

Alternatives to camps - response in urban and rural settings

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Key points

- When the refugee emergency risk is medium or high, always undertake contingency planning and advanced preparedness actions.
- Prioritise registration, assessment, profiling and information management from the start, to ensure effective delivery of core protection functions.
- Identify local partners, including local municipalities and community-based organisations, and build an outreach and referral network as soon as possible.
- Do not set up camps or parallel delivery systems. Wherever possible, mainstream refugees into national systems and structures.
- Seek efficient and adapted delivery mechanisms. Prefer cash-based approaches; draw on new technologies and innovative approaches. Focus on what refugees want.
- Activate coordination mechanisms at once. Do so in a transparent and well-documented manner.
- Invest in market-based livelihood strategies early on in the emergency.
- Consider that spatial planning and design can serve as a critical enabler and platform for aligning coordination and prioritization efforts in preparing for a refugee / IDP influx and addressing their needs in short, medium and long term.

1. Overview

Millions of refugees have settled peacefully in rural and urban areas, living on land or in housing that they rent, own or occupy informally, or benefiting from hosting arrangements in communities or families. For refugees, such settlements present obvious advantages over

camps: they can be anonymous, can earn money, and construct a future. They also present dangers: refugees often live in the poorest areas, may lack legal documents, are vulnerable to exploitation, arrest and [detention](#), and can find it difficult to find safe livelihood opportunities.

During a refugee influx, national and local authorities have a primary role in ensuring that refugees are protected and assisted and can find durable solutions. UNHCR should encourage all states to exercise this responsibility and provide the necessary support. In an emergency situation, however, states are often in greater need of operational support by the humanitarian community to fulfil this responsibility. In such context, UNHCR must pursue proactive and innovative approaches that strengthen the protection of all [age, gender and diversity](#) categories within a refugee population to settle safely outside of camps, whenever possible, and that support access to adequate shelter, basic services (health, water, sanitation and education) and safe and decent jobs. This can only be achieved in an enabling protection environment through a high degree and new forms of collaboration with governments, civil society, development actors as per UNHCR global compact and partners aimed at building on the capacity and independence of refugees themselves.

In this entry, 'urban and rural' refers to all populations living outside planned / managed camps, including those who live in cities and rural areas.

2. Main guidance

Context characteristics and risks associated

- Host governments may lack an enabling national legal and policy framework (permitting freedom of movement and the right to work, for example).
- Host governments are concerned about national security, and the economic and social impacts of a refugee presence, as well as the costs and impact of eventual solutions. For these reasons, they often tend to restrict refugees to camps.
- Refugees may place a strain on local services (education, healthcare and infrastructure, including housing), which are often already under strain. They may arrive in rural areas which lack infrastructure, land and basic services.
- In urban areas displaced persons are often subjected to low incomes (if any), low levels of access to housing, water, sanitation, education & health services and malnutrition.
- Creative approaches (to registration and protection, monitoring, support, and services) are required in order to know where and who refugees are, bring hidden problems to light, and resolve them.
- Refugees often find it difficult to access basic services, such as health care and education. Giving them documents that attest their identity and status can enable them to move freely, obtain access to basic services, protect themselves from exploitation and abuse, and gain access to justice.
- Refugees in urban areas may be subject to xenophobic attacks and treated with mistrust by host communities. UNHCR and partners need to adopt a comprehensive approach that includes working with host communities.
- When refugees decide to settle outside camps, they may face new threats, including the

risk of [detention](#). These may cause them to avoid contact with UNHCR (the hidden displaced). Protection risks are particularly acute when refugees are officially excluded from urban areas and the labour market.

- It is often assumed that refugees in urban areas enjoy easy access to UNHCR. This is not necessarily the case. Refugees are often concentrated in slum areas, shanty towns or suburbs, which are usually a long and expensive journey away from the nearest UNHCR office.
- In large-scale emergencies, the number of different actors potentially involved in programming may make it difficult to coordinate a refugee response effectively and transparently.
- Coordinating a refugee response outside camps is particularly complex. Refugee needs and the humanitarian response need to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach, taking into consideration the needs and absorption capacity of host communities and families.
- Coordinating the refugee response outside of camps is more complex and requires situating UNHCR's work within the broader framework of national development, international development cooperation, and the humanitarian response to different populations living in the same area, rather than addressing humanitarian and development concerns in an entirely separate and "stove-piped" manner.
- Efforts to provide, protect, and promote livelihoods for refugees must create and build links with the local economy, and avoid undermining local livelihoods and growth.
- Finally, refugee needs and the associated humanitarian response can seem less visible in a non-camp situation, which can impact on international interest and donor support.

Context-specific protection objectives

- Refugees live in an enabling protection environment where the legal, policy and administrative framework of the host country grants them freedom of movement and residence, permission to work and access to basic services and social safety nets.
- Refugees are not exposed to refoulement, eviction, arbitrary [detention](#), deportation, harassment or extortion by the security services or other actors.
- Refugees enjoy harmonious relationships with the host population, other refugees and migrant communities.
- Refugees reside outside camps and are in a position to take more responsibility for their lives and for their families and communities.
- Refugees have access to employment and education and, with greater mobility, enjoy more opportunities to build their livelihood assets and skills and send home remittances.
- Refugees retain their independence, retain and increase their skills, and develop sustainable livelihoods, thereby strengthening their resilience and their ability to overcome future challenges, whatever solution is available to them.
- Refugees are able to benefit from voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement programmes.
- Refugees of all ages, genders and diversity categories are consulted and have the opportunity to describe their situation, their problems and needs, and suggest possible solutions.
- Refugees enjoy police protection and can obtain justice.

- [Housing, Land and Property](#) (HLP) rights for displaced persons is a vital issue for consideration. If not they can be a triggers for discontent between displaced and host communities and are vitally important when considering matters of self-determination and peaceful co-existence.

Principles and policy considerations for the emergency response strategy in this context

The emergency response strategy should be anchored in the objectives of policies set out in:

- UNHCR, Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas, 2009.

Cities are legitimate places for refugees to reside and exercise their rights; protection space for urban refugees and humanitarian organisations that support them should be maximized.

- UNHCR, Policy on Alternatives to Camps, 2014.

Commits UNHCR staff to pursue alternatives to camps, whenever possible, while ensuring that refugees are protected and assisted effectively. Wherever possible, field managers should respond to refugee needs without establishing camps and, where camps must be established, they should be phased out as soon as possible or become sustainable settlements. This policy extends the principal objectives of urban refugee policy to all operational contexts.

Consider referencing the following: DESS to decide what's relevant for this revised entry and include as appropriate:

- SPHERE 2018 Edition.

The entire Handbook was reviewed from an "urban response" lens. The premise remains that the Sphere standards are applicable in all contexts, including urban settings. Where appropriate, specific guidance was added in the technical chapters.

- Global compact on Refugees (December 2018) / New York declaration.

Consider incorporating implications as per GCR to act as a basis for predictable and equitable burden and responsibility sharing

- Sustainable development Goals

Particular interest SDG # 11 'to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient & sustainable'.

When responding to refugee needs in emergencies, the following key principles should be

respected:

Refugee rights. Refugees are entitled to protection and solutions wherever they live and must be able to exercise the human rights to which they are entitled under international law.

State responsibility. UNHCR should encourage states to fulfil their responsibility to protect refugees.

Partnerships. In particular a non-camp response requires UNHCR to establish effective working relationships with a wide range of different stakeholders.

Age, gender and diversity. All aspects of the response must be based on [Age, Gender and Diversity](#) (AGD) approach.

Equity. UNHCR should ensure that all refugees are protected and treated in a consistent manner by UNHCR.

Community orientation. UNHCR must apply a community-based approach, strengthen the capacity of refugees and their communities, and foster harmonious relationships among them.

Interaction with refugees. UNHCR must meet refugees regularly, regardless of distance and any problems locating them.

Self-reliance. UNHCR will make every effort to ensure that refugees have access to livelihood opportunities, which are a condition of finding durable solutions.

Priority operational delivery mode and responses in this context

- When the risk of a refugee / IDP emergency is medium or high, always prepare contingency plans in close association with Government, development actors and partners. Focus on national legal and policy frameworks; and assess the extent to which communities, the national economy and infrastructures, administrative structures, service delivery systems, and housing, land and other resources, can manage or absorb a refugee influx. Identify key interventions needed to increase preparedness.
- Develop projects and deploy teams to assess the situation of the refugee population. Adopt approaches that are appropriate for complex urban and rural environments (home visits, vulnerability and socio-economic assessments).
- Operationalize protection from the beginning. Identify local partners at an early stage and build an outreach and referral network that will make case management effective.
- Mainstream refugees in national, local and community-based systems and structures (health care, education), and adopt efficient and appropriate delivery mechanisms (such as

cash-based interventions).

- Prioritise registration, assessment, profiling, and information management to ensure that core protection functions are delivered effectively. Use biometric and registration approaches adapted to urban contexts, such as mobile registration teams.
- Use a wide range of media to communicate, collect data and ensure accountability (mobile technology, crowdsourcing, mapping). Do not collect unnecessary data. Triangulate information with local and national sources.
- Activate coordination mechanisms. Do so transparently; keep records. Consider deploying specialized staff to coordinate large-scale emergencies.
- Explore partnerships with a wide range of non-traditional partners, such as the private sector, municipalities, local community associations, and religious groups.
- Develop advocacy strategies to explain why everyone will benefit if refugees are self-reliant and have freedom of movement. Focus on outcomes and adopt an evidence-based approach.
- Build on the strengths and capacities of refugees, displaced people and host communities. Develop market-based livelihood strategies that will enable refugees to take advantage of employment and self-employment opportunities.
- Encourage local and regional mobility, wherever possible.
- Work with national authorities at all levels to make sure that legitimate security and protection concerns are addressed.
- Combine the skills and resources of UNHCR and partner activities to make the best use of resources available in cities and rural areas. All activities should be in line with government plans and build long-term resilience.
- If resources are tight, target spending. Prioritize support to refugees who are most at risk.
- Consider that spatial planning and design can serve as a critical enabler and platform for aligning coordination and prioritization efforts in preparing for a refugee / IDP influx and addressing their needs in short, medium and long term.

Priority actors and partners in this context

- Work in synergy with national development planning and international development cooperation. Pursue integrated approaches that integrate the refugee response in national and local development efforts. To ensure that expenditure has long term value, activities should strengthen urban resilience.
- Develop strong, broad-based partnership models. Expand collaboration with national line ministries, municipal and local government authorities, national and international NGOs, community-based organizations and other civil society actors, the private sector, development-oriented UN agencies (including UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, UN-Habitat, WHO, ILO, FAO, IFAD), the World Bank, and bilateral and traditional donors, globally and nationally.
- Partnerships should be consistent with UNHCR's [Refugee Coordination Model](#) and should complement, reinforce and create synergies with UNHCR's protection and assistance programmes.
- Consider also the IASC Global coordination mechanisms of particular interest when UNHCR has lead role in activated clusters e.g. Shelter, Protection, CCCM.

Annexes

[UNHCR, Policy on Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas](#)

[UNHCR, Policy on Alternatives to Camps](#)

[Sphere Handbook \(2018\)](#)

3. Learning and field practices

4. Links

[Information Management Toolkit](#) [Good practice for Urban Refugees](#) [Global Shelter Cluster](#) [UNHCR Emergency Portals](#) [UNHCR, IFRC, UN-HABITAT - Shelter Projects \(2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011-12\)](#) [Global compact on Refugees \(December 2018\) / New York declaration](#) [Sustainable Development Goals Urban Refugees Website](#) [Settlement Information Portal](#) [UNHCR - Global strategy for settlement and shelter \(2014-2018\)](#) [Global Compact on Refugees \(December 2018\) / New York declaration](#) [Sustainable Development Goals](#)

5. Main contacts

The Division of International Protection and the Division of Programme Support and Management are working to improve the toolbox on out of camp responses and reinforce expertise in this area.

For technical advice, support missions or tools and guidance, contact: HQATC@unhcr.org.