Site planning for transit centres

29 March 2023

Key points

- Assess the suitability of transit centres and ensure that they meet basic standards.
- Develop a comprehensive plan. It should make provision for assessments, include scenarios, and establish indicators, as well as a schedule of operations from inception of the transit camp to its closure.
- Avoid very large transit centres where possible.
- Take steps to avoid congestion and very high density.
- Coordinate with other sectors and seek technical support when you need it.

1. Overview

Options for accommodating refugees include planned camps, collective centres (public or private buildings), and reception or transit centres.

Transit centres are used as temporary shelters for new arrivals and to provide short-term temporary accommodation for displaced populations pending transfer to a more suitable, safe and longer term settlement. They provide a habitable covered living space, a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity to people of concern for a short period (2-5 days) while they wait for new settlements to be constructed or until shelter can be found in other accommodation or host villages. These facilities can be used at the very onset of an emergency or within the context of a repatriation operation, as a staging point for return.

Transit centres are usually constructed on land allocated by Government. They should provide adequate protection, access to water and sanitation, hygiene, health services, and nutrition, in addition to shelter.
2. Main guidance

Protection objectives

- To provide a safe environment for new arrivals and increase the chances of survival of persons of concern.
- To improve understanding of the nature and scale of refugee movement.
- To better adapt the response to immediate needs by gathering information on refugee origin, security, points of entry, vulnerabilities, gender and age composition, etc.
- To gain greater understanding of the settlement options preferred by persons of concern and host communities.
- To safeguard social rights and ensure the availability of adequate shelter, food, clean water and sanitation.

Underlying principles and standards

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25 (1)

‘Everyone has the right to adequate housing'. This principle applies in all stages of the displacement cycle and is relevant to all people of concern, including women, girls, men, and boys. ‘Adequate housing' covers security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, as well as affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy.

For practical advice on how to set up, coordinate and manage transit centres in a manner that will satisfy minimum standards and uphold the rights of displaced people, see the section below on Tools, documents and references.

Protection Risks

Transit centres should not be considered for accommodation longer than 5 unless they offer appropriate support, including privacy, independence, and adequate accommodation. It is important to ensure that smoke from stoves or open fires does not pose a health and disease risk. Transit centres may house a high proportion of older persons, single people, and families. A prolonged period of stay is likely to result in stress and tension, possibly leading to depression, social conflict, friction between or within families, conflicts between clans or ethnic groups, and other individual or psychosocial problems.

Persons of concern in transit centres may face a number of other threats:

- Refoulement
- Arbitrary arrest/detention
- Inadequate shelter, inadequate heat, lack of clothing
- Inadequate food or means to prepare it
- Inadequate water supply (quantity and quality)
- Lack of firewood or fuel
- Epidemics and other threats to public health; poor medical facilities
- Political violence
- Physical violence, sexual and gender-based exploitation and violence, including rape
- Domestic violence, abuse and neglect
- Trafficking

**Other risks**

Where transit centres provide temporary accommodation for population en-route to a further location, they can stall due to a lack of capacity to receive populations at the end of their journey.

**Key decision points**

Transit centres are often located in or on the edge of camps to ensure that persons of concern do not have to live in the open on their arrival. They may also be located closer to the border en-route to a camp. They are especially preferred in situations where more than 150 people arrive per day in a steady flow. Local and national authorities are responsible for site selection, which has important consequences.

Transit centres are primarily a life-saving measure. They should be located in a place that is socially and environmentally appropriate and should meet public health norms. Their layout and whether they are located inside or outside camps can significantly influence the safety and well-being of those who stay in them. Other issues that planners should consider include: water (quality, quantity, and access), sanitation, administration and security, food distribution, health, education, community services, and access to income-generating activities.

Particular care must be taken to include persons of concern as the planning phase to reduce the potential for tension and conflict between persons of concern and host populations, and improve settlement and shelter strategies. Persons of concern must be involved as early as possible in decisions that affect them.

**Key steps**

**Management**

Managers should take steps to:

- Strengthen coordination between stakeholders.
- Identify (within a short time) the most suitable option or combination of options for refugee accommodation.
- Promote good relations between people within the same transit centre.
- Provide protection and security for residents. (For example, risks of sexual violence may be
reduced by providing adequate lighting at night.)
- Provide privacy to residents and make sure they are secure and safe. (Personal spaces should be lockable to increase personal safety. Arrangements should be made for safe evacuation in the event of fire.
- Ensure registration and issue appropriate documentation to persons of concern.
- Protect the human rights of residents and other persons of concern.
- Assess and monitor exposure to risk. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) may increase in transit centres that lack proper monitoring mechanisms.

Site Planning
Managers and staff should:

- Ensure that appropriate locations are selected. Consider security, accessibility, environmental factors, infrastructure, livelihoods, access to basic services, cultural identity, integration, etc.
- Be ready to adapt and maintain transit centres for long term use if necessary.
- Uphold UNHCR's protection mandate and apply UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity Approach.
- Ensure that planning minimise the need for subsequent repair and adjustment.
- Ensure that facilities improve the provision of services (ease of use, cost effectiveness).
- Ensure the most efficient use of land, resources and time.
- Maintain health and safety standards on building sites; make clear who has responsibilities in case of accidents; prepare sites (level, mark out, dispose of construction waste, clear vegetation, lay hard surfaces, provide landscaping, drainage, and utilities, etc.); make arrangements for handover.

Key management considerations

It is important to support and protect persons of concern, distance them from danger, and provide them with appropriate and durable settlement options. These objectives cannot be achieved without regularly updating information on the size and composition of displaced populations. Because large-scale emergencies are usually unpredictable and happen quickly, managers should take steps to:

- Assess available resources and request resources as required.
- Request support from other local or international implementing partners and organisations.
- Improve field co-ordination and avoid duplication and inefficiency.
- Support low-cost self-settlement options (if possible), such as accommodation in host communities.
- Adopt temporary emergency arrangements when required, while preparing longer term solutions that meet international standards.
Resources and partnerships

- Local or central Government authorities (including military officials).
- Community and religious leaders.
- Host communities.
- National and international NGOs.
- IFRC and ICRC.
- Other UN and international organizations.
- National (particularly local language) and international news media.

Annexes

UNHCR, Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, Guidance Note 12, Coordination and Management of camps and other collective settings

UNHCR, Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018

IOM, Collective Centres Guidelines, 2010


Sphere Handbook (2018)

3. Links

UNHCR, Guidance Note 12, Coordination and Management of camps and other collective settings... The Sphere Handbook 2018

4. Main contacts

Contact the Shelter and Settlement Section (SSS), Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). At: HQShelter@unhcr.org.