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# Reframing disaster recovery through spatial justice: an integrated framework

MEHMET ALI GASSELOĞLU

JULIANA E. GONÇALVES

*\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

## ABSTRACT

Post-disaster recovery is widely regarded as the least understood, yet highly consequential, phase of disaster management, shaping both short consequences and long-term trajectories of affected communities. Recovery efforts tend to prioritise physical reconstruction, often deepening socio-spatial inequalities. This paper argues for a reconceptualisation of recovery through the lenses of spatial justice, highlighting three interrelated dimensions: distributive justice (equitable allocation of resources in space), procedural justice (inclusive and participatory spatial governance) and recognition justice (valuing lived spatial experiences and human dignity). While these dimensions are often present in critiques of recovery practices, they have been approached in a fragmented manner. To address this gap, a systematic literature review ( $n = 68$ ) examines how recovery practices reproduce socio-spatial inequalities, how governance structures shape recovery processes and how spatial justice can offer a transformative opening in disaster recovery. Understandings of, and responses to, disaster are reframed through the spatial justice lens, proposing an integrated conceptual framework for spatial justice in disaster recovery as a scaffold for critical analysis in research and practice. This provides a useful starting point for more detailed, case-based and methodologically innovative studies that can test and extend the framework.

## PRACTICE RELEVANCE

Post-disaster recovery is often approached as a technical challenge of rebuilding, yet practitioners know that decisions about where, how and for whom recovery occurs fundamentally reshape social and spatial relations. An integrated framework is presented to help practitioners identify and address justice concerns in recovery processes. Drawing on a systematic literature review, it highlights how recovery efforts frequently reproduce socio-spatial inequalities through exclusionary governance, market-driven redevelopment and neglect of marginalised communities. The proposed framework brings together distributive, procedural and recognition justice to guide more inclusive and equitable practices. For planners, architects, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local authorities, it offers a lens through which to critically assess interventions, recognise whose voices are heard or silenced, and design recovery strategies that strengthen community agency and long-term resilience. Rather than restoring pre-disaster vulnerabilities, practitioners can use this framework to envision recovery as a transformative opportunity toward more just and sustainable futures.

SPECIAL COLLECTION:  
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## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Juliana E. Gonçalves**

Department of Urbanism,  
Faculty of Architecture & Built  
Environment, Delft University of  
Technology, PO Box 5043, 2600  
GA Delft, NL

[j.e.goncalves@tudelft.nl](mailto:j.e.goncalves@tudelft.nl)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Disasters reveal profound disparities in how societies, communities and individuals prepare for, experience and recover from adversity (Birkmann *et al.* 2010; Kates *et al.* 2006). Traditional disaster management is often framed around four key phases: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery (Smith & Wenger 2007). Post-disaster recovery, in particular, is a critical phase in disaster management, shaping the long-term social, economic and spatial trajectories of affected communities. In this phase, short-term efforts typically focus on restoring communities to their pre-disaster state, while long-term objectives emphasise enhancing resilience, reducing vulnerability and strengthening adaptive capacity. However, while essential, recovery remains the least understood and studied phase (Aydin *et al.* 2025).

A focus on the recovery phase is essential for two reasons. On the one hand, it holds the potential to reshape socio-spatial relations, land use, housing patterns and public infrastructure in more equitable ways. While disasters should be prevented, international policy frameworks also recognise them as potential opportunities for building more resilient communities (Birkmann *et al.* 2010; United Nations 2005). Major disasters can accelerate long-term societal transitions, understood as fundamental shifts in economic, technological, institutional and socio-cultural systems (Becker & Reusser 2016; Holtz *et al.* 2008). The ‘build back better’ principle, for example, embodies this view (Becker & Reusser 2016; Fan 2013). On the other hand, the recovery process presents great complexity and challenges, given the interdependence of socio-spatial dynamic tasks (Aydin *et al.* 2025). Recovery efforts that prioritise physical rebuilding, overlooking the complexity inherent in these processes, often end up replicating pre-existing vulnerabilities and perpetuating socio-spatial inequalities (Aydin *et al.* 2025; Lyons 2009; Kennedy *et al.* 2008). Indeed, post-disaster recovery programmes are often criticised for their failure to develop explicit means for promoting justice (Tafti & Tomlinson 2019; Olshansky & Johnson 2014; Fan 2012). Recovery interventions are therefore not neutral: they structure who can return, who is displaced and under what conditions, thereby directly shaping the geography of justice.

Despite a more radical perspective to disaster recovery emerging since the 1970s, there remains a hesitancy to fully politicise disaster discourse, even though such politicisation is intrinsic to determining for whom recovery serves (Cretney 2017; Olson 2008). Recovery priorities, what is rebuilt, where and for whom, can reveal underlying power structures (Vale & Campanella 2005). Previous research has also highlighted the centrality of politics and power in shaping recovery, particularly the role of neoliberal capitalism in defining reconstruction priorities and outcomes and the framing of expertise as neutral (Borie & Fraser 2023; Brown 2009; Kuus 2013; Ezrahi 1990; Cretney 2017). Building on Klein’s (2007) ‘disaster capitalism’ thesis, critical geography perspectives emphasise that crisis is not an exception but an integral part of capitalism, simultaneously shaped by and shaping state, economic and social structures (Arrighi 1978; Jones & Ward 2012). Despite this, recovery remains one of the least politically interrogated phases of disaster management, with most scholarship focusing on technical and procedural aspects rather than deeper governance dynamics (Cretney 2017).

Politicising disaster recovery requires interrogating how these processes influence existing socio-spatial inequalities. Numerous studies have shown that disaster impacts are unevenly distributed, often along the lines of race, class and geography (Emrich *et al.* 2020; Kato *et al.* 2014; Labadie 2008). Here, justice theory is concerned with:

how issues of socio ecological justice are brought to the political fore by moments of crisis, rupture, and displacement.

(Douglass & Miller 2018: 271)

Disasters can catalyse transformative change when recovery processes are grounded in principles of equity, participatory governance and just distribution of resources (Douglass & Miller 2018). Calls for justice become especially visible during disasters, which affect societies in socially, spatially and economically uneven ways (Eda 2015). As Douglass & Miller (2018: 278) argue, drawing on Soja’s (2008: 2) formulation of spatial justice, the challenge for disaster justice is to ensure:

a fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them.

This justice-oriented framing emphasises the potential for recovery to move beyond restoration toward transformation, rooted in community agency, distributive fairness and social resilience.

In this context, the concept of spatial justice offers a critical lens through which to reassess post-disaster recovery. Spatial justice foregrounds the equitable distribution of resources in space (spatial distributive justice), the inclusion of diverse voices in spatial planning processes (spatial procedural justice), and the recognition of marginalised spatial identities and experiences (spatial recognition justice) (Gonçalves *et al.* 2025). Thus, it offers a powerful lens through which to rethink recovery not as a return to a flawed status quo, but as an opportunity to reshape socio-spatial relations and pursue more inclusive, participatory and emancipatory futures (Cretney 2019; Aijazi 2015). Recent scholarship has increasingly engaged questions of justice and equity in relation to resilience and recovery, developing a range of normative and analytical frameworks (e.g. Meerow *et al.* 2019; Lamb & Vale 2024; Knox-Hayes *et al.* 2025). While some approaches foreground distributive, procedural and recognitional concerns, others highlight differentiated typologies, including interactional and informational dimensions (Low 2022). In post-disaster contexts, where recovery unfolds under conditions of urgency and exceptional governance, justice claims tend to crystallise most clearly around questions of resource distribution, participation in decision-making and the recognition of affected communities. This study adopts a three-dimensional understanding of spatial justice, reflecting patterns in the reviewed literature, where justice-related concerns are most consistently articulated around resource distribution, participation in decision-making and the recognition of affected communities. These dimensions therefore function as integrative analytical categories rather than being an exhaustive account of justice in post-disaster contexts.

Although many studies implicitly invoke spatial justice principles to critique dominant recovery paradigms, spatial justice is rarely adopted as an explicit integrative framework in the literature that addresses recovery as a socio-spatial process. The spatial dimensions in particular—how justice is embedded in places, material interventions and socio-spatial relations—remain under-theorised and under-operationalised. This lack of conceptual consolidation presents a significant gap in the understanding of how post-disaster recovery may contribute not only to socio-spatial rebuilding but also to reimagining more inclusive, participatory and equitable futures. This paper offers an initial step toward bridging that gap with two contributions:

- A systematic literature review highlighting how recovery processes shape socio-spatial inequalities, how governance structures reflect and reproduce power asymmetries in disaster recovery, and how spatial justice can offer a more transformative recovery framework.
- An integrated framework to explore justice as a multi-scalar and interrelated process in post-disaster recovery.

While further empirical application is necessary to refine its details, the framework provides a solid foundation for advancing scholarship and practice toward more equitable and transformative disaster recovery.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is guided by three interrelated research questions that together interrogate the socio-spatial dynamics of post-disaster recovery from a spatial justice perspective:

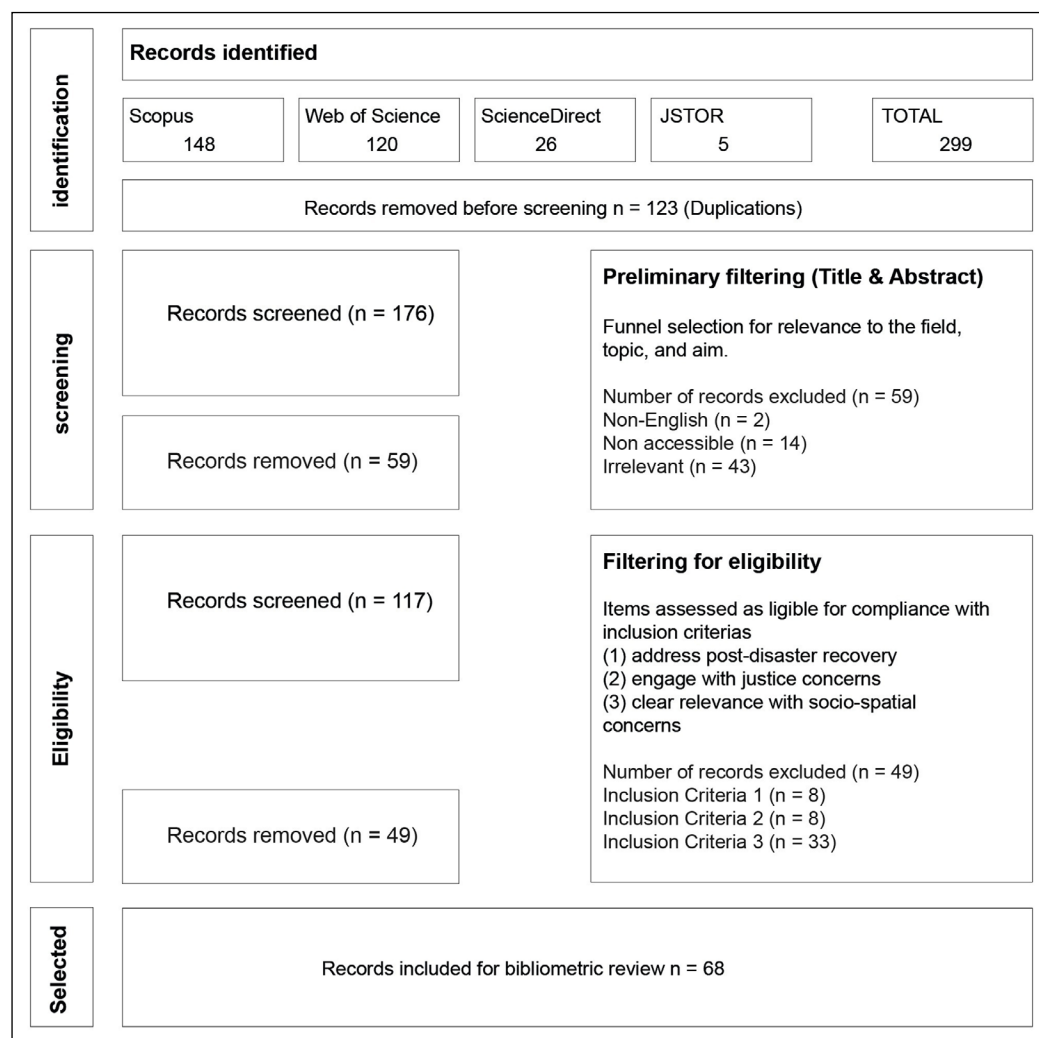
- How do recovery processes shape socio-spatial inequalities?
- How do governance structures reflect and reproduce power asymmetries?
- How can spatial justice offer a more transformative recovery framework?

These questions serve as an analytical framework upon which the literature is examined: the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities, the contested terrain of governance and power, and the search for justice-oriented alternatives.

To address the research questions, this study employs a systematic literature review methodology, following preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, replicability, and rigor in identifying and synthesising relevant research. The process follows three phases of identification, screening and eligibility, leading to the final dataset (Figure 1). In the identification phase, a search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and JSTOR, using the string ('spatial justice' OR 'social justice' OR justice) AND ('post-disaster' OR 'disaster recovery'). This initial step yielded 299 records. From these, 123 duplicate records were removed, leaving 176 unique entries.

In the screening phase, the unique entries were then subjected to a screening process based on titles and abstracts. Studies were retained if they engaged substantively with post-disaster recovery processes and displayed a clear relevance to socio-spatial concerns. A total of 59 items were excluded when they did not meet these basic criteria. Papers (n = 43) were excluded because they did not sufficiently address the research topic. In addition, two papers were removed due to language barriers and an additional 14 papers because the full text was inaccessible. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters were retained, ensuring academic rigour, and only studies published in English were considered in order to maintain feasibility of analysis. After screening, the dataset was reduced to 117 studies.

In the eligibility phase, the 117 studies retained in the previous phase were screened in full. At this point, inclusion required that publications (1) explicitly address post-disaster recovery either empirically or conceptually; (2) engage with justice concerns, with special attention to distributive, procedural or recognitional justice; and (3) situate their analysis within a socio-spatial framework. Here, studies were excluded if they did not attend to spatial dimensions (e.g. those



**Figure 1:** Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart for review document selection.

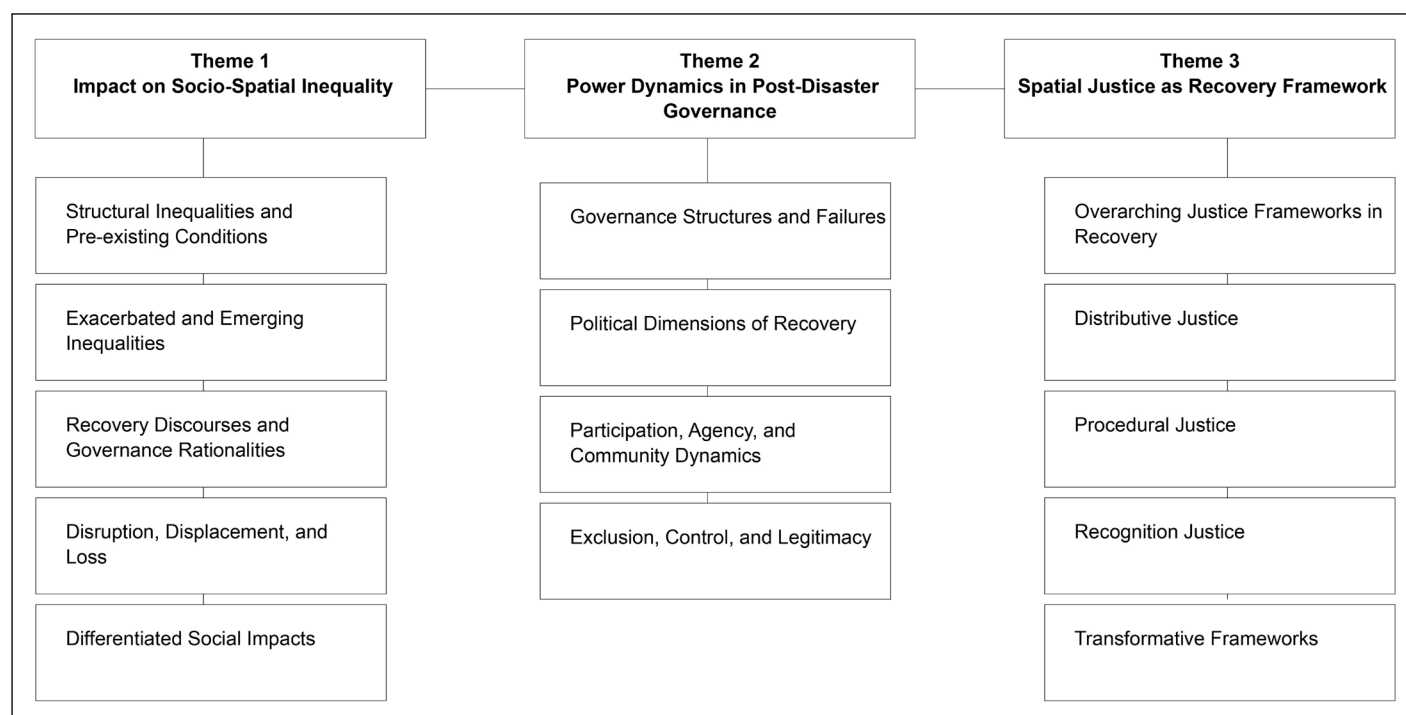
focused narrowly on psychological trauma or medical recovery). After applying these criteria, 68 publications were selected for detailed analysis. These studies constitute the empirical base of the review, informing both the conceptual framework and the typology of socio-spatial justice issues and tendencies in post-disaster recovery; they also informed the thematic coding and synthesis presented in this paper. Only publications that are directly discussed, empirically cited or theoretically mobilised in this study are included in the references. Therefore, the references represent a targeted subset of the reviewed literature rather than a complete catalogue of all screened records.

This review is constrained by the availability of peer-reviewed publications accessible through major academic databases, most of which are published in English. In addition, the disaster recovery literature itself remains geographically uneven, with empirical research concentrated in specific regions. As a result, certain regional perspectives and locally embedded recovery practices may be underrepresented.

The coding strategy was developed in alignment with the three research questions, which together structured the thematic organisation of the results. The papers were analysed through inductive and deductive coding. Inductive codes were based on the three research questions formulated above. Deductive codes were helpful in capturing the nuances and emerging topics in the literature. The analysis led to the creation of 1267 quotations. These quotations were labelled with about 100 different codes (about 35 codes for each theme), which were reduced to 64 final codes after refinement (i.e. merging similar codes or deleting repeated ones). These final codes were then clustered into subthemes, aggregated by themes 1–3 (T1–T3) (Figure 2). Figure 2 also presents the subthemes identified based on the final set of 14 codes (for the list, see Appendix 1 in the supplemental data online).

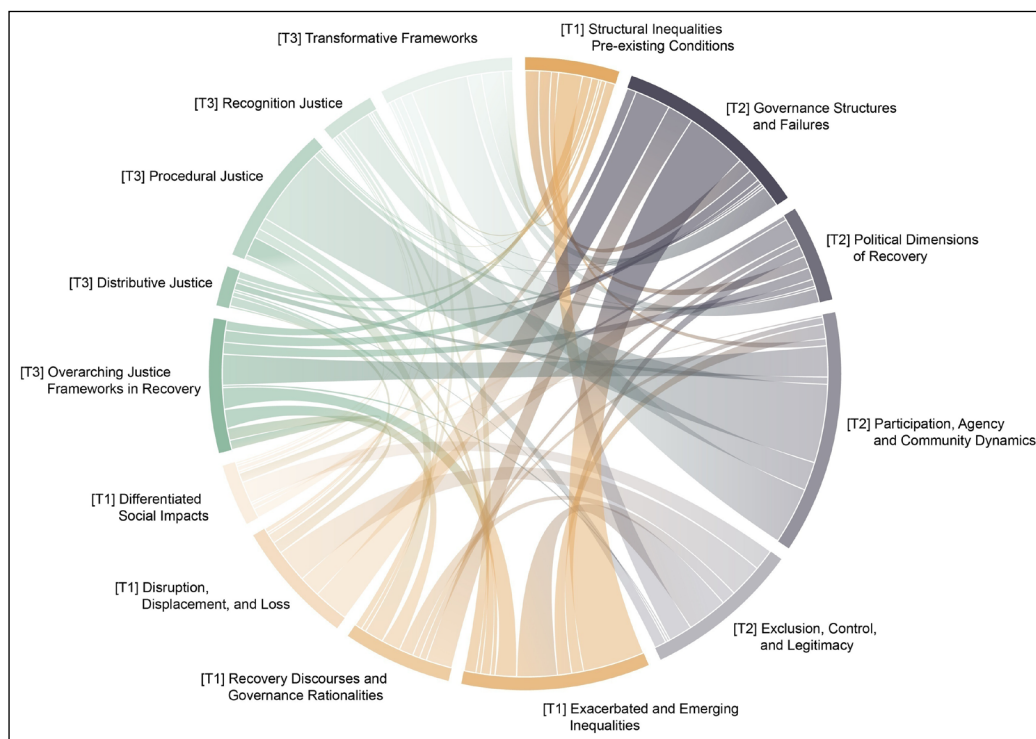
The interconnections among the three themes and respective subthemes were systematically mapped and analysed. The results for each theme are presented descriptively in Section 3. Based on the findings from the literature review, disaster recovery is reframed here through a spatial justice lens and via a conceptual framework to integrate the dimensions of space, justice and disaster is subsequently proposed, illustrating its applicability based on selected examples from the literature (Section 4).

**Figure 2:** Subthemes identified based on the systematic coding of the literature.



### 3. FINDINGS

The systematic interconnections across themes are illustrated in Figure 3, which maps the overlaps between the three research themes (T1–T3) and their associated codes. It shows how socio-spatial inequalities (T1) are deeply entangled with governance failures and political dimensions of recovery (T2), while also intersecting with justice-oriented frameworks (T3). For instance, structural inequalities and exclusionary governance practices are linked not only to differentiated social impacts but also to debates on recognition and procedural justice. Similarly, themes of participation and community dynamics bridge across distributive and transformative justice perspectives. The following sections describe the results per theme, exploring the themes and subthemes shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 3:** Systematic mapping of the interconnections between the three thematic strands (T1–T3) of the literature reviewed in this paper and their subthemes.

#### 3.1 UNEVEN RECOVERIES: SOCIO-SPATIAL INEQUALITIES IN POST-DISASTER CONTEXTS

The literature shows that recovery trajectories are not shaped solely by the hazard itself but by longstanding socio-spatial inequalities and policy decisions that precede the disaster (Miller 2012; Nix-Stevenson 2013). Marginalised groups often inhabit low-value housing in hazard-prone zones, leading to lower compensation and slower recovery (Gotham 2015; Aijazi 2015). Structural barriers, such as legal exclusion, under-investment in public infrastructure and technocratic recovery approaches, marginalise certain groups from accessing essential resources and voice in rebuilding efforts (Jerolleman 2019). Institutional mistrust, poor infrastructure and limited access to services, particularly in rural areas, further exacerbate these challenges (Sandoval et al. 2017; Hale et al. 2021). Thus, the impact of a disaster is not just determined by the severity of the event, but by existing and past policies and the underlying social architecture that determines whose lives and livelihoods are most at risk (Ewenson 2024). These disparities are compounded when recovery policies focus only on restoring prior conditions rather than addressing the systemic injustices that made communities vulnerable in the first place (Joseph et al. 2021).

The outcomes of recovery processes are indeed shaped by rationalities underpinning their discourses. Prevailing narratives often valorise ‘bounce-back’ efforts that prioritise visible reconstruction projects over equitable aid distribution, thereby foreclosing transformative possibilities by defining recovery as a return to a flawed pre-disaster ‘normalcy’ (Vale 2014;

Rivera 2022). This vision is frequently driven by narratives of economic growth that privilege efficiency and macro-development goals, often benefiting powerful actors at the expense of local needs (Ku & Dominelli 2018). As Gray (2023) illustrates, such ‘conspicuous resilience’ prioritises modern housing for wealthier homeowners while marginalising rural and working-class groups. Centralised bureaucracies often reinforce these inequalities by shaping recovery priorities and processes in ways that limit meaningful participation, thereby reproducing existing power hierarchies (Joseph *et al.* 2021). Crucially, this lack of engagement is not merely a technical oversight but embedded in ‘technologies of climate disaster’ that naturalise catastrophe to depoliticise recovery, effectively limiting local reparative possibilities and entrenching external control (Perry 2024).

Across these diverse narratives, disaster recovery is revealed not as a neutral process, but as a political and spatial practice that exacerbates vulnerability, erodes trust and perpetuates uneven recovery trajectories (García & Hernandez 2023; Titz 2021). Recovery programmes framed through technocratic or top-down approaches frequently overlook existing inequalities and the lived realities of marginalised groups, rendering them ineligible or undeserving in official disaster interventions (Aijazi 2015; Joseph *et al.* 2021). For example, large-scale reconstruction efforts tend to privilege housing estates and infrastructures without responding to community needs, leaving many rural residents (and poor (peri)urban communities) unable to sustain their traditional livelihoods (Ku & Dominelli 2018), reinforcing racialised and class-based disparities (Lewis *et al.* 2017). This framing silences the knowledge, needs and everyday repair practices of affected populations, rendering their vulnerabilities as well as their transformative potential invisible (Titz 2021).

The literature also shows that relocation processes associated with recovery are not merely logistical, they represent a fundamental socio-political project. In the post-disaster context, resettlement of communities relocates people geographically and also remakes them socially and economically, as they become detached from their histories and livelihoods (Aijazi 2015). Disasters disproportionately affect low-income and marginalised populations, frequently displacing them from well-located urban areas to peripheral and fragile environments (Tafti & Tomlinson 2019). These displacements are rarely temporary: they often lead to long-term exclusion from recovery processes and exacerbate vulnerabilities through loss of community, services and support networks (Miller 2012; Rendon *et al.* 2021). Moreover, slowed or denied recovery efforts can effectively control affected communities, treating them as ‘surplus’ populations, in a state of limbo that ultimately serves the interests of the status quo. This fragmentation of communities reduces collective action and enables pre-disaster agendas, such as housing demolition and market-led redevelopment, which can then proceed with less opposition, thereby reinforcing the interests of powerful actors (Miller 2012).

An important part of the reviewed literature highlights the intersectional nature of disaster and disaster recovery, with impacts affecting population groups differently based on intersecting factors such as race, gender, income and geography. For example, women face heightened barriers, from job losses and administrative burdens (Alexander 2019; Simington 2023) to exclusion from decision-making and exposure to violence in poorly planned shelters (Shrestha *et al.* 2019). These differentiated impacts demand that disaster preparedness and recovery efforts be tailored to reflect the varied social realities of affected populations (Miller 2012). Yet recovery aid tends to align with physical damage assessments, thus failing to account for social vulnerability and systematically disadvantaging historically marginalised communities and groups (Emrich *et al.* 2020; Nance 2018). As a result, structural injustices continue post-disaster, such as environmental degradation disproportionately affecting low-income and racialised groups (Labadie 2008), or recovery processes that overlook intersecting vulnerabilities such as race, gender and poverty (Nalla *et al.* 2021).

### **3.2 AUTHORITY AND EXCLUSION: GOVERNANCE AS A SITE OF POWER STRUGGLES**

Existing scholarship highlights that recovery often unfolds through centralised and technocratic structures that prioritise expediency, elite interests and securitisation over justice-oriented approaches (Fuentelba & Verrest 2020; Ewenson 2024). Such arrangements risk reproducing entrenched inequalities by sidelining community agency, disregarding local knowledge and

channelling resources through opaque bureaucracies (Alexander 2019; Aijazi 2015). In this light, examining governance structures is essential for understanding how recovery processes shape socio-spatial inequalities and for identifying the potential of participatory models to advance more inclusive and equitable outcomes.

Governance structures in post-disaster recovery are frequently marred by systemic failures that prioritise political expediency and centralised control over equitable and timely relief. A critical question arises as to whether these ‘governance failures’ represent unintended lapses in an otherwise functional system or, as some scholars suggest, a deliberate extension of centralised power. Rather than being mere failures that a society collectively wishes to solve, exclusionary procedures and unequal distributional results often function as structural features of disaster governance. As Rivera (2022) and Pyles (2017) argue, these outcomes can be seen as an extension of ‘disaster colonialism’ or neoliberal rationalities, where the state utilises the post-disaster opening to consolidate control and suppress local agency. This perspective is essential for a spatial justice framework, as it shifts the analytical focus from ‘fixing’ technical failures toward dismantling the structural violence embedded in centralised recovery architectures. For example, disasters are often managed in ways that ‘pose minimal political threat to governments’ rather than focusing on preparedness or genuine recovery (Aijazi 2015). Bureaucratic delay and central government reluctance to fund recovery have left areas such as L’Aquila in Italy in a state of suspended recovery even years after the disaster (Alexander 2019). Furthermore, state-led interventions often fail to engage or even actively exclude local communities, reinforcing top-down power structures and neglecting lived realities and local knowledge (Fuentealba & Verrest 2020; Titz 2021). Underlying these failures is the disaster management cycle itself, whose rigid linear framing has been widely critiqued for privileging managerial control while overlooking the non-linear, overlapping and socially embedded realities of recovery (Aijazi 2015; Neal 1997; Alexander 2019). These failures are exacerbated by bureaucratic and technocratic governance models that depoliticise risk and mask social vulnerabilities, resulting in inequitable outcomes and deepening existing inequalities (Shrestha et al. 2019; Sovacool et al. 2018).

The political dimension of recovery reveals how governance, power and competing interests deeply shape post-disaster outcomes. In many cases, recovery becomes a site of political struggle between growth or development-oriented and social justice narratives, as stakeholders:

compete over both the main fantasy (narrative) imposed on the reconstruction planning [...] and [on] the level entitlements for the right to reconstruction ‘experimentation’.

(Paidakaki & Moulart 2017: 286)

This struggle is evident in Haiti, where:

government, foreign states and actors such as the World Bank tended to view recovery as an opportunity for macro-economic development [...] whereas citizens wanted to improve their well-being and livelihoods.

(Pyles 2017: 636)

Powerful actors thus use ‘discursive practices to inform a pro-growth resilience narrative that supports capital accumulation’, sidelining community needs in favour of economic agendas (Paidakaki & Parra 2018: 1025). Such dynamics resonate with critiques of ‘disaster capitalism’, where elites and state authorities seize post-disaster openings to accelerate neoliberal reforms, prioritise capital accumulation and sideline community needs (Klein 2007; Recio et al. 2023).

The above issues are linked to centralised systems in disaster recovery and associated questions of exclusion, control and legitimacy. Top-down governance models, dominated by techno-centric, centralised management, frequently overlook the needs of vulnerable populations (Shrestha et al. 2019). They also exclude communities from access to resources or socio-political decision-making processes (Jerolleman 2019). This contributes to a loss of trust due to the deep community scepticism about the extent of their participation and influence in decision-making (Morello-Frosch et al. 2011). Legitimacy is also questioned when decision-making power bypasses local

authorities, as in the creation of parallel authorities that influence or have control over recovery processes (Sandoval & Voss 2016: 8). Moreover, the framing of recovery around militarised or bureaucratic structures exemplifies how control mechanisms can entrench exclusion rather than facilitate inclusive recovery (Rivera 2022).

Yet participation, agency and community empowerment are central to shaping recovery after disasters. The Just Recovery framework, for example:

empowers individual agency in support of collective action, allowing for the exercise of resilience in support of recovery.

(Jerolleman 2019: 10)

This and similar approaches highlight that communities strategically locate and employ the existing resources available in their life worlds, proving that ultimately they are the source of resilience and strength in their recovery journeys (Aijazi 2015: 7). Research also shows that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers, social workers and other groups with existing close ties to communities are best positioned to respond to disaster events and the importance of strengthening this local capacity (Hayward *et al.* 2019).

The governance of post-disaster recovery therefore emerges as a contested terrain where centralised and technocratic models frequently undermine equity, exacerbate mistrust and entrench exclusions, while community-driven and participatory approaches reveal alternative pathways grounded in agency, local resources and recognition (Jerolleman 2019; Joseph *et al.* 2021). However, the present paper highlights that the presence of community-driven and participatory approaches does not automatically lead to more just processes and outcomes, as even participatory frameworks can be constrained or co-opted into tokenism practices. This highlights the need for a more robust integration of justice principles in recovery governance. It also requires that community-based approaches not be read as just an alternative to the build-back-better approach to disaster recovery; these are movements demanding social justice rather than the relative improvement conceived by existing institutions after disasters (Joseph *et al.* 2021). It is therefore important to move beyond procedural inclusion toward governance architectures that redistribute power, recognise marginalised voices and reshape socio-spatial relations in transformative ways (Cretney 2019; Paidakaki & Moulart 2017).

### 3.3 TOWARD JUST RECOVERY: SPATIAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

A justice framework for recovery highlights the imperative of addressing not just material, immediate needs but the deeper structural inequities that disasters expose and often worsen. As Shrestha *et al.* (2019) argue, justice in disaster contexts is ‘under-theorised’, and recovery processes must be reframed to focus on both ‘redistribution and recognition’ while engaging ‘agents of change’ committed to equity. Similarly, Recio *et al.* (2023) frame disaster justice as a political and ethical claim on governance and a responsibility of the state to protect marginalised citizens and groups, highlighting the role of social movements in advocating for inclusive urban planning and radical policy changes. Jerolleman (2019) adds that a ‘just recovery’ requires full participation in decision-making and empowerment of community agency, stressing that without equitable access to resources and programmes, recovery cannot be just. Together, these perspectives emphasise that justice-oriented recovery must centre on distributive, procedural and recognition justice, not only on physical rebuilding.

Distributive justice in post-disaster recovery demands the equitable allocation of resources and burdens, a process particularly critical when competing needs meet scarce resources (Joseph *et al.* 2021; Tafti & Tomlinson 2019). While traditional models often prioritise physical damage assessments (Emrich *et al.* 2020; Nance 2018)—leading to unjust distributions that overlook institutional constraints and lived experiences (Tafti & Tomlinson 2019; Joseph *et al.* 2021)—a shift toward community-centred perspectives is necessary to achieve social equity (Emrich *et al.* 2020).

Reaching a 'just recovery' thus requires going beyond mere economic redistribution to guarantee full access to resources through inclusive governance and a 'recognition of difference' (Joseph *et al.* 2021; Shrestha *et al.* 2019).

Procedural justice in post-disaster recovery emphasises the importance of participation, transparency and inclusivity in decision-making processes. As Jerolleman (2019: 16) notes:

full and informed participation is considered integral to the concept of procedural justice [... which] requires a complete understanding of the hazards imposed by a particular set of decisions.

Similarly, Joseph *et al.* (2021: 2) highlight that:

procedural justice on the other hand is linked intimately with issues of participation and stakeholder engagement [...] in the case of procedural justice, the process is the only criterion for a just outcome.

Crucially, participation does not emerge automatically but depends on governance arrangements that enable meaningful involvement. Without just processes, recovery risks being inequitable since procedural justice concerns inequities in the meaningful involvement of socially vulnerable populations (Muñoz & Tate 2016). In practice, this means ensuring:

broad and inclusive engagement with residents [where] resident-led committees and working groups established the community vision, articulated goals and priorities, and developed ideas for projects and policies that would further recovery.

(Rumbach *et al.* 2016: 2055)

Recognition justice in post-disaster recovery emphasises the importance of acknowledging the identities, experiences and knowledges of those most affected by disaster. Aijazi (2015), drawing on Freire (1970), emphasises that survivors' most immediate need may be recognition as human beings with dignity and agency. In this sense, justice is about not only distributing aid or inclusive governance but also valuing diverse cultural knowledge systems and considering recovery goals tailored to specific communities (Aijazi 2015; Shrestha *et al.* 2019). Nancy Fraser's framework further highlights that justice must involve both redistribution and recognition to address deeply rooted inequalities, urging that representation and accountability are just as critical as material aid (Shrestha *et al.* 2019; Fraser 2003). Moreover, meaningful participation requires recognising community members as experts of their lived experiences, rather than relying solely on external authorities (Sherwood *et al.* 2024).

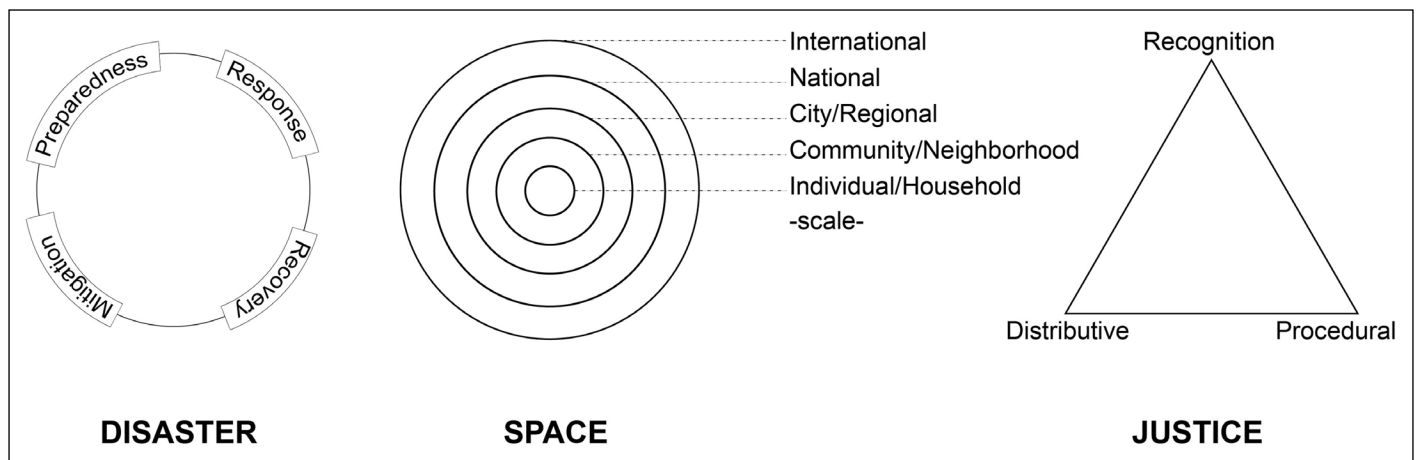
Going beyond a singular focus on recovery injustices, recent scholarship emphasises transformative frameworks that model more equitable outcomes. As Prilleltensky (2014) notes, true transformation occurs only when communities address root causes and dismantle the oppressive systems that reify injustices (Unanue *et al.* 2020). This literature can be categorised into conceptual reorientations and empirical grassroots successes. Conceptually, Aijazi (2015) proposes a 'social repair orientation' that prioritises the 're-humanization' of survivors through the strategic use of memory, hope and resistance, while Pyles (2017) offers a 'decolonising' framework that centres community needs through participatory assessments. Empirically, these frameworks find ground in initiatives that demonstrate the 'politics of possibility' (Cretney 2019). For instance, community-led commoning practices in Christchurch, New Zealand (Cretney 2019), and mutual aid centres in Puerto Rico (Unanue *et al.* 2020) illustrate how the rupture caused by disaster can be leveraged to move from collective trauma to 'critical consciousness'. Ultimately, these transformative pathways demand intersectional practices that, as Sherwood *et al.* (2024) argue, centre resistance among marginalised groups to challenge neoliberal and colonial narratives. By practicing participatory democracy and reclaiming spatial agency, these efforts explicitly show that more just recovery pathways are not only theoretically possible but also being actively enacted.

## 4. REFRAMING DISASTER RECOVERY FROM A SPATIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

Building on these critiques and insights, this study reframes recovery from a transformative change perspective, which understands disasters as potential catalysts for societal shifts (Birkmann *et al.* 2010; Becker & Reusser 2016; Cretney 2019; Borie & Fraser 2023). Such transformations, however, are neither guaranteed nor uniformly positive (Cretney & Bond 2014; Cretney 2019; Ku & Dominelli 2018). The distinction lies in governance rationalities and justice orientation. To support transformative approaches to disaster recovery oriented towards justice, a conceptual framework is proposed here that situates post-disaster recovery as part of a broader schema at the intersection of space, justice and disaster: the constitutive dimensions of the space–justice–disaster (SJ-Disaster) framework (Figure 4). To clarify the multidimensional nature of the proposed framework, Figure 4 presents the independent building blocks of the SJ-Disaster model. The framework proposes:

- Disaster is not a singular event but a continuous socio-spatial process, encompassing pre-disaster vulnerabilities, acute disruptions and long-term consequences.
- Space, as the material arena where recovery unfolds, shapes settlement patterns, infrastructures, public spaces and identities.
- Justice, as the normative orientation, encompasses distributive, procedural and recognition dimensions.

**Figure 4:** Space, justice and disaster: the constitutive dimensions of the SJ-Disaster framework.



The disaster dimension requires recovery to be recognised as a site where futures are negotiated and contested, rather than a return to normalcy. This means a different look at disaster management in its entirety, challenging traditional models of disaster management that emphasise a linear sequence of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery (Smith & Wenger 2007), and questioning how each phase is embedded in spatial decisions that distribute risk, resources and recognition unevenly. The Mitigation and Preparedness phases often reveal pre-disaster inequalities: land-use zoning, infrastructural investment and early warning systems are not equally distributed. Response efforts may reinforce procedural injustice by privileging certain voices (e.g. NGOs, state agencies) over others. The securitisation of response, as Gray (2023) notes, can exclude civil society actors and suppress local initiative. Recovery, as demonstrated throughout this review, frequently involves spatial restructuring that benefits dominant actors. Housing reconstruction, relocation schemes and urban redevelopment plans often displace vulnerable groups and deepen spatial injustice (Paidakaki & Moulaert 2017; Alexander 2019). Moreover, the boundaries between these phases are not fixed. Recovery decisions are made during the response phase; mitigation policies often emerge from the failures of previous recoveries. By conceptualising the disaster cycle as a continuum of spatial interventions shaped by power, this paper reveals how injustice is systematically reproduced across time and space.

The justice dimension understands justice across three interrelated dimensions: distributive justice, concerning the allocation of resources and opportunities; procedural justice, concerning participation, accountability and voice in decision-making; and recognition justice, concerning the visibility and dignity of marginalised groups (Soja 2010; Fraser 2003). Applied to disaster contexts, these dimensions expose not only who benefits and who is excluded, but also how recovery processes can either entrench or challenge structural injustices. In this (re-) framing, disasters are physical disruptions and political opportunities to reimagine socio-spatial relations. Reframing recovery through a spatial justice lens also requires attending to scale.

The spatial dimension understands recovery unfolding from the embodied struggles of individuals to the governance logics of global institutions, with distinct implications at each level. At the individual scale, recovery involves the re-humanisation of survivors and the reclaiming of agency and dignity against histories of oppression (Aijazi 2015; Joseph *et al.* 2021), as well as the recognition of intersectional identities. At the household scale, place-based vulnerabilities come to the forefront, as housing location significantly shapes recovery (Rumbach *et al.* 2016). At the community scale, recovery processes often reproduce uneven effects, with marginalised groups facing exclusion from resources, decision-making and recognition (Joseph *et al.* 2021; Ku & Dominelli 2018). At the city and regional scales, urban redevelopment strategies frequently determine who returns and who is displaced, with peripheral rehousing creating long-term isolation (Alexander 2019), and resilience investments disproportionately benefiting wealthier districts (Graham *et al.* 2016; Gray 2023). At the national scale, recovery frameworks reveal how aid distribution and planning priorities reproduce entrenched inequalities (Gotham 2015; Jerolleman 2019; Sandoval *et al.* 2017; Recio *et al.* 2023). At the global scale, disasters are entangled with planetary governance regimes and neoliberal economies (Klein 2007; Lukasiewicz & Baldwin 2020; Thompson & Lopez Barrera 2023).

Figure 5 illustrates how the SJ-Disaster framework can be applied to understand how disaster recovery unfolds through three selected cases from the literature. The proposed framework moves beyond a static understanding of recovery by emphasising the interconnectedness of space, time and justice. The independent spatial rings introduced in Figure 4 are operationalised in Figure 5 as a vertical axis of scalar hierarchy, ranging from the individual/household level to transnational systems. This translation clarifies that spatial justice is not confined to a single territory but operates across a continuum of scales where local experiences and global structures constantly interact.

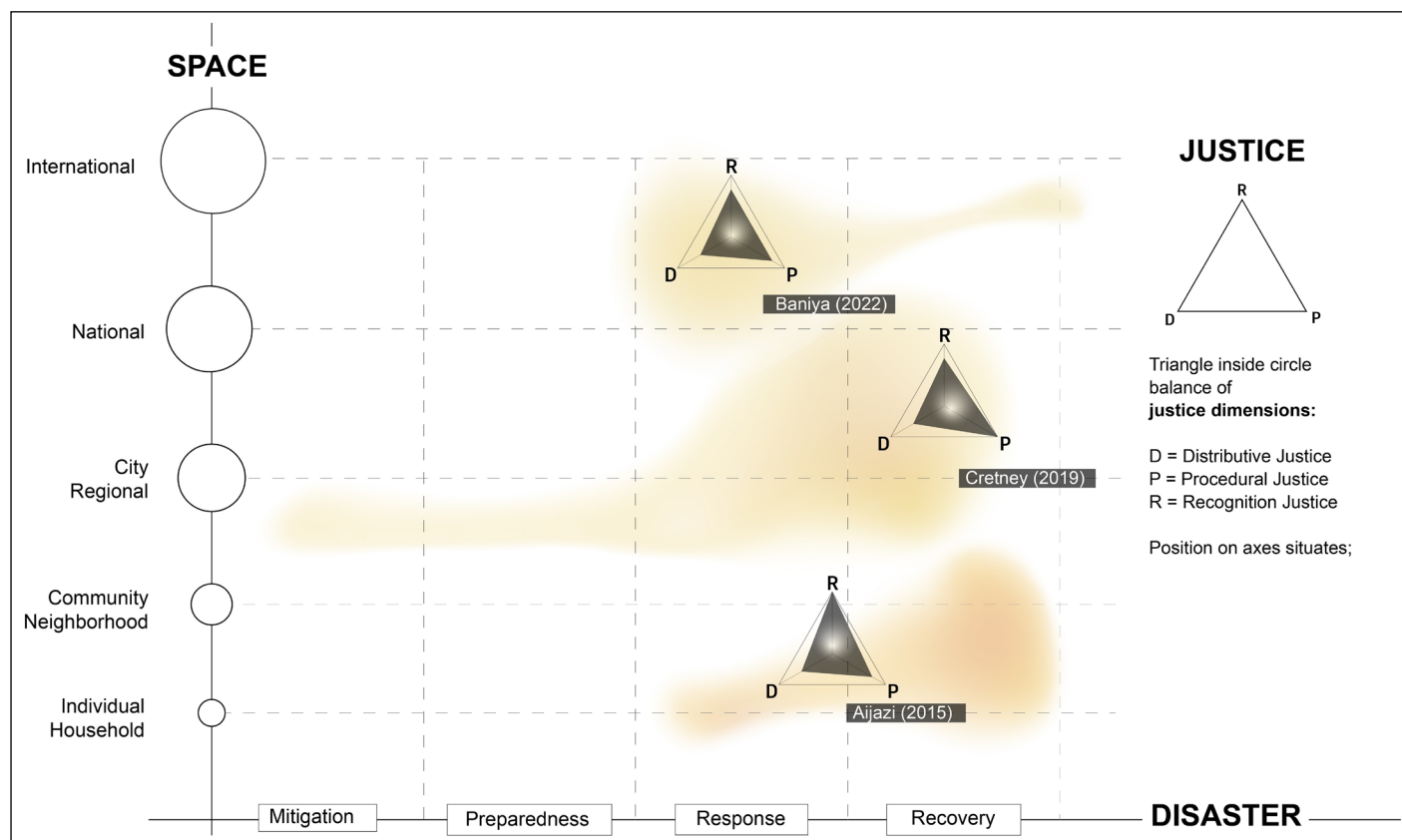
As illustrated by the translucent shaded ‘impact zones’ in Figure 5, disaster phases are not discrete, linear or circular stages but overlapping temporal processes with high degrees of permeability. Decisions made during the response phase, for instance, generate spillover effects that reshape distributive and procedural justice outcomes during longer term recovery.

Within these shaded ‘impact zones’, Figure 5 maps three cases that touch on different justice aspects and spatial scales. Aijazi (2015) highlights recognition-oriented recovery practices at the individual and community levels. Cretney (2019) demonstrates procedural struggles of grassroots initiatives at the intersection of local and national scales. Baniya (2022) illustrates how diaspora and digital platforms extend recognition and procedural justice through transnational solidarity networks operating from national to global scales. While all three cases are situated primarily within the response and recovery phases, the shaded areas denote their clear links to previous vulnerabilities and their long-term consequences for future mitigation.

The SJ-Disaster framework provides an analytical lens through which to explain how these ‘more just’ outcomes were actively pursued and achieved. By disaggregating justice into its spatial dimensions, it can be seen that Aijazi’s (2015) ‘social repair’ was not merely a psychological process but a spatial claim for recognition at the individual and community scales, achieved by reclaiming the dignity of survivors within their physical life-worlds. In the case of Cretney

(2019), the framework explains how procedural justice was pursued by explicitly challenging the ‘police order’ of top-down recovery; it was achieved through ‘commoning’ practices that transformed private or state-controlled rubble into participatory public spaces. Finally, Baniya (2022) demonstrates a transnational scale of justice where recognition was pursued through digital visibility, achieved by bypassing national governance failures and creating direct scales of solidarity between local survivors and global diaspora networks. These examples demonstrate that ‘more just’ outcomes are not coincidental: they are the result of specific justice pathways, be it procedural resistance, distributive claims or recognition of agency, enacted across multiple spatial scales.

**Figure 5:** The SJ-Disaster framework operationalised as an integrative matrix: mapping justice dimensions across spatial scales and disaster phases.



In Figure 5, the case of Cretney (2019) illustrates how procedural justice—initially strong at the local scale—can suffer from ‘scalar friction’ when national-level recovery frameworks fail to recognise grassroots legitimacy. The framework further situates Aijazi’s (2015) findings not just as social recognition, but as a spatial claim where individual lived experiences redefine the ‘recovery’ phase beyond physical repair. Similarly, Baniya (2022) exemplifies the ‘spillover effects’ discussed above, where digital solidarity networks bridge the gap between transnational recognition and local response.

Beyond the illustrative cases, the SJ-Disaster framework identifies specific justice pathways that operationalise transformative recovery through concrete spatial and institutional interventions (Table 1). These include community land trusts as tools for distributive justice that resist post-disaster market displacement, ecosystem equity approaches that address uneven environmental burdens through plural knowledge systems, and community-based laboratories that institutionalise procedural justice by embedding citizen participation into infrastructure governance. Although the justice pathways are presented individually for each justice dimension, they must be developed in an integrated manner. For a detailed version of Table 1 with coding steps and supporting references, see Appendix 2 in the supplemental data online.

JUSTICE PATHWAYS	CORE INSIGHTS	SCALE IMPLICATIONS	PHASE IMPLICATIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL
Procedural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency, participation and accountability through community groups, transparent governance, co-production and multi-scalar linkages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual/household: agency and access</li> <li>Community: grassroots participation, solidarity</li> <li>City/state: accountability, co-production</li> <li>Transnational: solidarity networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M: Use local knowledge in risk-mapping</li> <li>P: Inclusive training</li> <li>R: Transparent relief and accountability</li> <li>Rc: Participatory rebuilding and multi-scalar governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shifts recovery from top-down control to decentralised, participatory governance where citizens act as decision-makers</li> </ul>
Distributive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Requires the fair distribution of resources, land, housing, aid and environmental benefits, with special attention paid to vulnerable groups and collective rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual/household: equal access to essentials</li> <li>Community: land trusts, solidarity networks</li> <li>City/state: resource allocation and ecosystem equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M: Rights-based standards and vulnerability-mapping</li> <li>P: Tailored preparedness for marginalised groups</li> <li>R: Fair aid and resource delivery</li> <li>Rc: Equitable housing, land and ecological recovery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Turns disasters into opportunities for the redistribution of power and resources, creating long-term equity in land, aid and environment</li> </ul>
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledging diverse vulnerabilities, lived experiences, cultural dignity, plural knowledge systems and transnational solidarities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual/household: intersecting vulnerabilities, elders, minorities</li> <li>Community: solidarity, cultural dignity, mutual aid</li> <li>City/state: responsibility and inclusion in planning</li> <li>International: diaspora and cross-border recognition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M: Intersectional risk-mapping and knowledge diversity</li> <li>P: Compassion-based, culturally rooted preparedness</li> <li>R: Recognition of vulnerable groups and local knowledge</li> <li>Rc: Challenge hierarchies; empower marginalised voices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moves disaster governance toward inclusive empowerment that values difference, cultural dignity and global solidarity</li> </ul>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review examined how recovery practices reproduce socio-spatial inequalities, how governance structures shape recovery processes and how spatial justice can offer a transformative opening in disaster recovery. It revealed that disasters and subsequent recovery processes often deepen existing socio-spatial inequalities through centralised and technocratic structures that prioritise expediency, elite interests and securitisation. Drawing from transformative change theory, disasters can be reframed as sites where spatial futures are negotiated and contested, and an integrated conceptual framework for spatial justice in disaster recovery can be proposed. The SJ-Disaster framework highlights the importance of accounting for scalar variation, from the embodied experience of individuals and households to neighbourhoods, cities and transnational systems, while integrating distributive, procedural and recognition justice concerns, across the entire disaster management cycle. This framework can be used to understand how disaster and recovery unfold in specific cases as well as to develop justice pathways towards transformative change.


This paper contributes to building a foundation for future scholarship and practice that can engage more holistically with the socio-spatial dynamics of recovery and open pathways toward more equitable and transformative post-disaster futures. It offers a conceptual foundation for advancing research on post-disaster recovery through the lens of spatial justice. It should be read not as an end point but as a starting point for more detailed, case-based and methodologically innovative studies that can test and extend the framework.

Like any conceptual study, this paper has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although the review drew on a diverse set of cases, it inevitably reflects the geographical unevenness of the available literature. The study is also limited by its reliance on secondary sources: without empirical case study material, the application of the framework to concrete recovery contexts remains to be tested. Future research can build on these limitations in two ways: (1) in-depth case studies will allow the proposed framework to be tested, refined and adapted to specific socio-spatial contexts; and (2) methodological tools should be developed to capture how temporal dynamics (short-, medium- and long-term recovery) and spatial interventions (housing, infrastructure, public spaces) embody or obstruct justice.

**Table 1:** Justice pathways developed from the application of the SJ-Disaster framework based on the existing literature.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Mehmet Ali Gasselöglu**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-4086-129X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4086-129X)  
Faculty of Architecture, Gebze Technical University, Kocaeli, TR

**Juliana E. Gonçalves**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-6888-3362](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6888-3362)  
Department of Urbanism, Faculty of Architecture & Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, Delft, NL

Gasselöglu and Gonçalves 210  
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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Gasselöglu and Gonçalves 214  
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