UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Shelter needs assessment

25 January 2025

Key points

- Conduct an initial rapid assessment of shelter and settlement needs 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 including local authorities

1. Overview

In the event of forced displacement, whether in an urban or dispersed setting, and in the event of the establishment of formal settlements, the first step is to understand the needs of the affected population. An initial shelter and settlement assessment provides crucial information to establish a shelter response in a given context, and the capacity, layout and services needed across settlements. Moreover it offers essential elements to plan and design shelters beyond the emergency phase.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

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 including HLP, WASH, Health, among others). The Needs Assessments for Refugee Emergencies (NARE) checklist, a highly customizable initial multi-sectoral needs assessment is often used and contains a specific section with relevant questions to inform settlement development and shelter response.

The overall Emergency Needs Assessment in relation to shelter and settlement should provide sufficient information to identify the immediate life-saving priorities, anticipate potential problems, including insufficient space and overwhelmed accommodation opportunities, and identify forcibly displaced people with adequate shelter provided from their own resources, and the strategies they are using to cope. The emergency needs assessment should also identify and mitigate potential shelter and settlement-related tensions between new arrivals and the host community and identify the type and level of support required for both communities.

3. Main guidance for shelter needs assessment

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

- Enable forcibly displaced people to access and live in dignity in safe and secure settlements that improve their social, economic and environmental quality of life as a community
- Ensure the involvement of forcibly displaced people throughout the planning, design and implementation phases of shelter and settlement responses
- Identify most suitable settlement option or combination of options according to the context (host family support, transit/collective centres, formal/informal settlements, rental accommodation, sharing with family or relatives, etc.)
- Provide appropriate emergency shelter as needed, while ensuring minimum space of covered shelter area is provided (minimum 3.5m2 per person)
- Adapt shelter to protect forcibly displaced people from extreme weather conditions
- Ensure access to basic services
- Develop a comprehensive shelter and settlement response. Plan for and identify longer term shelter solutions

Recommended methodology for shelter needs assessment
To understand the dynamics of a displacement 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 secondary data analysis to determine what information is available, and primary data collection. Information can come from other sectors and/or organizations. It's preferable to initiate data collection as soon as possible, even in the preparedness phase. Any missing information should be included in the primary data collection.

A **secondary data review** should always be done in order to determine what information already exists. The critical background information should include:

- Traditional shelter types of both displaced population and host community, as well as climate and cultural practices that may influence settlement planning and shelter needs and related responses.

- Identification of persons with specific needs requiring shelter (re)construction assistance or specific shelter options (disability and access)
- Building practices of forcibly displaced in areas origin (e.g. building types, sizes, construction materials, physical architecture, etc.).
- Identify which national government departments are responsible for shelter and housing, settlement planning and public infrastructures
- National building codes, standards and regulations
- Housing, land and property ownership practices and laws in hosting areas (e.g. renting, leasing, ownership, compulsory acquisition)
- Availability of land, empty buildings and other facilities that could host most vulnerable forcibly displaced people
- Historical data on climate related (drought, floods, cyclones, etc.) and other hazards (e.g. earthquakes, presence of UXOs, structural safety of buildings, etc.) in areas where forcibly displaced people may settle/have settled
- Availability of construction materials (e.g. natural resources, nearby stockpiles, regional suppliers, etc.). Include market surveys (availability and costs of construction materials, rental options, etc.)
- Existing infrastructure and services surrounding the area where forcibly displaced people are settled
- Existing shelter and settlement response capacity among other UN agencies, NGOs, CSOs, line ministries, local municipalities, etc.

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, as well as the location where forcibly displaced people are settled/will settle (e.g. scattered contexts). Data collection can be carried out using the following methodologies:

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

The following are examples of key information to be gathered through primary data collection and analysis:

- Analyze Demographics (age and gender breakdown, persons with specific needs, etc.)
- Analyse Movement trends, arrival rates, and potential future trends to inform the shelter and settlement response
- Assess Resources and Physical Security: jointly with protection specialists, evaluate protection needs as well as coping mechanisms (e.g. moving into cheaper shelter, living in informal settlements, etc.).
- Assess whether there are any potential conflicts with hosting communities in relation to different levels of access to shelter
- Determine the level and type of intervention based on assessment findings. Share information with relevant sectors for a coordinated response (esp. WASH, HLP, etc.).
- Identify the most suitable settlement options that enable the population to access and live

in secure settlements with dignity
  - Determine if people can self support construction of shelter
  - Through intersectoral coordination, ensure access to basic services (WASH, electricity, etc.) in settlements, buildings or other facilities hosting forcibly displaced

Additional key informant questions and focus group discussion questions can be found in the Sphere Rapid Shelter Assessment and the Settlement Development, Shelter and CRIs in the NARE Checklist

Key guidelines and assessment questions for selection of new sites and extension of existing sites can be found in the **Multi-sectoral site assessment form**.

Resources and partnerships

Staff

- A shelter and/or settlement planning 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

Checklist

- Conduct Secondary Data Analysis for shelter and settlements providing critical background and context information which should include assessment of existing infrastructure and services, traditional shelter types, availability of materials, land and facilities, etc.

- Conduct Primary Data Collection, use methodologies such as community observation, key informants, focus group discussions, household key informants, and infrastructure/facilities visits.

- Analyze Demographics and Movement Trends, Assess Resources and Physical Security.

- Determine the level and type of intervention based on assessment findings. Share information with relevant sectors for a coordinated response.

- Identify the most suitable settlement options, Enable the population to access secure settlements. Provide emergency shelter and core relief items (CRIs) per minimum standards. Ensure access to basic services.

- Develop Shelter and Settlement Strategy. Conduct Follow-Up Assessments. Perform Shelter Condition Assessments to transform emergency shelters into more durable shelter Solutions.

Annexes

The Sphere Handbook, 2018

UNHCR Needs Assessment for Refugee Emergencies (NARE) Checklist

WFP, UNHCR - Joint Assessment Missions: a Practical Guide to Planning and Implementation, 2013

4. Main contacts

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