

Shelter Cluster

15 October 2024

Key points

- Contact UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section in the Division of Resilience and Solutions (DRS) as soon as there is an indication that cluster activation will be discussed. This early contact allows the section to provide guidance and effective support
- UNHCR leads the Shelter Cluster in conflict-related emergencies. Representatives should consult UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section if they believe their office cannot assume this role, as a decision not to lead contradicts UNHCR policy and guidance and can have significant operational and reputational consequences
- Appointing an NGO partner or government body as co-chair / co-lead is encouraged by the IASC, where appropriate and possible. However, this decision should only be made after consulting UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section due to its operational implications
- Coordinating a cluster is a full-time responsibility and should not be combined nor merged with other functions. A dedicated full-time Shelter Cluster Coordination Officer and Information Management Officer (IMO) should be appointed. Other coordination positions (Technical Coordinator, Sub-national Cluster Coordinators) are also typically required
- UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section can deploy surge capacity for coordination and information management at short notice to help establish a cluster or provide support during emergencies. It can also provide advice and assistance from headquarters

1. Overview

The Global Shelter Cluster was established in 2005 and is co-led by UNHCR (for conflict situations) and IFRC (for disaster situations) at the global level. The Shelter Cluster is an inter-agency mechanism coordinating shelter, settlements, and shelter-related non-food items (NFIs) in humanitarian responses to internal displacement (IDP) situations. When activated at the country level, it coordinates emergency shelter and NFI responses with Shelter Cluster partners,

other clusters, and government authorities, supporting both immediate needs (through the provision of plastic sheeting, shelter kits, tents, cash, and NFIs) and long-term recovery (through transitional shelter, housing reconstruction, capacity building, etc.).

The Shelter Cluster promotes the integration of disaster risk reduction measures into shelter design and construction. Protection mainstreaming and risk analysis, particularly around [housing, land, and property \(HLP\) rights](#), are key considerations. Close coordination with the Protection Cluster and other clusters is therefore essential.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

The Shelter Cluster aims to ensure a coordinated approach to meeting shelter needs, thereby strengthening leadership, coordination, and accountability in the humanitarian shelter sector. UNHCR should advocate for the activation of shelter clusters when there are shelter needs, and when the government requires additional capacity to coordinate shelter-related responses. According to [UNHCR's Policy on Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#), UNHCR should lead the Shelter Cluster in conflict situations.

The UNHCR Global Shelter Cluster Section should be contacted immediately if cluster activation is anticipated.

Please note that the cluster coordination approach applies in internal displacement and disaster situations. In refugee situations, the IASC framework does not apply, and responses are coordinated under the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM). In mixed contexts, the ["Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice"](#) (2014) applies.

3. Main guidance

The Shelter Cluster has developed a variety of tools and guidance for shelter operations, available on the Global Shelter Cluster (GSC) [website](#). The Global Shelter Cluster Coordinator and the support team at headquarters are available to provide advice as needed.

- **Preparedness/Pre-crisis:**
 - **Understand and familiarize your team with Shelter and settlements issues and the Shelter Cluster, and the responsibilities of UNHCR as Cluster Lead Agency:** The shelter sector is broad, covering household or shelter-related NFIs, emergency shelter, transitional and longer-term shelter, and settlement-related issues, including settlement planning and infrastructure development. UNHCR leads in conflict contexts, which includes being the first point of contact for the activation of the cluster at the country level and acting as the ["provider of last resort"](#).
 - **Familiarize your team with Shelter and the Shelter Cluster:** Educate your team on the broader impact and importance of Shelter in achieving protection, improving health, and creating a foundation for livelihoods. Several helpful resources are available, including the [Guidance Package on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) (public) or [UNHCR's internal "Building Blocks" and the Implementation Planning Tool for IDP contexts](#).

- **Advocate for activation and leadership by UNHCR:** Analyze the evolving emergency situation and the country's context to identify whether existing coordination mechanisms can cope with the demands. Contact donors early on, as resources and donor support will be needed. Donors can offer funding and valuable expertise, insights, and influence with governments and cluster partners, which can significantly support the cluster.
 - **Pre-identify Shelter Cluster partners, particularly the government and local actors:** Begin establishing contacts with shelter actors already present in the country, including local shelter organizations, architects or engineers' societies, and academia. Identify the appropriate government bodies that can serve as counterparts to the Shelter Cluster or co-lead the coordination mechanism, including at the subnational level, where relevant.
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Once the Shelter Cluster is activated at the country level:

- **Cluster Coordination Team:** Appoint a dedicated Shelter Cluster Coordinator and Information Management Officer (IMO).
 - **Terms of Reference (ToR):** Develop clear ToR to define the role of the Shelter Cluster, its scope, membership regulations, and national structure, including sub-national coordination mechanisms where appropriate. Where appropriate and possible, co-leadership with Government bodies and NGO partners is strongly encouraged.
 - **Strategic Advisory Group (SAG):** Chaired by the Cluster Coordinator, the SAG is responsible for developing the [cluster](#) strategic framework, setting priorities, and managing the work plan. SAG members should represent the full range of Shelter Cluster partners (e.g., INGOs, national NGOs, UN agencies, government representatives), with no more than 10 members.
 - **Shelter Strategy:** Initially, create a one-page document outlining the goals of the Shelter Cluster, including responsibilities and timeframes. Do not aim for perfection at the outset but focus on providing direction, elaborating details over time. Examples and templates can be found in the [GSC Coordination Toolkit](#).
 - **Information Management:** Establish a regular and predictable dissemination of information management products. The [GSC toolkit](#) and companion materials support this process, with essential tools such as 3/4Ws (Who, What, Where, and With Whom), population data, and key indicators. Harmonizing systems among partners early is crucial, as it becomes harder to implement as the response progresses. The [Shelter Severity Classification](#) (SSC) System can improve IM activities to support evidence-based decision-making.
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Checklist: UNHCR's Roles and Accountabilities in Countries Where it Leads the Shelter Cluster

As the lead agency, the **UNHCR Representative** is accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and responsible for:

- Ensuring that coordination mechanisms are established and supported.

- Serving as the primary point of contact for the government and the HC.
- Representing cluster-specific concerns at the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) level.
- Acting as the provider of last resort.

The **Shelter Cluster Coordinator** is responsible for ensuring the cluster performs six core functions:

- Supporting service delivery by providing a forum for agreement on approaches and eliminating duplication.
- Informing strategic decision-making through coordinated needs assessments, gap analysis, and prioritization.
- Planning and developing strategy, including funding needs and adherence to standards.
- Advocating for concerns on behalf of affected populations and cluster partners.
- Monitoring the cluster strategy and recommending corrective actions.

Conducting contingency planning, preparedness, and capacity building where necessary.

As an operational organization, and as outlined in the guidance on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, assuming cluster leadership involves not only the readiness to coordinate but also the capacity to be operationally relevant, predictable, and accountable.

- **Promoting State Responsibility for Shelter and Settlement Interventions:** Shelter coordination and interventions must be designed with a handover, exit, or transition phase in mind, particularly in protracted displacement situations.
- **Upholding and Maximizing Synergies with Refugee Protection and the Right to Asylum:** This is especially important in mixed contexts, where both internal displacement and refugee concerns must be addressed.
- **Promoting Human Rights:** Special attention should be given to Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights, ensuring they are carefully addressed in all shelter interventions.
- **Applying a Community-Based Approach that is Responsive to Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD):** This ensures that the needs and vulnerabilities of different groups are taken into account in shelter responses.
- **Responding in Partnership:** Shelter responses should foster collaboration with other sectors such as WASH, [CCCM](#), and Protection, as well as development and peacebuilding actors, community-based organizations (CBOs), and faith-based groups.
- **Integrating Protection Principles Across Clusters in an Interagency Response:** Ensuring that protection is a core component of all shelter and settlement interventions.
- **Promoting Comprehensive Solutions:** Shelter interventions are most effective when part of holistic, multi-sectoral approaches at the neighbourhood or settlement level. Every shelter intervention should include adequate access to water and sanitation, proper drainage, health and education facilities, garbage collection, and waste disposal services. Coordination with clusters such as WASH, Health, Education, CCCM, and Protection, as well as local government authorities, is critical to ensure that multi-sectoral issues are addressed. It is equally important to engage with the host community to ensure that interventions are designed collaboratively and benefit both displaced populations and host

communities. Disaster risk reduction should also be considered in every shelter and settlement intervention, with a focus on long-term solutions from the outset of the response.

- **Ensuring Sustainability and Local Capacity:** Shelter interventions should be sustainable and easy to maintain. Prioritize the use of local building practices and materials to ensure that shelters can be repaired and maintained using local knowledge. Consider building the capacity of the local population and local tradespeople, such as masons and carpenters, to support ongoing maintenance and repairs.
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Measuring Shelter Cluster Performance

Shelter Cluster performance can be evaluated against the six core functions of the Clusters and their accountability to affected populations. [The Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring \(CCPM\) Process](#) provides country clusters with a tool for conducting a yearly self-assessment. The standard indicators are organized under the following headings:

1. Supporting service delivery
2. Informing Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) strategic decision-making
3. Planning and implementing cluster strategies
4. Monitoring and evaluating performance
5. Building national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning
6. Supporting robust advocacy
7. Promoting accountability to affected populations

Post emergency phase

UNHCR and IFRC, as co-leads of the Global Shelter Cluster, work in close partnership with shelter actors to develop standardized approaches for shelter responses. They also work on tools and methodologies specific to disaster and conflict contexts, including longer-term considerations.

Shelter interventions often have long-term impacts, so it's essential to define appropriate approaches and technical solutions based on needs and best practices. Advocacy with donors and governments is crucial to securing funding and addressing issues like land allocation and HLP rights. The Shelter Cluster Coordinator plays a key role in advancing coordination and cooperation with other sectors (e.g., WASH, Protection, Early Recovery). Country Shelter Clusters should contribute to the shelter sector sections of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), including the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

Annexes

[IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level 2015](#)

4. Links

[Global Shelter Cluster Website](#) [Global Shelter Cluster Coordination Toolkit](#) [Global Shelter Cluster Information Management Toolkit](#) [Shelter Cluster Performance Monitoring](#) [Shelter severity classification system](#) [More than just a Roof: GSC online training on Shelter Building Blocks \(access for UNHCR staff only\)](#)

5. Main contacts

Functional mailbox: Global Shelter Cluster GSC@unhcr.org