Shelter needs assessment

14 November 2023

Key points

- Conduct an initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment within the first three days from the onset of an emergency, whenever possible within a coordinated multi-sectoral assessment.

- If possible the initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should be coordinated and supervised by an experienced sectoral expert and jointly undertaken with shelter and settlement actors already present in the area and should involve local stakeholders.

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1. Overview

Whenever a mass displacement occurs be it in an urban or rural context, the first step is always to understand the needs of the population. An initial shelter and settlement assessment provides crucial information which will invariably inform the type of settlement most suited to a given context, the capacity, layout and services needed within a settlement, along with providing essential elements to consider when planning and designing shelters following the peak of the emergency. Whenever a mass displacement occurs be it in an urban or rural context, the first step is always to understand the needs of the population. An initial shelter and settlement assessment provides crucial information which will invariably inform the type of settlement most suited to a given context, the capacity, layout and services needed within a settlement, along with providing essential elements to consider when planning and designing shelters following the peak of the emergency.
2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

UNHCR Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter (2014-18)


Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2015) Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA)

UNHCR (2018) Age, Gender and Diversity Policy

Good practice recommendations

An initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should be carried out within the first three days of an emergency, to identify needs and resources. To plan and implement an effective response, it is vital to coordinate assessments across a range of sectors (Protection, WASH, Camp Management, Health, Nutrition, and Education). The Needs Assessments for Refugee Emergencies (NARE) checklist, a highly customisable initial multi-sectoral needs assessment is often used and contains a specific section with relevant questions to inform settlement development and shelter response.

The scale and complexity of an emergency and the available staff and resources will influence the amount and quality of information that can and should be collected during shelter and settlement needs assessments. The information collected will in turn inform how best to prioritize lifesaving needs which should be addressed immediately, versus medium term needs. The assessment should be coordinated and supervised by an experienced Shelter Officer or Site Planner.

The overall Emergency Needs Assessment should provide sufficient information to identify the immediate life-saving shelter and settlement activities and priorities, anticipate the potential future problems related to shelter and settlement, including projections and contingency planning, and identify ‘self-supported' refugees - those with adequate shelter provided from their
own resources, and the strategies they are using to cope.

In situations where new arrivals are staying between camp and out of camp, self-settled or in host families, or when an influx of new arrivals may be placing pressure on local communities, the emergency needs assessment should also identify and mitigate potential shelter and settlement-related tension(s) between new arrivals and the host community and identify the type and level of support required for families in a host community.

**Recommended methodology**

To understand the dynamics of a crisis and the contextual implications for shelter and settlement, it is essential to gather a broad set of relevant information which will inform the sector specific assessment and response. This exercise requires a pre-crisis and post-crisis secondary data analysis to determine what information is already available as well as primary data collection. Information can come from other sectors and/or organisations. Any missing information should be included in the primary data collection.

**Secondary data analysis:** Review of secondary data relevant for shelter and settlements should provide critical background information and analysis, such as:

- Climate and cultural practice information that impacts settlement planning, shelter and Core Relief Item (CRI) selection.
- Building practices of refugees in country of origin (e.g. building types, sizes, construction materials, physical architecture, etc.).
- Review of previous market surveys (availability and prices of construction materials and household items pre-crisis).
- **Housing, land and property** ownership practices and laws in the country of asylum (e.g. renting, leasing, ownership, compulsory acquisition)
- Identify which national government departments are responsible for shelter, settlement planning and public infrastructure facilities
- Determine local Government and NGO response capacity for shelter and settlement
- Identify national building standards
- If the government has allocated potential sites to host refugees, check if geological information is available for the sites in the event of a planned settlement and structural safety in the event of public building rehabilitation

Secondary data review post-influx should specifically provide:

- Existing infrastructure and services surrounding the area where the refugees are located which will influence settlement development and planning
- Traditional shelter types of both displaced population and host community (avoid disparity between refugee and host community living conditions)
- Availability of shelter materials (e.g. natural resources, nearby stockpiles, regional suppliers, etc.)
- Identification of persons with specific needs requiring shelter (re)construction assistance or specific shelter options (disability and access)
- Options to ensure safety of shelter (e.g. types of materials, "fences" around family plots,
availability of locks)
- Availability of land and facilities for camps / settlements / collective centres

**Primary data collection:** The level of detail and questions asked during primary data collection will largely depend on information gaps identified during the secondary data review. Data collection can be carried out using the following methodologies:

- Community Observation
- Community Key Informants
- Focus Group Discussions
- Household Key Informant
- Infrastructure/Facilities Visits

The information collected during the initial rapid needs assessment should influence the development of a comprehensive shelter and settlement strategy which will structure and phase the sectoral response to address the needs of the persons of concern, and which will evolve over time to adapt to changing needs. Assessors should gather sufficient information in order to effectively guide the following actions:

- Identify most suitable settlement option or combination of options according to the context (host family support, collective centres, planned settlements, rental accommodation, sharing with family or relatives)
- Enable persons of concern to access and live in dignity in secure settlements that improve their social, economic and environmental quality of life as a community
- Ensure the involvement of persons of concern throughout the planning, design and implementation phases of shelter and settlement responses
- Provide appropriate emergency shelter and CRIs as needed
- Ensure minimum space of covered shelter area (3.5m² per person) is respected
- Adapt shelter to protect persons of concern from extreme weather conditions
- Ensure access to basic services
- Plan for and identify longer term or transitional shelter solutions

The following are examples of key information to be gathered through secondary and primary data collection and analysis:
### Demography
- How many people are affected? Who are they?
- What are their nationalities?
- Do they come from urban or rural enclaves?
- What ethnic groups do they belong to?
- How many men, women, boys and girls are there? What is the age breakdown?
- What percentage of boys and girls (under 18) are unaccompanied?
- What religions do they practise?
- What skills do they have?
- What specific needs can be identified?
- What is their physical condition (dehydration/malnutrition)?
- What diseases are present?

### Movement
- Where are the persons of concern coming from (general trends)?
- Where are they now (approximate locations)?
- Where are they going (general trends)?
- What is the rate of arrival (number per day)?
- Is the rate of arrival likely to increase or decrease?

### Resources
- What resources do the displaced population have?
- Do they have sufficient clothing?
- Do they need blankets?
- Do they need shelter materials?
- Do they possess domestic household items and supplies?
- Do they have livestock? If so, what animals do they have?
- What other possessions do they have?

### Physical Security
- Assess the protection needs of arrivals and the social support they require.
- What problems have they experienced on their flight route (presence of armed groups, water or food, crossing the frontier, border officials, etc.)?
- Does the whole group face an external physical threat? From whom?
- Is military protection required?
- Is factional conflict taking place? Which groups are involved?
- Is counselling required?
- Is there a problem of religious intolerance? Which groups are involved?

A secondary data review should always be done in order to determine what information already exists. The critical background information collection and analysis for shelter and settlement should include:

- Climate and cultural practice information that impacts settlement planning, shelter and CRI selection
- Building practices of refugees in country of origin (e.g. building types, sizes, construction materials, physical architecture, etc.)
- Review of previous market surveys (availability and prices of construction materials and
household items before the emergency)  
- Clarify housing, land and property ownership trends and laws in the country of asylum (e.g. renting, leasing, ownership, compulsory acquisition)  
- Determine which national government departments are responsible for shelter, settlement planning and public infrastructure facilities  
- Establish local Government and NGO response capacity for shelter and settlement  
- Identify national building standards  
- If the government has allocated potential sites to host refugees, check if geological information is available for the sites in the event of a planned settlement and structural safety in the event of public building rehabilitation

**Information for a post-influx secondary data review should specifically look at:**  
*Note that information can come from other sectors and/or organisations. Any missing information should be included in the primary data collection*

- Existing infrastructure and services surrounding the area where the refugees are located which will influence settlement development and planning  
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The information collected during the initial rapid needs assessment should largely influence the development of a comprehensive shelter and settlement strategy which will structure and phase the sectoral response to address the needs of the population of concern which will evolve in time. An initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should be carried out within the first three days of an emergency, to identify needs and resources. To plan and implement an effective response, it is vital to coordinate assessments across a range of sectors (Protection, WASH, Camp Management, Health, Nutrition, and Education). The Needs Assessments for Refugee Emergencies (NARE) checklist, a highly customisable initial multi-sectoral needs assessment is often used and contains a specific section with relevant questions to inform settlement development and shelter response.

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**Considerations for practical implementation**

The findings of an initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should guide the level and type of intervention in any given response, and all information collected during the initial needs assessments should be shared with other relevant sectors (Protection, WASH, Food Security, Nutrition, Public Health, Environment) to ensure a coordinated response.
An initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment provides a general picture of the shelter situation detailed enough to determine what shelter and settlement problems exist, how serious they are, and what assistance strategy is appropriate. Changing needs should be reviewed periodically and subsequent actions reflected in the sectoral strategy. As the situation stabilises, the following assessments should be considered:

- **Shelter Condition Assessment.** These assessments describe the assistance that will be required to transform emergency shelters (most often tents or emergency shelter kits) into transitional shelters when the situation stabilises.
- **Shelter Evaluations.** These assess the impact of completed projects on population needs, in order to measure a shelter strategy's relevance and success, and modify it as required.

Additional key informant questions and focus group discussion questions can be found in the Sphere Rapid Shelter Assessment and the UNHCR NARE Checklist - Draft (2014).

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**Resources and partnerships**

**Staff**

- A shelter and settlement expert
- Local shelter and settlement partner organisation
- Community outreach workers
Partners

- A variety of partners can assist with shelter and settlement assessments and responses, including international NGOs with expertise in the sector, local organisations and relevant government authorities.

Material

- GPS
- Camera
- Rapid assessment questionnaire

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Material

- GPS
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- Rapid assessment questionnaire

Annexes

Sphere Handbook (2018)


Shelter Cluster, Sphere Rapid Shelter Assessments Checklist

UNHCR, WFP - Joint Assessment Missions - a Practical Guide to Planning and Implementation (2013)
3. Links

Minimum Sectoral Data - Shelter and Settlement

4. Main contacts

UNHCR Shelter and Settlement Section, DPSM. At: HQShelter@unhcr.org UNHCR Shelter and Settlement Section, DPSM. At: HQShelter@unhcr.org