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## Shelter in urban areas

### Key points

- Consider how the settlement and shelter response can boost the local economy in marginalized neighbourhoods. Try to gain an understanding of the informal economy and how persons of concern can access income generating activities.
- Promote local construction as much as possible.
- Transfer technology where required, to improve best practice and manage hazards. Seek technical support in areas of seismic risk and with strong winds.
- Involve host communities and affected populations from an early stage.
- Favour shelter strategies that enhance integration and benefit the local economy.
- Collaborate closely with other UN agencies (such as UN-Habitat and UNDP), national planning bodies, housing ministries, NGOs, and private organizations.
- Coordinate closely with protection to ensure that you can monitor and mitigate risks of persons of concern living in potentially exploitative situations (rental accommodation, host arrangements)

### 1. Overview

This entry describes particular considerations to shelter responses in urban areas. This entry should be read in conjunction with the Entries shelter Solutions, settlement in urban areas, and rental accommodation.

A shelter is a habitable covered living space that provides a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity in order to benefit from protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings as well as privacy, comfort and emotional support. Shelter programmes generally involve a mix of sheltering solutions such as kits, plastic sheeting, tents, and cash assistance.

While the basic need for shelter is similar in most emergencies, such considerations as the kind of shelter needed, what materials and design to use, who constructs them and how long must they last will differ significantly in each situation. Shelter responses should be adapted to take account of the local context and climate, cultural practices and habits, local skills, and available construction materials.

In urban areas, the following factors will influence the choice of appropriate shelter solutions:

- Functioning financial systems. Banking penetration in cities tends to be greater than in rural areas. This can facilitate cash programming if persons of concern can have access to formal financial institutions. Mobile banking systems may prove a viable alternative for cash based programming.
- Lack of space. When persons of concern settle amid urban communities space availability becomes critical. Minimum standards for shelter may be far greater than the average available space in dense urban neighbourhoods, especially in informal settlements towards which displaced populations tend to gravitate.
- Accessibility. Urban environments may not guarantee adequate access and mobility for persons with specific needs.
- Targeting. Displaced populations may blend into the urban poor making targeted assistance challenging, but ever more important to ensure resources reach the intended recipients.
- Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues. Most cities develop rapidly and informally. Land use plans and ordinances are often out of date, as are cadastral records. Acquiring tenure security in those areas for displaced populations will be as or more difficult than it already is for its regular residents.
- Hazards. Persons of concern are likely to settle in high risk areas and undesirable land where they are exposed to environmental risks, and have little access to services.
- Civil society. Community organizations and civil society can play an important role in supporting the response. Their capacity, expertise and accountability must be taken into account.

## **2. Protection objectives**

- To provide a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity to persons of concern. Shelters should provide sufficient covered living space to undertake essential household and livelihood activities: include cooking, sleeping, storing belongings, etc.
- To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, and poor access to services. Threat of eviction is greater and often constant in urban areas when persons of concern settle in land and property without permission (dispersed settlement without legal status)
- To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.
- To recognize, and encourage other actors to recognize, that every person, including every refugee, is entitled to move freely, in accordance with human rights and refugee law.
- To assist refugees to meet their essential needs and enjoy their economic and social rights with dignity, contributing to the country that hosts them and finding long term solutions for themselves.
- To ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on equal footing and are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives. (AGD approach)
- To ensure that settlement and shelter related policies and decisions are driven primarily by the best interests of refugees (rather than the interests of UNHCR or Government).

### 3. Underlying principles and standards

In all circumstances (urban or rural) shelters should meet the following criteria:

- Dwellings should be of sufficient quality to last several years, and should offer persons of concern safe, secure, healthy and dignified accommodation.
- Their layout and size should provide adequate living conditions, sufficient to give persons a sense of ownership and help them regain their livelihoods.
- They should be easy to build and maintain, because persons of concern will participate in their construction and upkeep (aided by necessary technical, organizational and material support).
- Shelter assistance should prioritize groups with specific needs, including women (in particular female-headed households), children, older people, and persons with a disabilities. Criteria have been developed to help identify those most in need of assistance.
- Displaced populations should be empowered to build their own shelters with the necessary organizational and material support and to participate in all phases of the shelter programme.
- Shelter solutions should be cost effective, use local materials to the extent possible, and adequately reflect cultural preferences and traditional lifestyle of persons of concern.
- Shelter solutions should have the least possible impact on the natural environment. Careful consideration should be given to the sourcing of local materials to prevent environmental damage. Shelters should provide covered living space that is sufficient to allow a household to carry out essential household and livelihood activities (including space to cook, sleep, and store belongings).
- Designs should take into account: climate, topography, hazards and environmental risks, national and international minimum standards, livelihoods, and the local availability of resources, including materials, skills and infrastructure.

To ensure "a life in dignity", SPHERE Standards and UNHCR Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018 provide practical advice on how best to design a different types of shelters and uphold the rights of displaced persons.

At the beginning of an emergency, the aim should be to provide sufficient material to the refugees to allow them to construct their own shelter while meeting at least the minimum standards for floor space as follows

- Minimum 3.5m<sup>2</sup> covered living space per person in tropical or warm climates, excluding cooking facilities or kitchen. (it is assumed that cooking will take place outside).
- Minimum height of 2m at the highest point.
- Minimum 4.5m<sup>2</sup> to 5.5m<sup>2</sup> covered living space per person in cold climates including kitchen , as more time will be spent inside the shelter (cooking, eating, and livelihoods). 2m ceilings to reduce the heated space.

In urban areas there will be less external space for cooking or bathing facilities. Shelter solutions will need to adapt to space constraints especially in the medium to long term (two story shelters for example). The design of shelter should, if possible, provide for modification by its occupants to suit their individual needs.

#### **4. Protection Risks**

The right to adequate housing was first recognized with Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The principle: 'Everyone has the right to adequate housing' is applicable in all stages of the displacement cycle prior to, during and after displacement, and is relevant to all persons of concern, including women, girls, men, and boys. Adequacy of housing includes security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy.

- Displaced persons in town and cities tend to settle in informal settlements and slums, or peripheral land that is unsuitable for residential use (waste sites, ravine banks, canals, roads or railways), where they lack security of tenure and are exposed to natural disasters.
- They may also occupy the limited public spaces available to city dwellers; relations with the local community might deteriorate if the persons of concern occupy already limited number of public spaces such as parks, roads, or public squares.
- In urban environments, persons of concern must compete in the low-cost housing market but often lack money for a deposit or the references or documentation required. Persons of concern are vulnerable to exploitation by their landlords where regulations require proof of residence or citizenship to establish a tenancy agreement.
- Criminal groups can be prolific in urban areas; persons of concern can be targeted or recruited by organized crime. They may also be accused and blamed for neighbourhoods' problems such as conflict between families, criminal acts – often despite lack of evidence, thefts, etc. Verbal abuse or accusations can become physical abuse, and persons of concern may not receive protection from the authorities.
- Economies in urban environment are primarily cash based; agriculture is nonexistent; water points require payment. Access to food, water, and other necessities will come at a cost, which may force persons of concern to adopt negative coping mechanisms.
- Displaced children in urban areas face great risks. Lack of access to education can be caused by lack of resources, fear of the local community, or the need for children to complement household income. Lack of parental supervision and access to schools, and the overall poverty can lead girls and boys to try and fend for themselves and exposing them to child labour, sex work and theft. For girls especially the risks of early sex, exploitative sex and sex work is greater in cities and towns.
- Inadequate housing can forced families to live in overcrowded conditions, or to separate. Children may be sent to live with other neighbours exposing them to neglect and abuse.

- Displaced unaccompanied children, particularly child-headed households, are particularly exposed to protection risks due to a lack of appropriate shelter, including trafficking and various forms of violence, abuse or exploitation.

## 5. Other risks

Persons of concern in urban areas tend to settle in high risk areas or hazardous environments such as unused warehouses, factories, unfinished buildings, and the land surrounding those sites. Exposure to contaminants can be high.

The presence of displaced populations, especially in dispersed self-settlement without legal status or spontaneous settlements can become a political factor and their removal a political platform for elected city officials often resulting in forced evictions.

## 6. Key decision points

Shelter solutions must provide protection from the elements, privacy, emotional security and a space to live and store belongings in a dignified manner. They should be culturally and socially appropriate and familiar. Suitable local materials are best, if available, and shelters must be able to cope with changes of season. Whenever possible, persons of concern should build their own shelters, with appropriate technical, organisational and material support. This helps to ensure that dwellings meet their users' particular needs, generates a sense of ownership and self-reliance, and reduces costs and construction time.

Individual family shelter should always be preferred to communal accommodation as it provides the necessary privacy, psychological comfort, and emotional safety. It also provides safety and security for people and possessions and helps to preserve or rebuild family unity.

It is likely that the response in urban areas will require a combination of approaches to meet the needs of the displaced population. Because land is less available large camps, whether planned or spontaneous are unlikely. Small spontaneous camps however can appear if no other solution is found. Deciding which options to support will be a key determinant in the quality of life persons of concern are able to achieve during their displacement. The following table provide some guidance on the most frequently used shelter solutions in urban centres.

<b>Settlement typology</b>	<b>Most frequently used shelter solutions</b>
<p><b>Hosting neighbourhoods.</b></p> <p>It is crucial to ensure that host arrangements are sustainable and that hosted refugees do not put a strain on host families. Living conditions should remain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plastic sheeting to extend the host accommodation</li> </ul>

<p>adequate and hosting should not reduce access to services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter kit to create an extension</li> <li>• Cash assistance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Short term tenancy (land, house, apartment, room).</b></p> <p>In a competitive market persons of concern may be vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation by unscrupulous land lords. Rental agreements may not be formal or enforced, leaving persons of concern lacking security of tenure and vulnerable to abuse.</p> <p>Rent inflation and speculation may occur if the demand for rented property is high. Rental accommodation that is available and affordable is often substandard.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual or shared accommodation</li> <li>• Cash assistance</li> <li>• Plastic sheeting</li> <li>• Shelter kit</li> <li>• Local construction</li> <li>• Rental support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collective centres</b></p> <p>Buildings should be rehabilitated and upgraded to meet residents' need of shelter and services.</p> <p>Collective centres should be managed and maintained throughout the period refugees live in them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One room accommodation</li> <li>• Plastic sheeting</li> <li>• Shelter kit</li> <li>• Local construction (adaptation)</li> <li>• Cash assistance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dispersed self-settlement without legal status.</b></p> <p>Self-settlements do not always comply with government policy or standards, so it is important to negotiate an arrangement with Government. Relocation to official locations may be envisaged to minimize protection risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tents</li> <li>• Plastic sheeting</li> <li>• Shelter kit</li> <li>• Cash assistance</li> </ul>

## 7. Key steps

- An initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should be carried out within the first three days of an emergency, to identify needs and resources. Commission multi-sectoral teams to make sure that all issues are taken into account. Use the findings to design and organize more in depth needs assessments as needed.
- Locate and map the location of persons of concern.
- Based on the assessment prioritize lifesaving activities and priorities, and anticipate medium and long term shelter needs.
- Identify and prioritize shelter assistance for the most at risk groups (female-headed households, children under 5, elderly, people with disabilities, etc.). Vulnerability indicators for households and individuals should be contextualised. When doing this, consider the livelihood profiles of all persons of concern.
- Identify the range of shelter solutions that are preferred by, and that can be made available to persons of concern.
- Prepare an urban planning strategy. It should be based on analysis of residential areas, housing affordability and availability, and the absorption capacity of host communities.
- Ensure that persons of concern participate in the planning process. The above steps will largely determine whether a single or combined shelter solution is most appropriate.
- Develop a shelter and settlement strategy. Make sure the shelter and settlement strategy includes arrangements to transition from shelter assistance to more durable and sustainable long term solutions.
- 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**

- Ensure that an experienced shelter and settlement expert is part of the response team.
- Work closely with development agencies and government authorities that have expertise in urban development and urban social provision.
- Give specific attention to security of tenure, density of shelter occupation, and tensions between persons of concern and host populations.
- Collaborate closely with local actors, grassroots movements, organizations, and government authorities that can help to map the location of persons of concern or assess levels of the vulnerability in households and urban areas.
- Monitor the housing conditions of persons of concern; ensure they live in adequate conditions and are not forced into sub-standard accommodation on the periphery of cities.
- Permission to occupy public or private buildings should be set out in legal agreements. This reduces the risk of eviction and means that persons of concern can enjoy a safer and more secure living environment that complies with internationally recognized minimum standards.

- At the outset of a crisis it is sensible to consider a mix of settlement and shelter options in consultation with the host Government. Initial strategies can include the adaptation of unused public buildings, arrangements with community groups, rent support. Water and sanitation services need to be available in all cases.
- In cities and towns rental support can be a viable shelter solution. See Entry on rental accommodation strategy for more information.
- Ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the decision making process to determine the appropriate settlement solutions to support.
- In cities and towns Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues will be more complex. Regulations can be difficult to navigate. Most cities develop rapidly and informally and land use plans and ordinances are often out of date. Built up areas of informal settlements may for example still be designated as green belts and housing in those areas have no legal recognition. Acquiring tenure security in those areas for displaced populations will be as or more difficult than it already is for its regular residents.
- Ensure you have the appropriate technical support to clarify HLP issues and processes. Informal agreements may be the only agreements possible during the emergency response.

## 9. Resources and partnerships

- The affected population.
- Local or central government authorities , city officials
- Community and religious leaders
- Host community
- National and international NGOs
- Academic institutions
- IFRC and ICRC
- Other UN and international organizations
- National (particularly local language) and international news media

## 10. Links

UNHCR Intranet: Shelter and Settlement

UNHCR Emergency Information Management Toolkit – Shelter and Settlement:

<p><b>Need help?</b></p>
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**CONTACT** Contact the Shelter and Settlement Section, Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). At: HQShelter@unhcr.org

## **Annexes**

- UNHCR, Policy on alternatives to camps, 2014
- UNHCR, Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter, 2014-2018

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