their potential risks, limited research has been done on how these issues are handled in regional collaboration frameworks. For instance, research on transborder environmental management is limited, notwithstanding the fact that climate change's effect on common water supplies and biodiversity zones requires coordinated actions (Rucevska et al., 2017). Thirdly, inadequate emphasis is put on the way geopolitical factors determine the direction of sustainable development. Historical disputes and changing relationships are

unique characteristics of the South Caucasus region that have considerable effect on regional cooperation and development goals. Nevertheless, the impact of geopolitical variables on the successful execution of sustainability programs and the possibility of integrating regions are overlooked in the literature (Smolnik & Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023). Fourthly, empirical research that focuses on evaluating the extent to which international development and assistance approaches support sustainability in the region is not enough. Numerous programs have been undertaken by institutions such as the European Union and UNDP with the aim of accelerating sustainable development. However, there are limited thorough and systematic assessments of these program's results and the extent to which they meet the local requirements (Marley et al., 2020). Lastly, the representation of the stakeholders and local communities in the literature is absent. Developing inclusive and productive methods necessitates an understanding of the viewpoint of the individuals who are directly affected by the development programs and initiatives. To guarantee that sustainability efforts are anchored in the actualities of the populations they intend to benefit, case studies that record the local experiences of participatory research methodologies are essential (Giuliani et al., 2022).

To overcome these gaps, an interdisciplinary strategy that encompasses political studies, environmental science, program evaluation, comparative analysis, and participatory research is needed. With such an approach, a deeper understanding of sustainable development and regional planning in the South Caucasus that guides the development of fair and efficient policies can be achievable.

Research Methodology

Research design

A qualitative case study method is employed in this research to investigate the extent to which Azerbaijan's reconstruction plans after the conflict in the liberated regions align with regional planning frameworks and sustainable development. The case study approach and design are especially appropriate considering the Nagorno-Karabakh region's context-specific characteristics where historical, geopolitical, and socioeconomic circumstances intersect.

A qualitative research method was adopted as it enables a thorough examination of the practical, institutional, and tactical aspects of sustainable development. These aspects are difficult to quantify yet are essential to comprehend how policies are carried out in post-conflict contexts. This research aims to provide profound, interpretive insights through analysis of documents and interviews, instead of quantitative generalizations.

The case study approach is appropriate when research focuses on addressing current events and answering the "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2018). In this sense, by examining policy discussions and stakeholder views, the study analyses how Azerbaijan utilizes sustainability concepts in its reconstruction initiatives and why some of the challenges are still ongoing. Azerbaijan's case study appears as an integrated single-case approach, which means numerous data sources are reviewed within a national framework. By promoting triangulation, this approach improves the accuracy and thoroughness of the results (Patton, 1999). Semi-structured interviews are put together with document analysis of government initiatives, international aid files, and SDG reports on progress to accomplish data triangulation. This method presents a comprehensive understanding of the procedure for planning and its outputs while minimizing bias. In addition, by comparing the long-term strategic objectives specified in planning documents with the opinions and expertise of

government officials and professionals who are directly engaged in the implementation process, this approach allows for it to be easier to investigate policy-practice discrepancies. Particularly since the sustainable recovery of the liberated regions is a constant and dynamic process, a qualitative method provides the opportunity to communicate with fresh initiatives that continually arise (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In conclusion, the qualitative case study methodology prioritizes depth, setting, and relevance over the quantification and scope with the goal of reinforcing the study's primary research topic.

Data collection methods

This research utilizes a multi-method qualitative data collection approach with the goal of acquiring extensive and contextualized data on Azerbaijan's efforts for post-conflict reconstruction and their adherence to sustainable development and regional planning. The two main sources of data for this research are document analysis and semi-structured interviews. These approaches were adopted as a way to facilitate triangulation, increase the comprehension of official frameworks and actual experiences, and offer an impartial perspective that integrates top-down procedures with basic information.

Through document analysis, a range of readily accessible documents pertinent to Azerbaijan's development frameworks, reconstruction initiatives, and sustainability objectives are carefully examined. They consist of strategic planning initiatives, international reports, national policy papers, and reports on the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Among the significant documents examined are:

1. The "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development"
2. State Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture of Azerbaijan's statements and reports

3. Project summaries and national reports from UNDP Azerbaijan covering the green energy and smart village initiatives in Aghdam, Susha, and Fuzuli
4. Azerbaijan's SDG Voluntary National Reviews
5. Whenever applicable, development and planning records from global organizations including the European Union, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank

With the help of this analysis, it is easier to assess how sustainability is defined in official conversations, what kind of regional planning models are utilized, and how effectively these align with global best practices. The documents are analysed employing thematic coding which helps to concentrate on significant themes such as infrastructure development, stakeholder involvement, sustainability integration, and conformity with SDGs (Bowen, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews with individuals who are either directly or indirectly engaged in Azerbaijan's planning and reconstruction operations are conducted to further improve and complement the document-based findings. This may include:

1. Officials of the appropriate ministries (e.g., Urban Planning Committee, Ministry of Economy)
2. Professionals from international development institutions such as the UNDP and EU Delegation to Azerbaijan)
3. Independent researchers and scholars with specialization in regional planning or post-conflict reconstruction
4. Representatives of civil society who are familiar with the needs of the local community

Semi-structured interviews enable flexibility while retaining consistency across interviewees. Discussions are directed by an essential interview guide to concentrate on appropriate topics

of planning difficulties, stakeholder management, policy implementation, and sustainability goals. The follow-up questions are modified based on the responses and level of knowledge on the subject matter. Depending on the respondent's wish, availability, and accessibility, the interviews are either conducted online or offline. Each interview is recorded with the consent of the participant, transcribed, and coded for thematic assessment. This method makes it achievable to store complicated concepts and difficulties that are particular to a situation that may not be covered in official documents. Incorporating interview data provides the dual purposes of identifying implementation deficiencies, conflicts, or inconsistencies, and comprehending how policies are understood and carried out in practice notably in a politically delicate and post-conflict setting (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Document analysis and semi-structured interviews operate together to facilitate data triangulation thereby improving the research's interpretative complexity and reliability.

Document analysis offers a formal policy foundation, while the interviews shed light on the facts, interpretations, and organizational limitations faced by stakeholders who are involved.

Participant selection and sampling

A deliberate sampling method is utilized in this study, and respondents are selected according to their institutional responsibilities, level of knowledge, and relevance to the subject of the research. The intention was to identify individuals possessing firsthand knowledge of regional planning methods, sustainable development frameworks, and rebuilding projects in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan in accordance with the qualitative case study approach. With the goal of providing diverse and contextual data that corresponds to with the research's objective, the approach sets a higher priority on the complexity of insight rather than statistical depiction.

A senior public official actively participating in the post-conflict recovery and development efforts of the Karabakh region was one of the main participants. The participant consented to take part in the semi-structured interview, however, requested that all written material remain anonymous. Consequently, in accordance with informed consent standards and ethical research requirements, their name and particular institutional associations have been removed. Nonetheless, the insights of the participants are extremely significant and valuable, presenting essential viewpoints on the difficulties of reconstructing war-affected territories in conjunction with Sustainable Development Goals, incorporating sustainability, and policy implementation.

An interview with the second prevalent individual, who currently holds a significant role in an influential government-affiliated institution active in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Karabakh region, was successfully carried out. This participant also requested to remain anonymous however, the respondent is responsible for coordinating development activities and strategic planning as a result of their role. The participant's viewpoints offer relevant insights into how sustainability goals may be utilized in practice, the way institutional and monetary assets can be mobilized, and the importance of stakeholder inclusion in restoration efforts. These insights have the opportunity to assist in the examination of Azerbaijan's adherence to global development norms by presenting an understanding of how the policy frameworks are truly implemented, particularly with respect to sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, and regional planning integration.

Factors including institutional engagement, subject-matter knowledge, and the ability to articulate the intersection between sustainable development and regional plannings functioned as the basis for the deliberate sampling of the participants. This approach agrees with the best practices for case study research, analytical comprehension is the aim rather than generalizability (Yin, 2018). The acquired viewpoints enhance the study regarding the

way sustainability and plannings are incorporated into the post-conflict reconstruction strategy of Azerbaijan and assist in positioning the national policies within wider international frameworks. Even though greater stakeholder involvement may strengthen further research, the present sample offers an accurate foundation for analyzing the relationship between national restoration efforts and international development guidelines.

Data analysis approach

A systematic, theme-driven technique for data analysis was employed in this research, which relied on a thorough examination of qualitative interview insights, policy documents, and strategic development initiatives. The study centered on gathering thematic insights from primary resources and interview responses to analyze coherence with sustainable development goals and regional planning standards, considering the dynamic aspect of post-conflict recovery in liberated regions of Azerbaijan.

Significant national strategy documents, especially Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development, the “Great Return” project, UNDP assessments, and Voluntary National Reviews, were carefully investigated within the context of the first phase of the study that consisted of document analysis. The intention was to outline institutional objectives and repeated development goals, namely returnee resettlement, regional connectivity, green infrastructure, and smart urbanization. The primary elements of Azerbaijan’s reconstruction strategy were subsequently determined via analytical synthesis to group these frequent policy components thematically.

The observations from qualitative interviews with relevant professionals, planners, and scholars constituted the following part of the analysis. Although the limited quantity, the theme patterns observed in the document analysis reinforce these interviews. The strategic

objectives indicated in policy frameworks were consistently reaffirmed by the participants, who contextualized their practicality and relevance in current reconstruction operations.

Another analysis phase concentrated on understanding systematic problems and implementation gaps. This phase aims to evaluate instances where actual operations differed from strategy objectives, institutional capacity limitations, and disparities in resource allocation, by drawing on theme alignment from both interviews and document analysis.

Lastly, a comparative assessment was undertaken, evaluating Azerbaijan's initiatives to international criteria utilizing a few foreign case studies and planning guidelines. To assess basic components such as sustainability, stakeholder involvement, and resilience strategy, an organized table was employed. Azerbaijan's operations were more appropriately situated within wider post-conflict recovery frameworks owing to this comparative attention.

This comprehensive theme analysis enabled Azerbaijan's reconstruction path to be reviewed in an approach that was both extensive and relevant to policy.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study being conducted complies with the standard ethical guidelines to guarantee the transparency, integrity, and confidentiality of all participants. Ethical compliance is critical for collecting and reporting practices of data for this qualitative case research, which consists of semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Firstly, prior to conducting interviews, each participant granted their informed consent. They have received an in-depth overview of the study's objectives, how they fit, and that the participation is entirely voluntary. Because both participants requested to remain anonymous, all identifiable data has been omitted, and the participants' insights are delivered in an indistinguishable way. This is in accordance with the ethical standards for qualitative research (British Sociological Association et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In addition, to protect data confidentiality, transcriptions and recordings of conversations were safeguarded to ensure that only the researcher could access them. Following the completion of the study, the data will be erased in alignment with GDPR-compliant procedures (*General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Legal Text, 2024*). Open-source resources were leveraged to evaluate the secondary data, comprising documents for planning, public policy, and SDG progress reports. Ethical and legal compliance has been guaranteed by incorporating only openly accessible and non-sensitive materials.

In summary, the research project was planned and implemented in alignment with transparent ethical standards. The participants' rights, transparency, and data protection were all provided thorough consideration to warrant the research preserve academic integrity, and conform to the requirements of appropriate academic research.

Regardless of the attempts to guarantee the reliability and accuracy of this study, numerous limitations must be highlighted. Initially, there are restrictions linked to subjectivity and interpretive predisposition when applying qualitative tools, notably semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Although such approaches are great for analysing complicated socio-political relationships, the findings are unavoidably affected by the interpretative worldview of the researcher and the viewpoints of a restricted number of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another major limitation is the availability of data and access to it. Azerbaijan's reconstruction operations in liberated territories rely primarily on government planning and policy documents that are either not published, categorized, or inaccessible. In light of this, the document analysis was mainly exclusive to media outlets, policy papers, and materials that are publicly available. Unpublished and nuanced findings that might have offered deeper knowledge about implementation patterns may have been neglected due to this limitation.

Thirdly, though important insider interviews offer depth, the generalizability of the insights is restricted by the small sample size. It was challenging to associate specific insights with institutional connections as one participant requested anonymity. Additionally, it was not achievable to interact with local community representatives and displaced individuals whose insights would have contributed informative bottom-up opinions on sustainability and the effectiveness of planning.

Finally, since the reconstruction process evolves constantly, the data obtained for this study might soon be outdated. Consequently, the results ought not to be regarded as a final or complete assessment, but instead as a single instance in time.

Contextual background – The Liberated Territories of Azerbaijan

In this chapter, the essential background explanations cover the historical, geopolitical, and spatial characteristics of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. It is vital to comprehend the background to be able to assess how effectively national reconstruction initiatives correspond to regional planning principles and sustainable development goals. This section starts with an introduction of the 2020 conflict and its geographical implications, followed by socio-political and infrastructural features of the reclaimed territories.

2020 Conflict: A Brief Overview and Changes in Territory

In the long-standing dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh region and adjacent districts, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War which occurred from September 29 to November 10, 2020, was an immense and historic turning point.

Azerbaijan reclaimed control of immense territories that were previously occupied by Armenians since the beginning of the 1990s after the outbreak of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Gubadli, Kalbajar, Lachin, and Zangilan are the seven districts bounded by Nagorno-Karabakh that Azerbaijan reclaimed following the conditions of the ceasefire (*November 9, 2020, Trilateral Ceasefire Agreement*, n.d.). Thousands of Azerbaijanis resided in those regions before the conflict began in the 1990s, however, these districts suffered severe damage both during and after the time of occupation. Objective accounts and imagery from satellites confirm the massive devastation of houses, buildings, historical sites, and agricultural resources in these regions (Darbyshire, 2022). In accordance with the ceasefire agreement, Russian peacekeepers remained stationed throughout the Lachin corridor and in the areas of Nagorno-Karabakh that Azerbaijan had not taken back. This served to preserve delicate peace and facilitated reconstruction to commence in the recently liberated territories. These instances presented complicated problems for post-conflict operations and civilian relocation and drastically reshaped the South Caucasus geopolitical landscape (De Waal et al., 2021).

The Azerbaijani government has since vigorously begun the reconstruction operations, characterizing the conflict's conclusion as the re-establishment of territorial integrity. These involve constructing new cities, rebuilding transportation pathways, and implementing ecologically sensitive design models such as "smart villages" and "green energy zones" (Mammadov et al., 2021). The liberated territories extend nearly 10,000 square kilometers and the government has put priority on the resettlement of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had to abandon their homes during the first war. However, the relocation and rebuilding efforts have been impeded by landmines and explosive ordnance. Therefore, prior to any major return or improvement, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) states that thousands of mines that have been planted during occupation necessitate significant demining measures (ANAMA, n.d.)

In broad terms, the 2020 political and territorial alterations have left Azerbaijan with an opportunity and responsibility to reconstruct these territories in a manner that simultaneously restores the pre-conflict state and complies with broader goals for regional unity and sustainable development.

Features of Liberated Territories

The reconstruction strategies of Azerbaijan are influenced by the distinctive physical, demographic, and developmental features of the regions Azerbaijan regained after the ceasefire agreement of 2020. These places encompass an abundance of topographies including rich lowlands in Aghdam and Fuzuli and mountainous highlands such as Kalbajar and Lachin. This spatial heterogeneity impacts planning for infrastructure development, agricultural recovery, and environmental preservation (Abbasov et al., 2023).

Agriculture, cattle, and small businesses were the primary sources of income that supported most Azerbaijani populace that resided in the regions before the First Karabakh War in the early stages of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the majority of the villages, and settlements were left behind throughout the nearly three decades of occupation, and an enormous amount of residential infrastructure was either destroyed or severely damaged beyond repair.

International reviews and government reports indicate that throughout the occupation, Aghdam, Fuzuli, and related regions suffered nearly complete destruction, including whole urban regions destroyed and infrastructure being obsolete (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022; Gavan, 2021).

The widespread landmine contamination is a further significant characteristic of the liberated territories. The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) states that enormous portions of the liberated territories continue to be contaminated by landmines and hazardous ordnance, which threatens the civilian population and severely impedes the efforts for

resettlement and reconstruction (Mine Action Review, 2023). This creates major obstacles to the development of secure infrastructure, agricultural renewal, and resettlement. In both national and international rebuilding plans, de-mining persists to be an important objective (Mine Action Review, 2023).

Concerns were additionally expressed regarding the ecological state of the territories.

Throughout the occupation period, the region experienced deforestation, unlawful exploitation of resources, and soil degradation, based on the Ministry of Ecology reports and independent evaluations (Abbasov et al., 2023). In response to these problems, the reconstruction programs now incorporate an environmental sustainability element that involves reforestation projects and the implementation of green development concepts (Abbasov et al., 2023).

Delivering building supplies and services is also challenging due to certain districts' infrastructural and logistical distance, notably in mountainous regions such as Lachin and Kalbajar. For the purpose of ensuring long-term accessibility and economic sustainability, reconnection of these territories to national transportation and energy systems has been paid greater importance. To mitigate these constraints and stimulate regional cohesion, the government has commenced large-scale projects to reconstruct highways, tunnels, and electrical networks (Restoration of Kalbajar and Lachin Regions Is More Difficult Than of Other Liberated Regions - President Ilham Aliyev, 2022).

All things considered, the liberated territories are identified by their historical economic importance, tactical geographic value, and major repercussions of the lengthy occupation. Reconstruction has become both immediate and challenging given these features that necessitate an appropriate compromise among long-term sustainable development, environmental regeneration, and physical reconstruction.

Vision of Government Reconstruction

The Azerbaijani government began an extensive reconstruction plan to rejuvenate the liberated territories after the 2020 ceasefire. At the core of this premise is the program called the “Great Return”, which intends to encourage sustainable development and enable the return of internally displaced persons (IDP) alongside reconstructing infrastructure. The government invested roughly \$10.4 billion in reconstruction between the years 2020 and 2024, with a particular emphasis on infrastructure, housing, and economic reintegration (Ashirov, 2025). Preparing detailed strategic plans for cities and communities across the liberated territories is an essential aspect of this effort. In an effort to guarantee that urban planning conforms with contemporary standards and encourages the development of robust and inclusive communities, the State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture has served an essential part in this process. To ensure long-term viability, these initiatives place an intense emphasis on combining sustainable methods and smart technology (State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.)

To conquer the logistical difficulties presented by the region’s mountainous geography, the development of infrastructure has been prioritized. Substantial investments have been made to construct highways, roads, and energy stations to enhance the connection and accessibility of the necessary amenities (Turksoy, 2023). As an example, more than 3,400 km of highways have been constructed and some projects are underway, enabling simpler travel and economic activity (President: Transport projects are the backbone of work in liberated territories, 2025).

The vision of the government includes economic revival alongside physical recovery. Economic zones are currently being developed in East Zangezur and Karabakh with the objective of transforming these areas into engines for growth by creating public services, employment opportunities, and infrastructure development (Mammaov, 2025). The ultimate goal of this comprehensive approach is to ensure that returning citizens have access to a

variety of opportunities and an adequate standard of living. Therefore, the resettlement of IDPs is an essential part of the reconstruction plan. Approximately 140,000 citizens are anticipated to return to the Karabakh and East Zangezur districts by the year 2026. To facilitate this, new housing structures, educational institutions, and healthcare centers are being developed which establish the groundwork for flourishing and independent communities (Guliyev, 2025b).

To summarize, the reconstruction vision of Azerbaijan is exhaustive and involves social reintegration and economic and infrastructure development. The government intends to turn the liberated territories into successful regions that provide prosperity and stability for returning individuals through significant investments and effective strategic planning.

Implementation Methods: green zones, smart cities, and energy corridors

The Azerbaijani government has put an enormous value on the incorporation of smart technology and green development notions into execution strategies in its post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The liberated regions are intended to be utilized as testing grounds for highly technological, climate-resilient, and ecologically sustainable development. The formation of “green energy zones” has been an important governmental focus, especially in regions such as Jabrayil, Lachin, and Zangilan. The development of wind, solar, and hydroelectric power facilities would be an essential factor in transforming Karabakh and East Zangezur into exemplary green energy zone, according to the Ministry of Energy (The Caspian Post, 2025).

Simultaneously, to increase the quality of living in the liberated territories and upgrade infrastructure, Azerbaijan has launched smart city and smart village initiatives. The Smart Village project in Aghali, Zangilan district integrates smart agriculture, computerized infrastructure management, electronic governance, and renewable energy technologies. This

approach aimed to be reproduced in different regions to promote highly developed and sustainable communities (Zohrabov, 2024). Urban master plans that highlight the combination of smart technology, energy-efficient structures, and sustainable transportation networks have been intended for cities like Fuzuli and Shusha. While making sure that the city's ecosystems are undamaged, the Shusha master plan specifies significant locations for the construction of housing, social services, and cultural resources. Furthermore, infrastructure and transportation development receive the highest priority, concentrating on bicycle lanes, pedestrian walkways, and readily available public transportation (Novruz, 2024).

The development of new transportation and energy paths, such as the Kalbajar-Lachin highway, and the renovation of electricity systems complement these initiatives. By late 2025 and early 2026, the 75.8 km Kalbajar-Lachin highway, which contains tunnels along the way, is projected to be finished (Caliber.az, 2024). The establishment of a circular power source system that links the Kalbajar and Lachin regions' electrical lines is also under development. The objectives of these initiatives are to enhance connection make service delivery less difficult and reintegrate the liberated territories into the national economy (Azernews.az, 2023).

Findings and Analysis

This chapter outlines the main findings resulting from the qualitative research that was carried out for this study through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The objective is to examine the means by which reconstruction initiatives of Azerbaijan in the liberated regions correspond with regional planning principles and sustainable development goals.

The chapter has been divided into four primary sections. Firstly, frequent themes encompassing infrastructure development, regional integration, and sustainability are determined through evaluating thematic insights across strategic plans, official policy documentations, and reports. Second, interview insights from pertinent stakeholders demonstrate operational factors in the reconstruction process and present interpretations that are specific to the context. The third part of the chapter focuses on crucial implementation gaps and difficulties, especially, finance, institutional coordination, and long-term planning. Lastly, a comparative analysis is conducted by evaluating Azerbaijan's efforts to globally acknowledged best practices and standards, notably, SDGs and international post-conflict reconstruction models.

Document Analysis: Thematic Findings

The primary policy documents and strategic planning frameworks that pertain to the post-conflict reconstruction strategy of Azerbaijan are investigated thematically in this section. As opposed to assessing each document independently, this section outlines the recurring themes and patterns of development to evaluate the extent to which Azerbaijan's national targets align with the broader Sustainable Development Goals and best practices regarding regional planning. Some of the most significant documents that are referred to in this analysis are the State Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture's planning assertions, UNDP Azerbaijan project evaluations, SDG Voluntary National Reviews, international documents from the European Union and the World Bank, and "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development". The goal, mechanisms, and projected results of reconstruction in liberated regions can be comprehended through the prism of these sources.

Objectives and Strategic Themes

One of the persistent themes in the documents under assessment is the concentration on sustainable infrastructure development. The improvement of infrastructure, particularly green energy, smart urban planning, and digital governance is explicitly identified as an important component of future development in “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development” (President.az, 2021). The master plans of the State Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture, featuring a higher priority on energy-efficient architecture, interconnected transportation systems, and climate-resilient infrastructure, notably in major cities like Fuzuli and Shusha, reflect this national dedication.

Another key theme is environmental sustainability. Several SDGs like SDG 13 (Climate Action) and 15 (Life on Land) are given prominence within the Voluntary National Review, and both donor-supported and national programs represent these targets. For example, smart village initiatives, such as the Aghali demonstration project in Zangilan, employ water-efficient irrigation technology, smart waste management alternatives, and renewable energy sources (Aliyev, 2022). These projects promote ecological resilience as an important indicator of ensuring long-lasting national security and growth, in accordance with the vision set forth in Azerbaijan 2030 (President.az, 2021).

Regional integration is also heavily emphasized in the examined resources. Linking the liberated regions to national and international infrastructure structures is an objective of the development plans of the State Committee. Azerbaijan’s ambition to develop these regions into trade and logistics centers is apparent in its primary focus on establishing new roads, railroad links, and electrical corridors, such as Fuzuli International Airport and the Lachin-Kalbajar highway (Jalilzade, 2024). Specifically with respect to equitable and balanced regional development, these goals are in accordance with the primary focus of Azerbaijan 2030 (President.az, 2021).

Inclusion and equity are also closely linked. The Great Return Program outlines priorities for the restoration of returnees' healthcare, education, cultural heritage, and housing alongside public goods and services. Aside from facilitating SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), greater importance on equitable access to facilities and services additionally supports Azerbaijan's greater national targets of encouraging social cohesiveness and recovering formerly displaced communities (Azerbaijan: State Program on the Great Return to the liberated territories of Azerbaijan, 2022).

Governance and Institutional Capacity

A dedicated effort to strengthening cooperation among agencies and institutional capacity has been highlighted in the reviewed policy documents. The Third Voluntary National Reviews demonstrate actions to enhance public accountability, local government, and data administration (Third Voluntary National Review, 2021). The incorporation of electronic government technologies and real-time surveillance systems to monitor implementation is prominently highlighted in regional master plans that reflect these initiatives. This is supported by Azerbaijan 2030 strategy, with aims to strengthen the quality provision of services, digitalization, and transparency within public organizations (President.az, 2021). In addition, capacity-building activities throughout local government personnel and returning citizens are mentioned in the UNDP and EU program descriptions. Through training in renewable energy tools, sustainable construction, and electronic delivery of services, these projects aim to strengthen local communities and decrease dependency on outside entities ("Azerbaijan: Towards Green Growth - Issues Note," 2022).

Collaboration for Implementation and Financing

The wide range of funding sources and implementation collaborations is an additional repeating theme. Public-private partnerships (PPPs), integrated financing, and concessional

loans have become significant, according to recent reports including World Bank (World Bank Group, 2025a). Infrastructure initiatives including the Fuzuli Airport and the Zangilan smart village, for instance, have utilized the state budget emphasized by President Ilham Aliyev in his speech (News.az, 2024). The Azerbaijan 2030 strategy plan also points out that global cooperation and attracting foreign investments can advance the goals of sustainable development (President.az, 2021). Furthermore, the resources highlight that in order to minimize duplication and maintain coherence, external cooperation, and coordination with national plans are necessary. Investor input is incorporated into the “Great Return” Strategy through inter-ministerial task forces and organized feedback processes. The UNDP program, which stresses technological innovation, institutional resiliency, and green recovery, is also highly compatible with Azerbaijan’s strategic aims.

Adaptive Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Azerbaijan prioritizes monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in its endeavours to coordinate initiatives with indicators related to Sustainable Development Goals. The establishment of localized indicator systems to monitor performance is reiterated in the Voluntary National Reviews (Third Voluntary National Review, 2021). For example, a dynamic platform named the National Information Portal (NIP) combines the gathered information on the SDGs from government organizations and makes it accessible both locally and worldwide. As a result, this portal enables anyone to observe the Republic of Azerbaijan’s progression towards the SDGs (Third Voluntary National Review, 2021). These systems are intended to track indicators centered around outcomes such as poverty reduction, and pollution levels, in addition to input-output measures such as the development of infrastructure (United Nations, 2017). The UNDP and the EU are collaborating to evaluate adaptive planning strategies that include stakeholder dialogues and scenario-based predictions (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021). The “Great Return” strategy has processes for yearly

reporting for the purpose of evaluating achievements with regard to established criteria and modifying objectives as required. This plan is in compliance with “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development”, which focuses on upgrading government agencies and making conclusions and decisions based on data (The World Bank, 2022).

The Incorporation of Themes within the Great Return Strategy

As a vital policy document, the “Great Return” strategy connects and operationalizes different thematic targets indicated in the broader reconstruction frameworks. Social infrastructure, transportation, housing, environmental regeneration, and economic revival are all covered in this meticulously planned strategy for progressive restoration and reconstruction. The targets of the strategy directly correspond to the national development themes of technical advancement, sustainability, and inclusive growth (President.az, 2021).

The strategy’s aptitude to bring together the development of smart infrastructure and regional cooperation is one of its remarkable features. For example, it resonates with the objectives defined in the “Azerbaijan 2030” national priorities and the smart village models in Aghali and elsewhere that are supported by the UNDP through providing priority to the development of digital management structures and sustainable appliances (President.az, 2021). With particular measures for repairing cultural and historical property in Shusha and adjacent cities, the policy also sets a high priority on equal treatment and cultural preservation. This pertains to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), contributing to the overarching national discourse of identity resurrection and reconciliation.

Furthermore, comprehensive methods for monitoring developments and evaluating results are also covered in the strategy. The notions of responsible and data-informed policy development are amplified by this, which demonstrates an increasing commitment to

adaptive governance and transparency (President.az, 2021). The spatial focus of the strategy promises that reconstruction and investment projects are specific to the particular geographic and socio-economic features of each region. For example, the productive plains of Fuzuli adhere to agricultural recovery, while mountainous regions such as Kalbajar need significant infrastructure.

This chapter presented a thematic analysis of the reconstruction frameworks and policies of Azerbaijan after 2020, focusing on various development plans, SDG reports, and national initiatives. The “Great Return” strategy encompasses multiple significant themes such as smart governance, infrastructure advancement, sustainability, and integration across regions (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.). The plan’s efficacy requires institutional capacity, partnership, and continual assessment even if it is structured and consistent with international standards. The next chapter explores the shortcomings and difficulties in the implementation process of Azerbaijan’s reconstruction efforts.

Assessment of Implementation Gaps and Challenges

The post-conflict reconstruction agenda of Azerbaijan is competitive and complex, yet there remains an array of significant implementation gaps and limitations that could hinder the effective and successful completion of both national and global development targets. This chapter reviews the logistical, structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges that influence the real-time execution of projects in the liberated territories. It presents an adequate comprehension of the restrictions that can undermine the development progress by referring to information from global development evaluations, policy texts, and Voluntary National Reviews.

Structural and logistical impediments represent the most striking and ongoing implementation challenges. Fundamental infrastructure notably roads, electricity lines, water systems, and

telecommunication networks were left severely damaged because of the conflict's widespread destruction of the liberated regions. Considering Azerbaijan's substantial reconstruction attempts, including airports in Fuzuli and Zangilan and highways such as the Lachin-Kalbajar corridor, the enormity of the critical infrastructure investment creates major obstacles (Guliyev, 2025a). Seasonal difficulties with access and arduous terrain render logistics even more challenging in remote and mountainous regions akin to Kalbajar and Lachin (Abdul, 2024b). Hence, the existence of these restrictions postpones the return of IDPs and the development of goods and services essential for long-term resettlement. The prompt construction of fundamental infrastructure is vital for the "Great Return" program's achievement, which seeks to resettle thousands of families. Procurement, competent labour shortages, and construction supplies persist in hindering the development (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.). In addition, continuous landmine contamination obstructs reconstruction and presents an imminent threat to the safety of citizens. The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) has been organizing demining operations, although substantial areas are still unreachable or risky for development (Third Voluntary National Review, 2021).

Coordination and institutional capacity throughout essential government entities deliver a second significant barrier. Whereas governance modernization is a national objective within Azerbaijan 2030, present implementation frameworks commonly contain disjointed accountability structures, conflicting demands, and inadequate decentralization (President.az, 2021). Delivery of services and monitoring are impeded by the shortage of managerial personnel in liberated regions, where local authorities continue to be formed or strengthened. While collaboration among agencies is supported structurally by projects such as the "Great Return" strategy, it frequently lacks operational coherence. For example, close collaboration among local administrations, energy suppliers, ICT experts, and urban planners is crucial for the accomplishment of "smart village" and "green energy" programs. In reality, this form of

coordination is unbalanced, which could result in differing quality standards, project backlogs, or work redundancy (World Bank Group, 2021).

Another limitation to consider is the challenges related to financing. The monetary cost is tremendous, even though Azerbaijan has allocated enormous state funds to reconstruction. The national budget by itself cannot cover lengthy capital expenditures and technical competence required to construct sustainable development infrastructure, such as smart grids, green structures, and digital service systems (Azerbaijan Country Economic Memorandum, 2022). Despite the assistance offered by international agencies like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, efficient foreign aid utilization and exposure to concessional loans are contingent upon solid regulatory frameworks and transparent financial assessment. Because of regulatory constraints and potential investment risks in post-conflict territories, public-private partnerships, which Azerbaijan 2030 advocates as an instrument of economic growth, continue to be overlooked (President.az, 2021). Numerous prospective investors are discouraged by insufficient risk-sharing procedures and legal assurances, especially in areas of high risk with continuous safety hazards or unstable growth in population.

The reintegration of the internally displaced persons and recovery of community relations entail major social drawbacks. Most returnees encounter loss of typical social connections, unstable livelihoods, and mental distress. Although the “Great Return” strategy allocates for healthcare, education, and professional development, service delivery in different domains remains inconsistent (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.). Vulnerable communities experience challenges due to an absence of programming that is gender and disability inclusive. Furthermore, enabling citizens to participate and experience a sense of ownership is key to the success of the restoration process. Nevertheless, instruments of civic involvement, such as platforms for participatory planning grievance resolution, are either in their adolescence or are utilized inconsistently. This disparity could undermine community trust and lead to development

results being less sustainable. The Azerbaijan 2030 agenda prioritizes equitable development, however, to fully implement these ideas, more effective institutional structures and basic awareness-raising are needed (President.az, 2030).

The insufficient capacity to monitor, evaluate, and plan for adaptation is another major gap. Despite Azerbaijan making progress with its SDG monitors and VNRs, the data accuracy and quality are still inadequate for spontaneous policy modifications. Efficient selection of services and infrastructure is impeded by the absence of data disaggregation by age, gender, income level, and disability, especially in liberated territories (United Nations Country Team & State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, 2020). In addition, planning processes remain in the beginning stages of employing remote sensing technology, geographic information systems (GIS), and satellite imagery. This inhibits the potential to monitor shifts in land use, urbanization, and environmental destruction. Obtaining data in conflict-affected or demined regions continues to be a logistical and technological obstacle (Third Voluntary National Review, 2021).

Another important concern is environmental sustainability. Practical implementation generally lags behind the policies and initiatives that prioritize climate-resilient growth and green infrastructure. Smart village models, for example, foster agricultural sustainability and renewable energy, however, their capacity for expansion is restricted by logistical gaps, technical competence, and finance. Environmental goals are additionally undermined by insufficient infrastructure for recycling and inappropriate waste disposal (Gurbanov & Mammadli, 2024). The SDGs and national development are in conjunction with the Azerbaijan 2030 strategy, which contains commitments to address climate change and land preservation (President.az, 2021). Nonetheless, practical commitment to these objectives is inconsistent. Accelerated reconstruction has sometimes surpassed environmental planning in

regions like Aghdam and Fuzuli, which has brought up concerns regarding the long-term ecological repercussions.

Finally, legal and regulatory ambiguities remain as obstacles. In the liberated regions, issues of property compensation, zoning, and land ownership are of particular significance. During the conflict, cadastral documents were frequently misplaced or destroyed, causing land registration to be more difficult (Ministry of Economy, 2024). Even though the government has begun amending legislation to make property rights more clear and easier to understand, these region's legal systems are insufficiently developed, and progress is gradual (*BTI Azerbaijan Country Report, 2024*).

To summarize, in spite of containing a well-defined and dedicated reconstruction plan, Azerbaijan continues to experience significant barriers, such as infrastructure, financing, and environmental risks, which indicate cooperation, international aid, and enhanced planning to effectively achieve the objectives of the “Great Return” strategy and Azerbaijan 2030 and to guarantee an equitable and sustainable recovery.

Interview Reflections

This chapter analyses interviews from two experts who are involved in the post-conflict reconstruction of Azerbaijan to better understand the findings of the document analysis.

These qualitative inquiries revealed insightful viewpoints on the strategic, managerial, and everyday situations that enabled state-led efforts to develop in the liberated regions.

Notwithstanding the small number of participants, both interviews took place with individuals who were directly engaged and familiar with the planning, supervision, or scholarly review of recovery initiatives. Besides validating numerous instances in policy documents, their responses offer an understanding of institutional dynamics, challenges with implementation, and the broader geopolitical variables impacting the reconstruction efforts.

The initial participant highlighted reconstruction as a long-term investment in geographic stability in addition to a nation-building activity, stressing the symbolic and developmental importance of restoring previously occupied territories. The participant underlined the government's initiatives to rebuild the communities, specifically for IDPs, in newly established or repaired settlements, noting the evolution of cities like Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Shusha. This is in accordance with the nation's larger "Great Return" initiative, which intends to not only repopulate these regions but also utilize infrastructure restoration and construction of jobs to build a functional socio-economic system (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.)

Namely, SDGs 7, 9, and 11 are all in conformity with Azerbaijan's recovery plan, as recognized by both participants. As particular instances of implementing SDG concepts, the first participant highlighted the Aghali smart village project and the renewable energy cooperations with global corporations like BP. Although the SDGs are not frequently indicated explicitly in public discussions, the second participant reverberated this, noting that operational goals, including green energy, Aghdam's innovation centers, and the environmental recovery of damaged land demonstrate a de facto alignment with the global agenda for sustainable development.

The second participant presented a more technical and policy-based standpoint in explaining the general reconstruction vision. They claim that despite substantial funds being allocated, there could still be long-term risks when there is no structured and robust master plan. Bringing comparisons from global cases such as the US reconstruction initiatives in Afghanistan, describing it as expensive, but mostly ineffective, they underlined that Azerbaijan cannot afford such inadequate management considering its limited institutional and financial resources. The participant did accept, however, that the "Great Return" policy serves as a strategic action plan with concrete metrics (KPIs) and expected outcomes.

Both respondents gave complementary answers when inquired if an official regional planning strategy existed. While the second respondent stressed the presidential directions as an instance of top-down regional planning, the first respondent underlined the application of smart technology and sustainable urban development notions. The second participant, on the contrary, was more critical of the existing processes, stating that the shortage of a clear, legally recognized spatial planning framework causes organizational cooperation to be more challenging and raises the prospect of execution that is fractured or duplicated. This observation corresponds with the previous assessment of the lack of stakeholder involvement and institutional dispersion in regional recovery (Nahmadova, 2022).

The obstacle encountered by landmines was a common theme in both interviews. As stated by the second participant, the most pressing and important obstacle to reconstruction is demining. The low progress of mine elimination holds off infrastructure endeavours, agricultural renewal, and the safe reintegration of displaced people since substantial portions of Aghdam and Fuzuli are considered hazardous. The degree of contamination is still an important challenge, although agencies like ANAMA contributed to cleaning operations (ANAMA, n.d.)

Destruction of infrastructure and the need to start over were recognized as major challenges, as well. The challenge of restoring whole towns and villages from bad conditions while balancing the requirements of social cohesion, utility repair, and urban planning was emphasized by the second participant. They stressed the importance of social architecture, which encourages cohesive community and a sense of belonging alongside infrastructure restoration. This correlates to more general ideas of post-conflict urban planning, which highlight that institutional inclusiveness and human growth are just as important to reconstruction success as physical development (Nahmadova, 2022).

Both respondents noted an inconsistent history of involvement with regard to global cooperation. The first participant highlighted that geopolitical concerns prevent some global organizations from pursuing projects in disputed areas. Although collaborations with organizations such as the World Bank and UNDP exist, the second participant underlined that a significant amount of reconstruction remains to be managed and funded domestically. In addition to this, they noted that just a small fraction of foreign assistance in technology is being deployed at the present time. They remarked how this cautious approach hinders the funding and information exchange that might otherwise be available in global partnerships.

Performance evaluation and monitoring were also addressed, especially in the second interview. The respondent stated that reconstruction-related progress metrics are monitored at the government level by employing internal dashboards and imagery from the satellite. The participant referred to an absence of transparency in these systems of monitoring, which prevents further civic or academic examination, even though these systems empower the government to analyse changes in land use and physical progress. Adaptive planning and accountability might be strengthened by establishing a translucent, indicator-based approach that conforms with SDG reporting norms, like those employed by the UN's Voluntary National Reviews (Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2023).

Lastly, both respondents acknowledged the strategic benefits that reconstruction provides. The first participant emphasized how digital infrastructure and strategic planning concepts may be incorporated in regions like Karabakh, which, in contrast to Baku, presents an empty canvas for experimentation. Reconstructing these regions under the Azerbaijani government demonstrates sovereignty and conveys an indication of peace to the world, according to the second participant, who also highlighted the soft power and geopolitical communication of reconstruction. Regional collaboration was described as diplomatic and economic

prospective, particularly through relationship initiatives like the anticipated Zangezur Corridor.

Considering cultural heritage, the first respondent placed a significant emphasis on the maintenance of religious and historical symbols, such as Christian churches and Muslim mosques. These activities were viewed as crucial for restoring national integrity and preserving the region’s cultural sustainability. Based on this viewpoint, cultural heritage is vital for sustainable development since it bridges the distance between the past and the peaceful and fair future’s vision.

To summarize, these two individuals’ reflections complement a variety of the primary themes encountered in document analysis: effective policy conformity with SDG goals, and considerable institutional and operational issues at the grassroots. Although smart urban development, heritage restoration, and regional incorporation were considered groundbreaking opportunities, demining, funding, coordination, and equitable planning appeared as ongoing challenges. Given that the nation has made significant advances, more transparency, meticulous planning, and enhanced global engagement are obviously necessary to fully accomplish the objective of resilient and sustainable post-conflict recovery.

A Comparative Evaluation of International Best Practices

Table A

International Standard	International Reference	Documented in Azerbaijan’s Reconstruction	Assessment
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	UN SDG Report (2015)	Massive transportation and smart city investments (Azerbaijan 2030)	Met

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	UN SDG Report (2015)	Eco-friendly housing and smart villages development (OECD et al, 2023).	Met
SDG 7: Affordable Clean Energy	UN SDG Report (2015)	Building wind zones and solar farms in Lachin and Jabrayil (MinEnergy, n.d.)	Met
SDG 13: Climate Action	UN SDG Report (2015)	Environmental planning is incorporated into regional ideas; limited climate adaption methods (World Bank Group, 2023)	Partially Met
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	UN SDG Report (2015)	Ongoing mine removal, centralized governance; insufficient community justice institutions (ANAMA, 2023)	Partially Met
UN-Habitat Post- Conflict Development Guidelines	UN-Habitat (2020)	Partially organized spatial planning; little regional connectivity (Petrella, 2020).	Partially Met
OECD: Diverse Stakeholder Participation	OECD (2020)	Limited local consultation observed; substantial involvement via Karabakh Revival Fund	Partially Met
World Bank: Climate Resistant Infrastructure	(World Bank Group, 2023)	Advocation for smart infrastructure; lack of details of resilience to potential climate risks (Proposal for Azerbaijan, 2024)	Partially Met

After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, post-conflict recovery initiatives of Azerbaijan in the liberated regions constitute an extensive national attempt designed to revive areas devastated by war while at the same time progressing sustainable development goals and adhering to global best practices. Employing frameworks from notable global organizations such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), this chapter thoroughly examines Azerbaijan's reconstruction goals across the perspective of a few SDGs and several international standards. The purpose is to determine how effectively Azerbaijan's post-conflict development procedure corresponds to established international standards and gaps, underlining areas that have made significant progress and those that need further improvement.

SDG 9 emphasizes constructing resilient infrastructure, fostering equal and sustainable industrialization, and facilitating innovation (United Nations, 2015). Azerbaijan's post-conflict recovery policy has put the development of infrastructure at the forefront of its priorities. Constructing highways, railroads, and airports indicates an important commitment to recovering connectivity and enhancing transportation logistics, especially in cities like Aghdam and Fuzuli. A bigger vision grounded in innovation and smart development is illustrated by initiatives like the Fuzuli International Airport, which was completed in record time (Alchi, 2021). Furthermore, the introduction of "smart city" and "smart village" notions in locations such as Zangilan combine digital technology to strengthen service delivery, water management, and usage of energy. This objective is in accordance with Azerbaijan 2030, which aspires to modernization utilizing digital infrastructure and innovation (President.az, 2021). Nevertheless, questions concerning long-term resilient sustainability and infrastructure, specifically in the midst of climate

tension, continue regardless of the ambition and quick progress. According to the World Bank, the present frameworks of Azerbaijan do not yet entirely internalize these dangers, and climate risk evaluations are important parts of infrastructure construction to ensure durability. Continuous support for these projects will demand regular expenditures in green infrastructure, regular maintenance, and institutional capability (World Bank Group, 2021).

SDG 11 aims to develop cities and settlements in a safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable manner (United Nations, 2015). Sustainable settlement development has emerged as an essential part of Azerbaijan's policy, as demonstrated by the establishment of eco-friendly neighbourhoods, solar powered houses, and coordinated waste management systems. The most notable example is the smart village of Aghali in Zangilan district, which envisions rural development through the integration of digital governance, renewable energy, and effective land use management. These programs demonstrate a favourable direction toward rural growth and environmental sustainability. However, additional work must be done in the field of inclusivity, especially with respect to displaced persons' adequate access to housing and resources. The critical role of context-dependent urbanization collaborative planning is underscored by UN-Habitat (2020). Nevertheless, reviews of Azerbaijan's reconstruction strategy exhibit that citizen engagement is inadequate, especially from local population, vulnerable groups, and IDPs (OECD et al, 2023). The social sustainability of these urban initiatives may be compromised by the shortage of thorough consultation mechanisms. It becomes easier to ensure that sustainable settlements are both socially durable and responsive to the demands of their residents provided community-driven methods for feedback, resolving conflicts, and local government are implemented.

Restoring post-conflict communities demands energy accessibility and sustainability, especially considering climate requirements. Azerbaijan has accomplished major progress on SDG 7, which seeks widespread access to modern, inexpensive, and reliable energy (United

Nations, 2015). The development of vast renewable energy initiatives, such as wind and solar farms, in liberated regions like Lachin, Jabrayil, and Zangilan, indicates an intense dedication to decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and expanding the nation's source of energy (Azerbaijan Renewable Energy Agency under the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.). Along with offering technical expertise, collaborating with global energy corporations like BP to produce renewable energy additionally improves credibility and competence in the transition to clean energy (Interfax, 2025). These projects are part of the broader national objective which is to transform Azerbaijan as a supplier of green energy. Despite that, there are still obstacles to incorporating these scattered renewable systems with the nation's primarily fossil fuel-based electricity grid. Enhancing the energy infrastructure in rural and secluded regions is essential to provide equal access. For the transition to clean energy to be both affordable and resilient, regional experts must be trained, local supply chains must be developed, and policies must be continuously enforced (World Bank Group, 2025b).

SDG 13 requires immediate and continuous action to effectively combat climate change and its numerous effects (United Nations, 2015). Leveraging instruments like the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), Azerbaijan has taken the first steps towards incorporating climate issues into its development strategies (United Nations Climate Change, 2023). Regardless of the existence of macro-level policies, regional and local execution of climate adaptability is underdeveloped. Adaptive infrastructure planning and detailed risk evaluations are mostly insufficient in the liberated regions as environmental destruction due to conflict compounds climate vulnerability. Ongoing ecological resilience requires water management approaches, reforestation projects, and climate-conscious agriculture. Besides being smart, infrastructure must be climate-resilient, requiring risk assessment and planning for possible scenarios (World Bank Group,

2023). Azerbaijan's institutional capacity for monitoring the environment and early alerting mechanisms continues to evolve, consequently, technical assistance and global support are required to address these gaps.

The foundations of post-conflict recovery are peacebuilding and the integrity of institutions. SDG 16 emphasizes access to justice, dependable institutions, and inclusive, harmonious communities (United Nations, 2015). Massive demining operations are the primary commitments of Azerbaijan in this regard. To promote safe recovery and citizen resettlement, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) is instrumental in directing the initiative to eradicate landmines and unexploded ordnance. Alongside physical security, nevertheless, establishing open governance and rule-of-law organizations is crucial to developing social confidence. Affordable legal representation, alternate conflict resolution organizations, and community-level judiciary bodies are in developmental stages. In addition, albeit effective, the centralized process of decision-making reconstruction design inhibits local engagement and poses the risk of alienating influenced communities. The OECD (2022b) claims that enhancing local institutions and incorporating stakeholder participation promotes the credibility and accountability of governance processes. Post-conflict social harmony may be significantly improved by a bottom-up method that considers feedback from the public and resettled communities.

In post-conflict situations, UN-Habitat promotes social fairness, ecological preservation, and regional connectivity through participatory and integrated spatial planning (Petrella, 2020). Reviving historical urban regions such as Aghdam and Shusha is a prime instance of how Azerbaijan's present reconstruction policy displays a solid urban focus. Despite this urban-centric strategy promoting efficient administration and economic advancement, when it fails to be accompanied by substantial rural and suburban development, it carries the danger of increasing regional disparities (Stevens, 2024). The shortage of regional planning frameworks

that link cities with neighbouring rural towns is an important issue. For instance, staff mobility, supply chain logistics, and agricultural growth have not been well incorporated into spatial planning. A multifaceted development model that allocates investment throughout connected centers is what UN-Habitat proposes (Petrella, 2020). Implementing such strategies would assist Azerbaijan minimize resource accumulation in certain urban areas by ensuring that services and infrastructure are spread out equally.

Effective procedures that ensure open, inclusive, and participatory policy development are commended by OECD's guidelines, especially during the period of recovery and transformation (OECD, 2022). Participatory systems are still under development. A certain degree of citizen participation has been made attainable by the Karabakh Revival Fund, though this has been mostly figurative as opposed to structural (Tahmazli, 2022). Public participation might be established through the formation of institutional structures such as local development panels, open budgeting, and regional advisory councils. Further, underrepresented communities in consultation processes frequently consist of women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. A study from the OECD (2022) underlines the significance of establishing focused outreach programs to promote marginalized voices. By considering a variety of demands and experiences, institutionalizing inclusion facilitates the planning and implementation of recovery initiatives while also reinforcing democracy.

With an emphasis on risk management and adaptation capacity, the World Bank stresses that climate-resistant infrastructure is required for successful recovery in post-conflict regions (World Bank Group, 2023). Azerbaijan's dedication to smart and digital technology is outstanding, however, currently, there is insufficient incorporation of ecosystem services, watershed planning, and climate risk evaluations into infrastructure planning. The majority of investments have put tangible properties above long-term sensitivity to adverse weather and water stress, challenges that are anticipated to increase because of climate change (Proposal

for Azerbaijan, 2024). Open roads, green roofs, and flexible transportation systems are examples of adaptive design norms that are currently inadequate. Azerbaijan can ensure that its reconstruction not simply satisfies current needs but also gears up for future ambiguity by improving connections with organizations that possess expertise in green infrastructure and educating engineers and planners in resilience to climate change (Proposal for Azerbaijan, 2024).

Azerbaijan's deliberate pursuit of digital innovation, energy efficiency, and infrastructure renovation indicates a noteworthy alignment with international development standards. Reconstruction efforts are aligned with various numbers of SDGs such as SDGs 7, 9, and 11. Nonetheless, issues in crucial domains exist including stakeholder participation, regional integration, institutional growth (SDG 16), and climate adaptation (SDG 13). A transition toward regional planning designs, participatory governance, and environmentally conscious development plans that utilize global best practices is necessary to address these deficiencies.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of Azerbaijan's liberated regions after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh dispute represents an exceptional intersection of sustainable development, regional planning, and post-conflict revival. The extent to which Azerbaijan's recovery initiatives are in alignment with global best practices in regional planning and the SDGs was investigated in this thesis. The study presents an in-depth assessment of the process of reconstruction, the challenges it faces, and its prospects for the future employing an integrated method of document analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and comparative assessment.

The results indicate that Azerbaijan has carefully centred its reconstruction efforts on the "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development" plan, and the "Great Return" national framework. These blueprints convey the basis of multisectoral,

determined, and comprehensive reconstruction initiatives (President.az, 2021). With expenditures in smart cities, green energy infrastructure, and environmentally friendly transportation, the research discovered that the SDGs, especially SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) are diligently embedded in a variety of projects, such as in Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Zangilan (United Nations, 2016; MinEnergy, n.d.).

A significant policy emphasis towards equitable and sustainable development has been presented by document analysis in Chapter 5.1. smart agriculture, renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and green transportation are addressed in planning documents involving presidential orders and regional masterplans. Thematic findings, nevertheless, indicate several shortcomings, particularly in the areas of long-term monitoring, environmental danger elimination, and stakeholder collaboration. Both public and official resources underscored the absence of a coherent multi-agency approach (Abbasov et al, 2023).

The comparison analysis conducted in Chapter 5.4 further demonstrated the manner in which, despite certain significant areas of limited compliance, Azerbaijan restoration initiatives adhere to a number of global standards. With regard to smart urban and spatial planning, the country's efforts are in alignment with UN-Habitat's post-conflict planning norms; however, equitable governance and public participation remain inadequate (Petrella et al, 2020).

Despite Azerbaijan collaborating with companies such as BP and other global partners to encourage climate-conscious infrastructure, it is still barely aligned with World Bank standards on climate-resilient advancement, with plans for adaptation yet to be fully incorporated into implementation. Furthermore, the principle of OECD for inclusive stakeholder engagement was not fully adopted; centralized management continued to be the standard model, and local discussions have been constrained.

Additional qualitative context and verification were offered by the interview outcomes, which were reviewed in Chapter 5.3. The government's determination to adopt SDGs was affirmed by both respondents, who were experts engaged in or closely related to the reconstruction project. Major indications of SDG-oriented recovery were recognized, including the Zangilan solar energy stations, the Aghali smart village project, and the Shusha cultural landmark. The participants additionally emphasized significant obstacles to achieving SDG alignment, especially lack of coordination among agencies and international involvement, shortage of funding, and landmine contamination. One of the most affecting observations was that whereas Azerbaijan has a courageous strategy for regional resilience and inclusion, financial, geopolitical, and administrative impediments restrict its actual implementation. For example, due to their disputed circumstance, foreign agencies have been cautious to collaborate in areas like Lachin and Shusha, which has restricted alternatives for technical and financial partnership, according to both participants. Recurring difficulties were also stated, including institutional weaknesses like isolated operations and inadequate regional planning functions of state organizations.

However, significant advancement has been accomplished. Alongside with restoration of infrastructure, reconstruction efforts communicate Azerbaijan's larger political narrative of ownership, recovery, and regional reconciliation. According to the first participant, with nations such as Italy, the UK, Turkey, and Central Asian governments participating in recovery efforts, these attempts have assisted in improving views of worldwide perception. A significant dedication to the SDGs and a sustainable future is demonstrated by environmental restoration efforts, including clean energy, reforestation, and rehabilitation of cultural heritage.

Notwithstanding the accomplishments, this research demonstrates that Azerbaijan's reconstruction approach only partially conforms with international standards for sustainable

development and planning. Even though the nation continues to make significant improvements in energy, infrastructure, and urban revitalization, substantial obstacles to resolving environmental risk administration, inclusive governance, and monitoring exist. Enhanced institutional frameworks and more global collaboration, especially by means of alliances with agencies like the UNDP, World Bank, and OECD, will be required to solve these issues. The research suggests that stronger community involvement methods, greater transparency in the monitoring process, and the formal implementation of exhaustive regional sustainability frameworks that incorporate SDG indicators to enhance alignment. Credibility would also be improved by expanding the participation of global agencies beyond mine removal and ensuring that communities and civil society stakeholders have a voice in governance structures.

Taking everything into account, the post-conflict reconstruction of Azerbaijan in its liberated territories is a rapidly changing and constantly evolving process that blends ambition and realism. It represents the goal of an inclusive, contemporary, and sustainable territory that could potentially serve as a global example for post-conflict development. Azerbaijan's journey to sustainable recovery is not only achievable but also a possible model for subsequent initiatives and stronger collaboration.

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