Managing and supporting spontaneous settlements

25 April 2023

Key points

- Reorganizing, relocating or upgrading spontaneous settlements will require expert support and additional operational capacity.

- Prompt assessment of alternative sites is crucial to protect persons of concern from hazards. Determine the appropriate strategy (support, relocate or move) as soon and carefully as possible. Poor decisions made at the start of an operation are difficult to reverse and have significant consequences as settlements evolve.

- Pursue alternatives to camps whenever possible, while ensuring that persons of concern receive effective protection and assistance.

- Involve local authorities and people of concern in the planning process. An adequate supply of water throughout the year is vital. The settlement's sanitation strategy should reflect the specific soil type at the site.

- In all types of settlement, persons of concern should enjoy sufficient space for shelter and associated basic services. Reference Sphere 2018 p. 240 to 286.

- The layout and organization of spontaneous settlements often reflect the priorities and preferences of their residents. These should be taken into consideration when upgrading or relocating.

- They are often densely settled in the centre and sparsely settled on the edge, complicating efforts to establish communal facilities and infrastructure.

- Once spontaneous settlements have been established, it is difficult to upgrade facilities (sanitation, power, etc.). Upgrading usually also causes the settled population to lose some resources and investment.
1. Overview

Spontaneous settlements occur when persons of concern populate areas without agreement, assistance or guidance from local government or the humanitarian-aid community. Such settlements are located on land the displaced population does not officially have the right to occupy.

A camp's location, layout and available services significantly impact on protection and access to assistance. Initial site selection has an impact on decisions throughout the camp life-cycle. Ideally, UNHCR and partners should be involved in site selection and planning of all camps; however, in reality a large number of settlements are settled spontaneously before support is available. Spontaneous settlements are formed by persons of concern without adequate planning in order to meet immediate needs.

Generally, spontaneous settlements have more disadvantages than advantages. Re-designing the camp is generally necessary (where resources are available) as may be re-location as early as possible, to a well-identified site; especially if there is conflict with local host community. The layout, infrastructure and shelter of a camp will have a major influence on the safety and well-being of its residents. Spontaneous settlements include but are not limited to: empty buildings, vacant land, road sidings, etc.

The permission to settle on these sites is usually informal, often an ad hoc agreement with host community and requires reconsideration or negotiation with authorities or private landowners. In the interests of persons of concern and their security, it is important to recognize existence of traditional or informal land tenure arrangements.

2. Main guidance

**Protection objectives**

- To provide a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity to persons of concern
- To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, poor access to services, safe living environment and unhygienic living conditions.
- To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.

Spontaneous settlements often occupy land that is unsuitable (such as flood plains), mainly because such land is unwanted and available. Urgent consideration should be given to relocation if the site has been judged to be unsatisfactory. Relocation should be done in coordination with the local authorities and government. The difficulty in moving persons of concern from an
unsuitable site increases markedly with time. Even if people already in such spontaneous settlements cannot be moved, consideration should be given to diverting new arrivals to alternative more suitable locations.

**Underlying principles and standards**

Before considering the upgrading of a spontaneous settlement, determine if it is possible to pursue alternatives which can ultimately be more sustainable and cost-effective, harness the potential of refugees, rationalize service delivery or allow for more targeted assistance to those most in need.

Persons of concern may not have access to basic services. In all types of settlement, persons of concern should have access to water, sanitation, roads and infrastructure, community spaces, shelter, health, education, food, and livelihoods.

Consider whether the spontaneous settlement should be upgraded and supported in situ, moved to a different location, or persons of concern relocated to a more suitable settlement (such as a planned camp or collective centre/alternative to camp arrangement).

Once the decision to upgrade has been made, the same principles and standards that apply to planned camps will apply to the retrofitting of a spontaneous settlement. SPHERE emergency standards are the key reference to designing settlements. See DEH entry 66. Site planning - planned settlements and camps, and 186. Planned settlements / camp site planning standards.

**Protection Risks**

- The often informal agreements to occupy the land may not protect the persons of concern from abuse, exploitation or forced eviction. The power relationship between landlord and tenant(s) may be unequal.
- The environment of a camp is particularly conducive to exploitative and manipulative activities by people who seek to gain from the persons of concern due to the range of risks they face and specific needs – especially during an emergency. In spontaneous camps it may be even more difficult to identify and protect persons of concern from those elements.

**Other risks**

- Conflict may arise with the host community if the presence of refugees increases strain in local services and makes access to resources such as water more difficult.
- The location, size and the design of camps can contribute to the maintenance of a peaceful environment and the security for refugees and local residents. Spontaneous settlements are often located in high risk areas vulnerable to hazards and tend to have very high density. Overcrowding increases health risks as well as tensions, violence and crime.
Key decision points

Take account of the following when you address spontaneous settlements.

- Negotiate with the host Government the best settlement option to ensure persons of concern in spontaneous settlements have equal access to humanitarian assistance.
- Use SWOT analysis to determine the most suitable option to support persons of concern in spontaneous camps. Explore alternatives to camps, relocation of the settlement to a suitable site, relocation of residents, upgrading of the site, rental subsidies, etc.
- Discuss with partners (especially local authorities, community-based organizations and representatives of persons of concern and the host community) the possibilities for persons of concern to integrate into the host community. Agree how they can be assisted to do so.
- Clarify ownership of buildings and land.
- Ensure that persons of concern can safely access all shelters and settlement locations, and essential services.
- Involve local authorities and persons of concern in planning temporary communal settlements, by family, neighbourhood or village groups as appropriate.
- Ensure adequate fire separation between shelters, in accordance with relevant standards.
- Involve development partners as early as possible.
- Ensure that specialized technical support is in place and that physical site planners are deployed in a timely manner.
- Seek technical support from relevant Government departments and ensure that local authority experts are involved in settlement planning.
- Make use of the settlement's layout and topography to minimize the settlement's adverse impact on the natural environment, and provide adequate drainage.

Key steps

1. Determine whether other settlement options are available to persons of concern, such as accommodation with host families or rental support.
2. Determine whether the spontaneous settlement is to be supported in situ or relocated.
3. Put together a team to manage the project; ensure there is good continuity across each phase of the settlement cycle.
4. Work with programmes to identify implementing partners.
5. Conduct a thorough site assessment taking into account topography, land use, climate, soils, geology, hydrology, vegetation, infrastructure and key natural and cultural resources. Conduct soil tests, hydrological surveys, detailed topographical surveys, etc.
6. Acquire a detailed understanding of residents' needs by means of an assessment.
7. Establish coordination mechanisms or working groups with key stakeholders.
8. Consider local guidelines, regulations and practices. Ensure that liaison with local and national Governments is both adequate and effective and that there is inter-sectoral engagement.
9. Conduct an environmental impact assessment and incorporate its findings into plans.
10. Develop designs into working drawings that include detailed specifications.
11. Establish project management plans, checklists, and operating procedures.
12. Work with programmes and logistics on procurement and awarding of contracts.
13. Establish monitoring and evaluation frameworks for continued monitoring.
14. Establish reporting criteria and project tracking mechanisms.
15. Develop completion and handover certification.
16. Develop maintenance and exit plans.

**Key management considerations**

The following issues should be taken into account when addressing spontaneous settlements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>For consideration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>◦ Opportunities to increase self-sufficiency, if agriculture or grazing is possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ If many persons of concern move into sparsely occupied areas, they may outnumber the original residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>◦ If persons of concern are scattered across urban areas, data on them will be hard to gather.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Upgrading existing urban settlements is challenging in the absence of a legal framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural &amp; urban</td>
<td>◦ Persons of concern are unlikely to interact with local communities or authorities or aid organisations if they are considered to be illegal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Involve persons of concern in strategic planning and construction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Assist persons of concern to integrate into the local community, and develop positive coping strategies and some autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ If households can choose who they live next to and how they organize themselves, tension between refugees and the host population is less likely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ If persons of concern are forced into illegal work, the incidence of exploitation and abuse will rise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Take steps to provide access to housing. Too often, persons of concern can only access sub-standard housing in areas vulnerable to natural hazards,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and live in crowded and unsanitary environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Take steps to protect persons of concern from eviction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Be aware that persons of concern become less visible when they are dispersed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Locating those in need of assistance will take time and resources.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Issues to bear in mind when considering spontaneous settlements.
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.
- Private sector as appropriate.

Annexes

UNHCR, Global strategy for settlement and shelter 2014-2018

Policy on Alternatives to Camps

Sphere Handbook (2018)

3. Links


4. Main contacts

Consult the Shelter and settlement section, Division of Programme Support and Management. At: HQShelter@unhcr.org.