

Shelter Cluster

20 September 2023

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 permits the section to provide guidance and support effectively.
- UNHCR leads the shelter cluster in conflict-related emergencies. Representatives should consult UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section if they feel their office cannot take the lead, as a decision not to lead the shelter cluster contradicts UNHCR policy and guidance and can have important operational and reputational consequences.
- The appointment of a NGO partner or a government body as co-chair is encouraged by the IASC, where appropriate and possible, but should be made after consulting UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section because the decision has important consequences.
- Coordinating a cluster is a full-time job. It should not be merged with another function. A dedicated full-time Shelter Cluster Coordination Officer and a full time Information Management Officer should be appointed. Other coordination positions (Information Manager, Technical Coordinator, Sub-national Cluster Coordinators) are normally also required.
- UNHCR's Global Shelter Cluster Section can deploy surge capacity for Coordination but also Information Management at short notice to help establish a cluster or support during an emergency situation. It can also provide support and advice from headquarters.

1. Overview

The Global Shelter Cluster was established in 2005 and it is co-led by UNHCR (conflict situations) and IFRC (disaster situations) at the global level. The Shelter Cluster is an inter-agency mechanism that coordinates shelter, settlement, and shelter-related non-food items (NFIs) during a humanitarian response for internal displacement (IDP) situations. When activated at country

level, it is responsible for coordinating the emergency shelter and NFI response with Shelter Cluster partners, other clusters and government authorities to support affected populations (through the provision of plastic sheeting, shelter kits, tents, cash, NFIs or other support) and longer-term needs (through transitional shelter, building or reconstruction of houses, capacity building, and related matters).

The Shelter Cluster promotes the inclusion of disaster risk reduction measures in the design and construction of shelters and settlements. Protection mainstreaming and risk analysis, particularly for [housing, land and property \(HLP\)](#), have important implications for shelter interventions. Close coordination with the Protection Cluster but also other clusters is therefore very important.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

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

The UNHCR Global Shelter Cluster Section should be contacted as soon as there is an indication that the activation of clusters will be discussed.

Please note that the cluster coordination approach is applicable in situations of internal displacement and natural disasters. In refugee situations the IASC does not apply, and the response is coordinated within the framework of the (RCM). In mixed settings, the "[Joint UNHCR – OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice](#)" (2014) applies.

3. Main guidance

The Shelter Cluster has developed tools and guidance for shelter operations which can be found on the [GSC website](#). The Global Shelter Cluster Coordinator and the GSC support team at HQ stand ready for any advice needed.

Preparedness/ Pre-Crisis

- Understand and familiarize your team with Shelter and settlements issues and the Shelter Cluster and responsibilities of UNHCR as Cluster Lead Agency: The shelter sector is very broad covering household or shelter-related NFIs, emergency shelter, transitional and longer-term shelter, and issues related to settlements, including settlement planning and infrastructure development. UNHCR is the lead for conflict contexts which includes being the first port of call for the activation of the cluster at country-level, and the responsibility to be the “provider of [last resort](#)”

- Familiarize your team with Shelter and the Shelter Cluster:

Educate your team on the wider impact and importance of Shelter as a way to achieve protection, improve health and a basis for livelihoods. Several helpful tips from the [Guidance Package on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) (public) or the [UNHCR \(internal\) "Building Blocks", the Implementation Planning Tool for IDP contexts](#)

- Advocate for activation and leadership by UNHCR and analyse the country context and evolving emergency situation and identify existing coordination mechanisms and whether they will be able to cope. Get in contact with donors as resources and donor support will be needed early on. Donors will not only be able to provide funding, they have also very useful expertise, insights and leverage with the government and cluster partners that can be of enormous support to the cluster.

- Pre-identify Shelter Cluster Partners, particularly the Government and local actors – start getting in contact with shelter actors present in country, including local shelter actors or other organization, e.g. architects or engineers' societies, local academia or research. Identify which of the different government bodies will be best placed to be the counterpart of the Shelter Cluster or to co-lead a coordination mechanism, where applicable, including at subnational level.

Once the activation of the Shelter Cluster at country level has been activated:

- ✓ Establish a cluster coordination team: When UNHCR takes the leadership of a Shelter Cluster, a dedicated Shelter Cluster Coordinator should be appointed. Information management capacity should also be put in place.

- ✓ Define national Shelter Cluster ToR: Establish a clear ToR clarifying the role of the cluster in this specific context, scope, regulations for membership and national structure including subnational structures. Where appropriate and possible, co-leadership with Government bodies and NGO partners is strongly encouraged.

- ✓ Create a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG): Chaired by the Cluster Coordinator, the SAG is responsible for developing and adjusting the strategic framework, priorities and work plan for the [cluster](#). SAGs must represent the overall cluster partnerships, including the different types of cluster partners (International NGOs, national NGOs, UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement) but also government representatives. A SAG should not have more than about ten members.

✓ Outline a shelter strategy: Aim initially for a quickly produced one page document that outlines what the cluster would like to do, why, by who, how and by when. Do not aim for perfection initially but rather create something that gives direction and elaborate details with time. Examples and templates can be found in the [GSC Coordination Toolkit](#).

✓ Establish a regular and predictable dissemination of Information Management Products. The GSC has a [toolkit](#) and a companion available to support this. Initially this should include activity planning, 3/4Ws (Who, What, Where, and with Whom), and basic information on population, key indicators and mapping. The onset of an emergency is a critical moment to harmonize systems among partners as this becomes increasingly challenging as the response becomes more established. The [Shelter Severity Classification](#) (SSC) System can improve IM activities to support evidence-based decision-making.

Checklist on UNHCR's roles and accountabilities in countries where UNHCR leads the Shelter Cluster

As Shelter cluster lead agency, the **UNHCR Representative** as head of the Shelter Cluster lead agency is accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and is responsible to:

- Ensure that coordination mechanisms are established and properly supported.
- Serve as first point of call for the Government and the Humanitarian Coordinator.
- Represent at the HCT cluster-specific concerns and challenges that the cluster cannot solve.
- Act as provider of last resort.

The **Shelter Cluster Coordinator** is responsible and accountable for ensuring that the Shelter Cluster performs the following six core functions:

- To support service delivery by providing a forum in which approaches can be agreed and duplication eliminated.
- To inform the strategic decision-making of the Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Country Team by coordinating needs assessments, gap analysis, and prioritization.
- To plan and develop strategy (including cluster plans, adherence to standards, funding needs, HPC processes, CERF and Country-Based Pool Fund processes, etc.) and mobilise resources
- To advocate for identified concerns on behalf of affected populations and cluster partners.
- To monitor and report on the cluster strategy and its results and recommend corrective action where necessary.
- To conduct contingency planning, preparedness, and capacity building where needed.

As an Operational Organization and as indicated in the guidance on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, assuming cluster leadership not only implies readiness to coordinate, but also readiness to be operationally relevant, predictable and accountable.

1. Promoting State responsibility for Shelter and Settlements interventions: Ultimately this suggests that shelter coordination and shelter interventions need to be designed with a handover/exit or transition phase in mind, especially where internal displacement is likely to remain protracted.

2. Upholding and maximizing synergies with refugee protection and right to asylum, predominantly in mixed contexts;

3. Promoting human rights: Particularly Housing Land and Property (HLP) rights should be carefully addressed.

4. Applying a community-based approach responsive to age, gender and diversity (AGD);

5. Responding in partnership: Designing a response that fosters collaboration with other sectors such as WASH, [CCCM](#), and Protection as well as development and peace actors, CBOs and faith groups.

6. Infusing protection principles across clusters in an interagency response;

7. Promoting comprehensive solutions: Shelter interventions are more meaningful when holistic, multi-sectoral interventions at a neighbourhood or settlement level are considered. All shelter interventions should include adequate access to water and sanitation, all settlements should have drainage, health and education facilities, garbage collection and waste disposal facilities. Engagement with the WASH, Health, Education, CCCM, and Protection clusters, but also (local) government authorities will be important to ensure multi-sectoral issues are adequately addressed. It is also essential to include the host community and find ways to ensure that the interventions are designed jointly and will also benefit them. Disaster risk reduction should be considered in every shelter and settlement intervention. Overall, keep in mind these approaches and long-term solutions from the start of a response.

8. Disengaging responsibility: Shelter interventions should be sustainable and as easy to maintain as possible. Local building practices and local materials should be prioritised so that shelters can be maintained and repaired with the existing know-how. Building capacity of the local population and local builders such as masons and carpenters should also be considered.

The Shelter Cluster performance can be measured against the 6 core functions of the Clusters and accountability to affected population. The [CCPM Process](#) is a tool provided to country Clusters to carry out a yearly self-assessment. Standard indicators will follow the following headings:

1. Supporting service delivery
2. Informing HC/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 Shelter Cluster co-lead agencies at global level, work in close partnership with shelter actors to develop common approaches for shelter responses while developing more specific tools and methodologies for Disasters and Conflict contexts, which might include longer-term considerations. The Shelter Cluster develops an overarching strategy to provide a harmonized, efficient and effective humanitarian shelter response and support resource mobilization efforts.

Given the often long-term impact of shelter interventions, it is essential to ensure that appropriate approaches and technical solutions are defined based on good practices, needs, and capacities. Advocacy with donors and government is a key activity of a Shelter Cluster in order to get funding for cluster partners and support for issues such as land allocation or other HLP issues. The Shelter Cluster Coordinator also plays a crucial role in advancing coordination and cooperation between different sectors' intervention (e.g. WASH, Protection, Early Recovery (where existing), etc.). Country Shelter Clusters should coordinate and provide inputs to the shelter sector sections of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) and its outputs 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 <info@sheltercluster.org>