

The Gaza We Want

*Children's voices on life,
recovery and the future
of the Gaza Strip*

REPORT | 2026
UNICEF STATE OF PALESTINE

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for every child

THE GAZA WE WANT غزة التي نريدها



One of the outputs of the 'Gaza in the Future' activity: a mural created by six girls – Rania (16), Raneen (16), Yusra (14), Rawan (17), Noor (14), and Hala (18).

Foreword

Since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, the priority has rightly been on saving lives. For Gaza's children, however, survival has meant repeated displacement, constant fear and profound uncertainty. Today, nearly nine in ten children in Gaza ask for psychological support - and 91.8% say they live in fear of bombardment.

These figures reflect not only immediate danger, but the deep and lasting impact of trauma on childhood.

Too often, children's perspectives have been absent from conversations about the future. There has been limited space to ask girls and boys how they imagine the Gaza they wish to grow up in, or what they believe should be rebuilt first. The Gaza We Want initiative responds directly to that gap, listening to 1,603 girls and boys across Gaza and documenting their views with care and respect.

Their priorities are unequivocal: housing (97.3 per cent), education (94.2 per cent), safety (91.8 per cent), healthcare (91.8 per cent) and psychological support (88.7 per cent). An overwhelming majority reject temporary solutions, with 94.2 per cent calling for permanent school buildings rather than tents. Many crave a Gaza "like before the war," while also presenting thoughtful, concrete visions that centre on healing, stability and dignity.

As recovery and reconstruction efforts advance, children must not be treated as passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf. The choices taken now will shape their lives for decades to come. Children have a legally recognised right to participate in decisions affecting their lives, and their perspectives must inform policy, planning and reconstruction efforts. They have the right to education, to health, to protection from violence, to play and to recover from trauma. These rights are not optional. They are obligations.

Rebuilding Gaza is not only about restoring infrastructure. It is about restoring childhood itself. It is a moral and legal imperative to support healing and to uphold every child's right to grow up in safety, dignity and lasting peace.

Jonathan Veitch
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Introduction

Two years of intense bombardments and fighting have wrought catastrophic devastation across the Gaza Strip. The toll on children is unconscionable. Nearly one million of Gaza's children have been exposed to the traumatic experiences of war, the consequences of which will last a lifetime. Children have lost parents and other family members, their homes, their schools, their parks and playgrounds.

UNICEF's vision for Gaza is a child- and youth-centred recovery that restores essential services, rebuilds resilient systems, and reimagines a future in which every child in the State of Palestine can learn, be safe, participate and thrive in a peaceful, inclusive society. The Gaza We Want initiative was created to hear directly from children in Gaza about their vision for the future. At a moment when recovery and reconstruction are being actively discussed, UNICEF believes that children's voices must be heard and meaningfully reflected in those conversations.

The child-centred consultation in Gaza began with coordination and facilitator training for around 50 civil society community partners on trauma-sensitive, inclusive methods. Over 103 staff were trained to run the activities and collect data through surveys and creative activities for children aged 5 to 18, including those with disabilities, using approaches designed to be safe, inclusive and sensitive. The survey was initially intended to reach 500 children, but uptake among partners and children was far higher than anticipated, highlighting the clear desire among children to participate and share their hopes for the future of Gaza. In total, 1,600 children completed the online questionnaire, and analysis of the results form the basis of this report.

Alongside the poll, children engaged extensively in complementary activities, resulting in the **participation of about 11,000 children** who expressed their visions for Gaza's future in creative ways. Children across the north, middle area and south of Gaza engaged with energy and imagination, using many forms – drawings, poems, stories, videos and other forms of creative expression – to describe the future they hope for.



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Children in Gaza drew what they would like their neighbourhood and local park to look like in the future.

In every piece of art, a shared vision of Gaza emerges as a vibrant place, with streets that are clean and lined with trees. The sea is a source of joy, schools are places for both learning and play, and hospitals are spaces of care and safety. Children describe Gaza not simply as a place, but as a symbol of security, peace and freedom, where there are no sounds of shelling, no fear of tomorrow, and where laughter, colour and light fill every corner.

Children show an extraordinary ability to transform pain into creative visions, to imagine rebuilding from the ashes, and to picture a future that honours their right to childhood, education and a dignified life.

In their imagination, the Gaza of the future blends technology with tradition, and modern life with heritage, becoming a city that nurtures peace, plants hope, and restores to every child the right to play, laugh and thrive.

Behind the figures and the creative outputs are powerful emotions, including profound loss, alongside a clear and consistent desire for dignity, a sense of normality, and hope for the future. Listening to children is not optional. It is essential for building a child-centred recovery that truly serves their needs and upholds their rights. For children in Gaza, whose lives have been shaped by extreme and sustained violence over the past two years, ensuring that their voices inform decisions about recovery is a critical foundation for any credible and child-centred future.

Methodology and scope

Child protection partners in Gaza designed a child-centred consultation process, using child-friendly, trauma-sensitive and inclusive approaches. Facilitators were trained on the online tool survey in early December 2025 and used a common set of tools, including open-ended survey questions and creative activities.

For the poll, data collection took place from 7 to 20 December 2025 across all governorates of Gaza. Girls and boys aged 5 to 18 took part, including children with disabilities. Facilitators collected poll responses, and following data collection, partners consolidated and analysed the information, identifying key themes.

Facilitators followed standardized scripts and applied informed consent procedures and safeguarding protocols throughout the process. Partners conducted quality checks during data collection to help ensure the consultation remained safe, ethical and inclusive. This report presents children's perspectives with care and excludes any information that could identify individual participants.

Alongside the survey, facilitators collected creative outputs, which included drawings, poems, models, and audio messages among others. A small selection of children's quotes and creative works is included in this report to illustrate the findings.



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A nine-year-old child with a disability from Gaza city making the future Gaza.

Who took part

The questionnaire received 1,603 responses from girls and boys across all five governorates. For the purposes of this analysis, responses are grouped into two age ranges: 5–11 years and 12–18 years. Girls accounted for a higher proportion of respondents, which may reflect population demographics.

| Category | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Age 5–11 years | 959 | 60% |
| Age 12–18 years | 644 | 40% |
| Female | 1091 | 68% |
| Male | 512 | 32% |
| Gaza City | 432 | 27% |
| North Gaza | 287 | 18% |
| Deir al-Balah | 256 | 16% |
| Khan Younis | 387 | 24% |
| Rafah | 241 | 15% |
| Total responses | 1,603 | 100% |

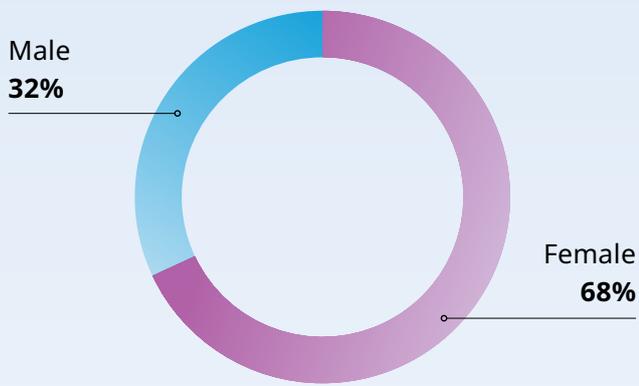


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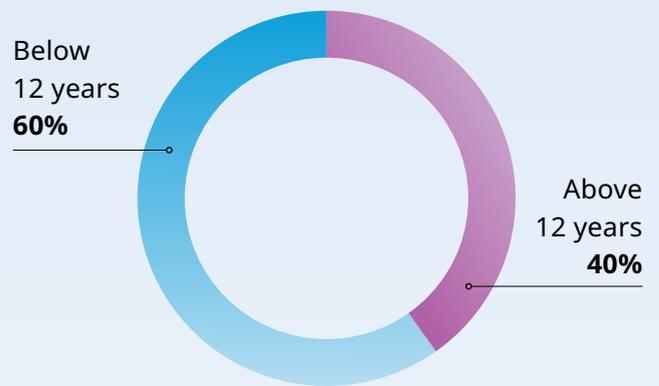
A group of talented children from Khan Younis painting the future of Gaza in their small art tent, with the guidance of the UNRWA art teacher.

Most children had support to complete the questionnaire from an organization engaged in child protection or a caregiver, while some completed it independently.

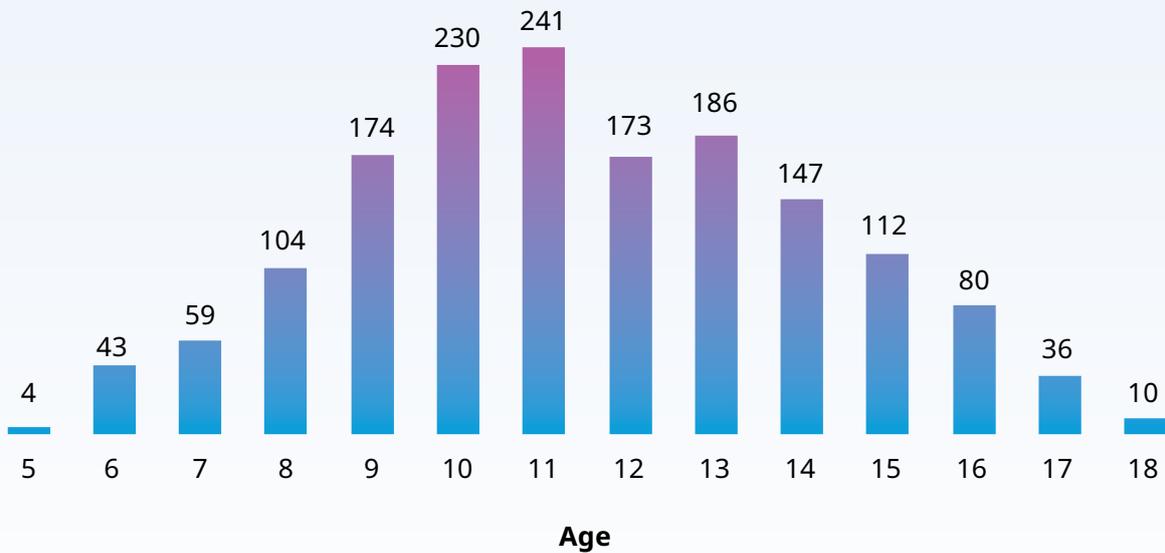
Gender of children



Children age distribution category



Children age frequency





What children told us

The Gaza We Want

The Gaza they imagine: safe, green and organized

In their creative works, children showed that they dream of a homeland reborn as a gentle garden, a canvas of green spaces and colourful streets where the only echoes are of laughter, not explosions, painting beauty over the rubble of memory.

Answers to the online questionnaire tell a similar story:

- Green spaces, trees and flowers are a recurring image.
- Clean streets with no rubble and working street lighting.
- Colourful buildings, safe pavements and nearby playgrounds.
- A return to normal life - "like before the war" - but better.



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A group of children in front of their destroyed school in the Middle Area showing with hope their drawings of Gaza in the future.

The Gaza I Want

It is not a tent pressed against the wind,
Nor a blood counter running night and day.

I want it as a morning
Opening its window to a calm sea,
And a fisherman returning
With nets full of fish,
Not riddled with shell holes.

I want it
Writing its school assignments,
Not the names of the deceased,
Counting stars in the sky,
Not airplanes.

I want it as a mother
Waiting for her children to come home from school,
Not from beneath the rubble,
Baking bread
With the scent of thyme,
Not smoke.

The Gaza I want
Is a city that resembles life,
Walking barefoot on the sand,
Laughing,
Without bowing to the world.

Malak, 13, Khan Younis

Education: real schools where learning and play happen

Children pleaded for real schools, not tents: sanctuaries of sturdy desks and kind teachers where learning feels not like a temporary shelter, but a permanent doorway to a future they can own.

“We need real schools, not tents, so we can feel like children in the rest of the world.”

Mohamad, 14

The data echo these sentiments:

- Permanent school buildings with proper furniture, water and hygiene supply and toilets.
- Libraries, labs and access to technology.
- Kind teachers, time to play and learning for the future.
- Girls often asked for girls-only spaces, boys often asked for sports areas.



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One of the outputs of the 'Dream Neighbourhood' activity: a group of children (9-12) created models of the key places they hope to have in their neighbourhood in the future. They called it 'Peace Neighbourhood', and it includes models of a school with a playground, a hospital, a mosque, a play area, and a house.

Health: from trauma to healing

Children asked for hospitals that don't smell of fear, where healing is interwoven with quiet gardens and doctors who listen, a place where both bodies and silent, trembling hearts can mend.

From the online poll:

- Quiet, calm and child-friendly health facilities.
- Fast services and enough medicines.
- Mental health and psychosocial support alongside physical care.



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One of the outputs of the 'Dream Neighbourhood' activity: a group of children created models of the key places they hope to have in their neighbourhood in the future." It includes models of a school, a hospital, a mosque, and homes.

Safety and protection: many layers

Children sing that their deepest prayer is for a night undaunted by thunder from above, and a walk to school without a flinch.

- Protection from bombardment and violence is the top concern.
- Children find safety in routine and in trusted adults.
- They want safe roads, transport and visible child protection systems.

“Once, I looked up at the sky and spoke to a star about what I want. I told it, ‘I dream of living in peace and safety. Beautiful, towering buildings from which I can see my city, and complexes that have everything I need: a school, or a library for reading and gaining knowledge, a swimming pool and restaurants for entertainment, electricity to light up the whole area, and wide streets and neighbourhoods.’”

Mohamed, 16



Aya, 13

Play and development: the right to a childhood

Younger children in particular declare play a necessity, not a luxury, and demand parks and clean beaches as their rightful arena to reclaim a stolen childhood, one game, one mural, one free breath at a time.

“I dream of playing with my friends in a park without fear.”

Amal, 9

- Public parks and green spaces close to where children live.
- Sports facilities, indoor play areas and cultural centres.
- Accessible spaces for children with disabilities.



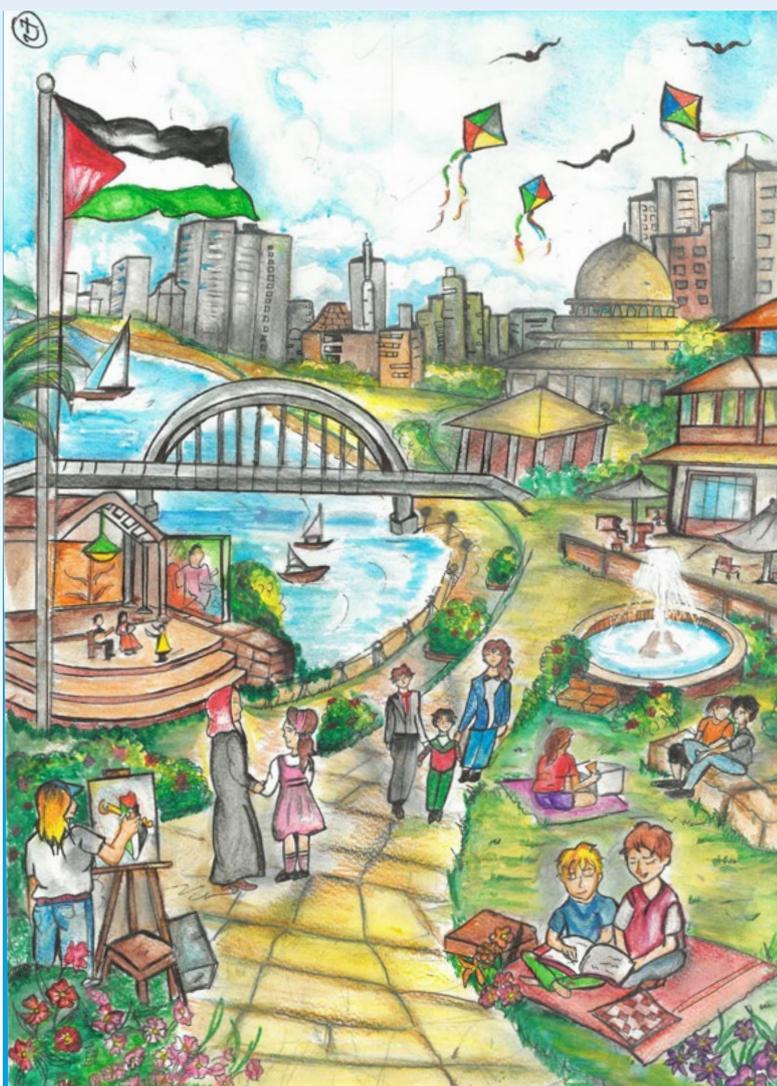
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A group of children from the northern part of Gaza, one of the most affected areas, full of hope as they display their drawings in the 'Gaza in the Future' activity organized by Taawon organization.

Social connection and community

Children envision neighbourhoods as living tapestries where families gather, older people sit safely in the sun, and community centres hum with the rhythm of shared holidays and restored belonging.

- Places where families can gather and celebrate.
- Markets and services within walking distance.
- Community centres that welcome all ages.



Mirna, 13, Rafah

The Gaza I Want

Gaza is not just a story we hear
It's our home, our memories,
our future

It's the sea that still stretches for us
And the sky we look at every day
The Gaza we want is simple and human
Where children go to their
schools, not tents

Carrying pens, not stones

We are watching people who are
not forced to endure destruction

But who dream, make and build
their future by their own hands

We want homes rebuilt and mosques
filled with the call to prayer

We want mornings that begin with hope,
not amid the rubble of ruin

Our voices matter; our lives matter;
our dreams matter

The Gaza we want will NOT be silent
Will shine.

Asma, 15

Psychological needs: invisible wounds, visible solutions

Group activities like plays and group drawings reveal invisible scars, asking for someone to talk to and colours that soothe, seeking visible anchors of light and gentle conversation to calm the silent storms within.

- Someone to talk to, help with nightmares and activities that help healing.
- Environments with colours and nature that make children feel calm and hopeful.



Shahed, 17

The Gaza I Want

If you ask me about the Gaza I want,
I want Gaza back -
Better.
Not white and black:
I want it full of colours.
I want it full of flowers.
I want it free -
Strong -
As it should be.
Don't ask me how, just hear my dream.
Please listen to my silent scream.
Give me home, give me peace.
Excuse me, please.
Our tents in winter freeze.
I want cheers instead of tears

Huda, 16



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What to build first: children's priorities

"The Gaza I want is a safe Gaza with a home, a school, and a hospital for every child."

Child, 12 years

"I wish our neighbourhood could be full of trees and schools, not destruction."

Child, 10 years

In the quiet calculus of survival, the children mapped their revival: first, a roof against the sky and a tent for learning; then sturdy walls for homes and schools, with a park just beyond their doors. Their vision stretches across the years - from clinics to cultural centres; from clean streets to universities - building not only a place to live, but a timeline for hope, whose final cornerstone is not a site of loss, but a space for peaceful remembrance.

| Time horizon | Top priorities named by children |
|--------------|--|
| 0-6 months | Safe temporary housing; safe learning spaces; mobile health services; protected play areas; psychological first aid |
| 6-18 months | Permanent homes; proper school buildings; community health centres; public parks; child protection offices |
| 18-36 months | Specialized health facilities; sports complexes; cultural and arts centres; environmental clean-up; transport links |
| 3+ years | Higher education and technical colleges; recreational facilities; new industries; international connections; memorial and healing spaces |



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Children in the Middle Area rebuilt Gaza from the rubble of their destroyed houses

Recommendations for child-centred recovery



Make children's participation routine, not a one-off:

Embed safe, ongoing child participation in all planning and monitoring. Use child-friendly feedback loops and adapt plans based on what children say.



Design for healing:

Apply trauma-informed design across homes, schools, clinics and public spaces. Prioritize light, colour, quiet areas and green space.



Link services at neighbourhood level:

Plan housing together with schools, health and play areas so children can walk safely between them.



Guarantee gender-responsive and disability-inclusive spaces:

Provide safe, dignified access for girls and for children with disabilities in schools, water and sanitation facilities, and play areas.



Put mental health support within everyday services:

Provide psychosocial support in schools, clinics and community centres, not only in specialist sites.



Protect children everywhere:

Strengthen child protection systems in communities and schools, including confidential reporting and trained staff.



Phase the response and be clear on timelines:

Deliver practical improvements early, while planning and building for long-term quality and sustainability.



Conclusion

We must build a Gaza where children are not only heard, but where their voices shape the blueprint for lasting recovery. This requires embedding child participation permanently into governance, with continuous and safe feedback mechanisms that actively inform and reshape decision-making.

The very architecture of children's lives must be designed for healing. Trauma-informed principles of light, green space, safety and calm should be woven into every neighbourhood, ensuring that homes, schools, clinics and parks are connected by accessible and secure pathways. This physical foundation must be universally accessible, guaranteeing gender-responsive and disability-inclusive spaces across all facilities, while integrating mental health and psychosocial support into the daily rhythm of schools and community centres.

Finally, a seamless and trusted web of child protection must be strengthened within communities, with trained personnel and confidential systems, and clear referral pathways to safeguard children's dignity, safety and rights throughout every aspect of their renewed lives.



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