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Settlement in rural areas

Key points

- Attention should be given to laws and regulations governing the use of environmental impact assessments prior to the design and planning of the settlement and shelter programme.
- No one option is ideal. Settlement planning is context specific.
- A sound settlement strategy may combine several settlement options.
- Assess available natural resources and the absorption capacity of hosting areas.
- Ensure that needs assessments evaluate the logistics infrastructure, storage capacity, the availability of construction materials, and the feasibility of setting up supply chains into affected areas.

Environmental considerations must be integrated into physical planning and shelter programmes from the start of an emergency. The location and layout of camps, provisions for emergency shelter, and the use of local resources for construction and fuel, can have significant impacts on the environment.

1. Overview

A human settlement derives from the structured landscape of a territory. It takes into consideration spatial allocation of functions while maintaining equilibrium between the needs of the population, the availability and allocation of resources, economic dynamics, the amelioration of living conditions, the provision of services and enhancing transportation networks, as well as recreational spaces. A settlement must address the needs of the community at large and be designed with the active involvement of persons of concerns, partners, and all sectors.

Settlement refers to the physical spaces and environments in which households are sheltered, and how one shelter relates to others. The term is generally used in the context of displaced populations to describe the temporary or sometimes permanent living arrangements of displaced families. In this context settlements can range from planned camps to dispersed accommodation in host villages/neighbourhoods, collective centres, and spontaneous camps, etc.

A rural settlement is where displaced populations settle on land outside of cities and towns. The population is often dependent on agricultural and pastoral practices, and has fewer community infrastructure systems than in urban settlements. Rural contexts are defined by population thresholds that differ internationally.

This section looks at common rural settlement options and the development of settlement strategies. These require analysis that should be undertaken during the preparedness phase, in which settlement options are identified in collaboration with stakeholders.

Options should be adapted to capacity and available resources. Prior to determining suitable options, ensure that the following information is available:

- Spatial analysis that describe the availability, uses, and suitability of land.
- Evaluation of the absorption capacity of hosting areas and the extent of natural resources.
- Sources of water and their potentially sustainable yield.
- Market assessments, including infrastructure, logistical resources, storage capacity, the availability of construction materials, and the feasibility of setting up supply chains into affected areas.

The most common rural settlement options are host villages and 'camp-like' settings.

Host villages

In host villages, displaced people live with and amongst local households, on land or in properties that local people own. Hosts may be relatives, distant family members, friends or acquaintances, or people previously unknown to those who have been displaced.

Dispersed self-settlement without legal status

Persons of concern may settle in scattered locations across large areas, on land or buildings which they have no approval to occupy. In this form of settlement the displaced population has no assistance or guidance from local Government or the aid community.

Spontaneous settlements

Spontaneous settlements or unplanned camps occur when groups of displaced people populate areas without assistance or guidance from local government or the humanitarian community. Such settlements are located on land the displaced population does not officially have the right to occupy. Some spontaneous settlements can be formalized and upgraded if the site is suitable and approval is granted by the authorities. For more information see entries on spontaneous settlement strategy considerations and managing and supporting spontaneous settlements.

Planned camps

Planned camps are a form of settlement in which refugees or IDPs reside and receive centralised protection, humanitarian assistance, and other services from host governments and humanitarian actors. Planned camps are designed and developed to contain the needed infrastructure to serve its residents, and have formal recognition/approval from the authorities. For more information see entries on camp strategy considerations and site planning for camps.

2. Protection objectives

- To provide a safe and healthy living environment for persons of concern.
- To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, poor access to services, and natural hazards.
- To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.

3. Underlying principles and standards

- Settlement and shelter designs should reflect the needs of persons of concern, their cultural habits and their capacities, and should also attempt to build on existing resources and enhance access to infrastructure.
- Settlement and shelter interventions need to be planned and implemented to mitigate, to the extent possible, the impact on the natural environment and to prevent hazard risks such as landslides, floods and earthquakes, among others.
- Inclusive and meaningful participation of persons of concern in accordance with UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity approach, is essential to ensure that men, women, girls and boys have their voice heard, identify their needs, and have the opportunity to contribute to the search of adequate solutions.
- Accessibility to land constitutes a fundamental element of the realization of the right to adequate housing, and must also provide sustainable and non-discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, nutrition, security and comfort.
- Durable solutions are the ultimate goal, taking into consideration appropriate technology, capacity-building of both refugees and local communities, and use of local skills, materials, techniques and knowledge.
- Refugees and other persons of concern should be empowered to participate actively in decisions that concern them at all stages. An inclusive approach fosters ownership and acceptance of programmes and improves maintenance of shelters and settlements. It facilitates communication and can generate information and support that may be crucial to a programme's success and sustainability.
- International human rights law and refugee law recognize the right of every individual, including refugees, to move freely.
- Persons of concern should be supported to become self-reliant, enabling them to contribute to their host country and find long term solutions for themselves.
- Settlements policy and decisions should be driven primarily by the best interest of persons of concern.
- Persons of concern should have access to essential services in all types of settlements. These services include water, sanitation, roads and infrastructure, community spaces, shelter, health, nutrition, education, food, and livelihoods.

- Settlements should provide sufficient space for shelter and associated basic services. Though in host situations, for example, it can be difficult to ensure accommodations meet standards, interventions should aim to achieve minimum international or national standards.
- Housing Land and Property (HLP) considerations are fundamental in planning and implementing settlement activities. Mechanisms should be in place to protect persons of concern from forced eviction, exploitation or abuse derived from a lack of tenure security.

4. Protection Risks

- In protracted situations, deteriorating living conditions of families hosting large number of persons might lead to health and psychosocial problems, as well as risks of stigmatization, harassment, economic or sexual exploitation, and violence against the displaced families.
- In areas where refugees are not welcome, both host and displaced families might become targets of retaliation by parties to the conflict or by surrounding communities.
- In dispersed settlement and spontaneous camps persons of concern may not have adequate access to services or humanitarian assistance.
- Those settled spontaneously on private or public land are often under constant threat of eviction by landlords or authorities. Monitoring and responding to harassment and threats may not be achieved in a timely manner if settlements are scattered and legal tenure has not been clarified.
- Prolonged stay in camps or collective centres can result in stress and tensions and can lead to social conflict and friction with host communities, between families, clans or ethnic groups.
- Persons of concern in collective centres often under threat of being evicted by landlords. Those occupying schools, religious, and other public buildings are under increased pressure to leave.
- Relations with the host community as well as within IDP groups might deteriorate over the sharing of limited resources, for example, the depletion of nearby areas for firewood, and the occupation of land by persons of concern or the requisition of land by local authorities for their benefit.
- The presence of an ethnically, culturally, religiously or linguistically different group of people may give rise to tension.
- Despite the fact that a larger group settlement may be more secure for persons of concern than dispersed and exposed shelters, a large group settlement may be easily targeted for forced recruitment and violent attacks.
- A proliferation of high quality shelters in an area where housing standards are low can create tension with local communities.
- High population density significantly increases health risks.

5. Other risks

- Environmental contamination may cause serious health problems for residents and those living in close proximity. Environmental damage especially related to water and sanitation is likely in the immediate vicinity of camps.
- Living in camps can encourage dependency and reduce the ability of persons of concern to manage their own lives. It is vital to ensure that persons of concern are able to play an active role in planning and developing settlement strategies as well as designing and managing governance mechanisms in their settlements. Displacement tends to last longer than expected; camps are rarely occupied for short-term. Planners should always expect that once put in place, camps are likely to exist over a long period of time, i.e. longer than one year. Service provision over that period of time is likely to stay the responsibility of humanitarian actors, and integration with local existing services will be challenging.

6. Key decision points

- Seldom does one settlement and shelter option fit the needs of the entire displaced population. Explore the available options and solutions persons of concern may have already found and agree the most suitable settlement options, and humanitarian assistance plan, with the host government.
- Ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the decision-making process to determine the appropriate settlement solutions to support.
- Housing, Land and Property (HLP) regulations are often complex and difficult to navigate. Ensure you have the appropriate technical support to clarify HLP issues and processes.
- With partners, local authorities and community-based organizations, discuss the right of persons of concern to stay in local communities and agree how they may be assisted most effectively.
- Analyse settlement patterns, the topography, and the resource base, to reduce adverse impacts on the natural environment. Make use of existing planning processes (where this is possible), and follow best practice, to minimize the risks and vulnerabilities that settlement will trigger.
- Ensure that persons of concern can safely access shelter and settlements locations and essential services.
- Involve local authorities, persons of concern and host communities (by family, or neighbourhood or village groups) in planning of temporary communal settlements.
- Involve development partners as early as possible, notably UNICEF, UNDP, and (where appropriate) the World Bank. Consider how both relief and broader development objectives can be advanced by means of the resources that those who have been displaced will attract.
- Conduct a cost benefit analysis of different settlement options, determine resource requirements, and establish priorities, to ensure that adequate human, financial and material resources will be available.
- Ensure that the specialized technical support required is in place and that physical planners are deployed in a timely manner.
- Seek technical support from the technical department of the host Government and ensure that local authority experts are involved in settlement planning.

7. Key steps

- Analyse demographic factors, population movement, available resources, protection concerns, and local capacity. Survey available documentation on displacement and what communities can offer, but also specific needs and hazards.
- Obtain information on rules and regulations, building codes, environmental analysis, lists of contractors and material suppliers. Obtain information from local and regional associations of engineers and architects, to help identify potential local partners.
- Determine the suitable settlement solutions for the needs of the displaced population. Determine follow up actions such as: which spontaneous settlements should be upgraded, which populations should be relocated, should planned camps be developed, should host family accommodation be upgraded, etc.
- Identify the range of shelter solutions that are preferred by, and that can be made available to persons of concern.
- Develop a shelter and settlement strategy.
- Assess supply and logistical requirements and constraints; put in place arrangements to address them.
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of programmes over time.

8. Key management considerations

- Integrate settlement strategies and potential layouts in preparedness planning processes
- Ensure systematic deployment of senior settlement and shelter experts at the onset of emergencies.
- If access is limited, gather essential information from local authorities, NGOs and local civil society organisations, or secondary sources and technology.
- To reduce the risk of conflicts over land, collaborate closely from the start with local authorities' technical departments, and inform yourself of local rules and regulations on land tenure, public works and housing.
- Establish and apply quality assurance measures. These may include training in best practices to build capacity.
- Identify natural hazards (such as flooding, landslides, strong winds). If there are seismic risks, seek specialized technical advice even for the design of a simple shelter.
- Coordinate and liaise with other sectors, including water and sanitation and livelihoods, to ensure solutions are integrated.

9. Resources and partnerships

- Affected populations.

- Local or central government authorities.
- Community and religious leaders.
- Host community.
- National and international NGOs.
- IFRC and ICRC.
- Other UN and international organizations.

Technical experts will generally carry out specific tasks. The table below suggests appropriate experts at different stages.

| Planning stage | Who can help | What they can do |
|--|--|---|
| Needs assessment; understand PoC' profile and demographics | Sociologist/economist Anthropologist Architects/engineers | Carry out comprehensive surveys, including market surveys. Evaluate information. Gather background information. Analyse traditional practices and cultural habits. |
| Site selection | Geologist/hydrologist Water/sanitation engineer Civil Engineer Physical planner Protection Environment Logistics | Carry out surveys and topographic studies. Draw contour lines. Assess the capacity of water sources. Evaluate data and conduct risk analysis. Recommend solutions and most suitable settlement options. |
| Settlement layout | Physical planner Architect Civil engineer Water/sanitation engineer Protection experts Environmentalist Logisticians | Prepare layout and technical plans. Analyse infrastructure (accessibility and conditions). Estimate costs, and resource requirements. |
| Implementation | Civil engineer Architect Logisticians | Prepare the work programme and risk management plans. Supervise implementation. |
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10. Links

UNHCR Intranet: Shelter and Settlement

<http://www.unhcr.org/530f13aa9.pdf>

<http://www.spherehandbook.org/en/how-to-use-this-chapter-2/>

<http://www.sheltercentre.org/library>

Need help?

CONTACT Shelter and Settlement Section (SSS), Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). At:

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Annexes

- The Sphere Handbook
- UNHCR 2014, Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva
- Safer homes, stronger communities. a handbook for reconstructing housing and communities after natural disasters
- Strategies for transitional settlement and reconstruction, Shelter Centre, Geneva

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