

# Principles & Standards for Settlement Planning

26 June 2025

## Key points

- UNHCR discourages the establishment of camps and formal settlements that may limit enjoyment of basic rights for forcibly displaced and stateless people
- Alternatives to camps should be pursued, whenever possible, while ensuring that forcibly displaced people are protected and assisted effectively and are able to achieve solutions
- Protection and assistance can be compromised when settlements are established in unsuitable geographical locations. Use the Multi-sectoral Site Assessment Form for the selection of settlements locations
- Failing to develop settlements based on good standards can result in unnecessary further loss, distress and risks for forcibly displaced persons
- Follow the principles of the Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning
- As forced displacement grows in time and scale, settlement planning shall remain dynamic, adaptable and capable of responding to changes during and after a crisis

## 1. Overview

This entry provides guidance and minimum standards that should be considered when planning and developing settlements for forcibly displaced and stateless persons as part of an emergency response. The ultimate aim is for displaced communities to live with security and dignity in a healthy environment which improves their quality of life, while meeting life-saving needs and also enhancing self-reliance, resilience and solutions.

While the principles and standards provided here are usually used to plan and develop formal settlements, they can be applied to other types of settlement (e.g. when upgrading informal settlements).

## 2. Relevance for emergency operations

This entry focuses on standards, principles and indicators, that should be considered in emergency operations when planning and developing settlements to host forcibly displaced, stateless people. This is a critical step as it has implications in the ways other sectors (shelter, WASH, health, education, livelihood, etc.) will shape their response to adjust to the specific characteristics and locations of settlements.

## 3. Main guidance

### 1. Guiding principles in settlement planning

**Settlement planning** is the physical organization of sites and locations where forcibly displaced may (decide to) settle. Appropriate, tailor-made settlement planning has a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of a community, enhancing their protection, assistance and solutions. It also facilitates swift humanitarian delivery of equitable and efficient delivery of goods and services.

The **choice of settlement location** is also a critical decision which will have significant impact on the protection and well-being of displaced people, as well as broader local development. While a well-positioned settlement can have multiple protection benefits and contribute to local development, **a settlement in the wrong geographical location can pose a threat to the protection and assistance** of displaced persons and have **negative consequences on the local development and the peaceful coexistence** of communities.

Settlement plans should follow the below principles:

1. Start site selection/assessment and settlement planning at the **earliest stages of a response (ideally during preparedness)**.
2. In addition to providing security, **host governments are ultimately responsible for allocating land for camp and settlements**. Make sure proposed sites are conducive to protection, assistance and solutions for the persons UNHCR cares for.
3. **Early planning assumptions can endure for decades**. Because decisions on site selection are difficult to reverse, seek and make use of technical support from the beginning.
4. Decisions on settlements' location should **involve** national and local Governments as well as **host and forcibly displaced communities**.
5. Consider how **housing, land and property rights** (HLP) affect site use, including access to water and pastoral and agricultural activities.
6. Follow a **people-centered approach**, promoting self-reliance and enabling communities to develop suitable solutions themselves.
7. Systematically apply an **Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach** to ensure that all forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities have equal access to their rights, protection, services and resources, and are able to participate as active partners in the decisions that affect them.
8. Consider the **characteristics and identity of the area**, the environment, and of the

people and their habitat. Beside technical drawings, the plan should provide **social features** including host communities, and the social organization of forcibly displaced people.

9. **Avoid high density settlements**, whatever the circumstances. Ideally camp/settlement should be **no larger than 20,000 people**.
10. **Reduce aid dependence** through spatial allocation of functions, such that displaced persons can increase their independence, and potentially integrate fully with host communities.
11. **Coordination** is a vital element of settlement planning because it links land, shelter, services, infrastructure, livelihoods, environmental considerations, and governance. Many sectors need to cooperate to ensure that assistance gaps do not occur, and that the dignity of affected people is protected.
12. Ensure **climate related and other hazards** are identified, from the onset of planning, and that adequate mitigation measures have been planned, taking into consideration both existing and long-term threats (for example due to climate change).
13. Screen for **environmental considerations**, from the onset of the emergency response; run a rapid environmental assessment as early as possible, enabling risk-informed decisions (using tools like NEAT+).
14. **Be dynamic, adopt bottom-up approach and use modular planning**. Settlement designs should be able to meet the needs of individual families while being adaptable and responding to changes in a crisis situation.
15. Consider that assistance to forcibly displaced **last longer than expected**. Take this into account when planning and developing settlements, and **estimating resources required** to meet standards on the long run.
16. Settlements layout should **promote community ownership and maintenance of public infrastructures** (such as water points, toilets, showers, facilities for washing clothes, waste management).
17. Have provision for an **exit strategy** when forcibly displaced and stateless persons find durable solutions.
18. Consider **national development plans** to ensure that settlement plans are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.
19. Local and international partners should be engaged whenever and soon as possible. UNHCR takes full operational responsibility only when circumstances require and is in the interest of the forcibly displaced.
20. Apply [\*\*UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles\*\*](#) (see below).

## 2. Master Plan Approach Principles

UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles provide the framework for the definition of physical site layouts. The table below defines the guiding principles and expected outcomes.

Guiding Principles	Expected Outcomes
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**Principle 1**

National legislation, policies & plans provide a framework for settlement design.

- The spatial design of the settlement is in compliance with national and local planning regulations and emergency response minimum standards.
- Infrastructure improvements are designed to support national/regional development plans and priorities.

**Principle 2**

Environmental considerations drive design.

- Risk of natural disaster impact (e.g. due to floods, landslides) is identified and addressed.
- Risk of endangering natural resources (e.g. deforestation which can, in turn, increase the risk of natural disaster impact) is identified and mitigated.

**Principle 3**

Defining site carrying capacity.

- The capacity of the site has been defined taking into account sufficient access to water, fuel, and land for livelihoods.
- Risk of conflict between the displaced population and host community over access to natural resources is identified and mitigated.

**Principle 4**

Decisions about density must be taken in context.

- Site density is in 'harmony' within the physical context.

**Principle 5**

Supporting safe and equitable access to basic services.

- Equitable access to basic services for the displaced population and the host community is ensured.
- Development and upgrading of existing services facilities have been prioritized over the creation of new parallel services.
- Travel distance to basic services is within standards.

**Principle 6**

Providing an enabling environment for [livelihoods and economic inclusion](#).

- Site location and layout represent a positive choice in terms of impact to livelihood, economic opportunities and self-reliance of displaced population and host community.

**Principle 7**

Addressing [housing, land and property](#) issues, an incremental tenure approach.

- Risk of conflict link to land tenure has been addressed and mitigated.
- Following the initial emergency response, actions are taken to increase the security of tenure for the displaced population through pathways for the incremental establishment of tenure through formal or customary means.

<p><b>Principle 8</b> Defining localized critical design drivers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Site layout is informed and respond to physical and social factors and the spatial needs over time.</li> <li>◦ Residential areas, key services and infrastructures are not susceptible to the risk of natural hazards such as flash floods and landslides</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principle 9</b> Follow natural contours in the design of road and drainage infrastructure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Site layouts respond to the natural topography and drainage patterns of the site.</li> <li>◦ An effort has been made to reduce construction and maintenance cost of road and drainage infrastructure.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principle 10</b> Finalizing the settlement layout.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Site layout takes into account the social organization of the displaced population under the bases of an Age, Gender, and Diversity approach.</li> <li>◦ The physical layout considers fire risk mitigation strategies and complies with standards for the provision of basic service.</li> </ul>

Table 1 - Masterplan Approach Guiding Principles

### 3. Protection objectives

- Locate settlements in areas safe from natural hazards, disasters and violence.
- Avoid dependency and promote self-reliance.
- As far as possible, reduce population density in order to prevent health and environmental risks.
- Prevent environmental contamination.
- Advocate for the recognition that every person, including every person forced to flee their home, is entitled to **freedom of movement**.
- Ensure that settlement design contributes to prevent protection risks such as GBV and SEA.
- **Plan** and manage settlements in a manner that **encourages affinities**, and **mitigates potential friction, between forcibly displaced and host populations**.
- Ensure that settlement programming sets safeguards in place to **prevent** any action from inadvertently increasing **marginalization, vulnerability, exclusion and stigmatization**.
- Ensure that forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities **enjoy their rights on an equal footing and participate in decisions that affect their lives**.
- Ensure that settlement and related policies and decisions are **driven primarily by the best interests of forcibly displaced people** (rather than the interests of other actors).
- Please refer to the entry [Safe and secure settlements](#).

### 4. Resources and partnerships

Staff

- A variety of (technical and non-technical) support staff may be needed depending on the number, scale and complexity of settlements where the emergency response is delivered.
- It is important to liaise closely with other sectors, including but not restricted to shelter, WASH, health, protection, education and livelihood.

## Partners

- Government, municipalities and any other relevant authority
- UN, NGOs, other humanitarian actors
- Private sector.
- Representatives of forcibly displaced people and host communities

## Post emergency phase

Even if an emergency response can be considered over, important considerations should be made to project settlements on the **long run**:

- **Camps and settlements are rarely occupied for short-term.** Once put in place, camps are likely to exist over a long period of time - in many cases **years or even decades**.
- Where **assistance and services provided to forcibly displaced may create disparities with the host community**, consider implementing Community Support Projects (CSPs), sharing goods and services, or advocate for increased development and/or governmental support. Eventually, on the long run a balance will need to be agreed upon between national and international standards, also factoring SDGs.
- Consider **maintenance and upgrades for shelter, infrastructures and facilities**, involving the residents through effective settlement governance and community participation / mobilization mechanisms.
- Service provision over that period is likely to remain the responsibility of humanitarian actors, and **integration with local existing services will be challenging**.
- Camps can also distort **local economies** and in the long run adversely affect development planning.

In the event of formal settlement decommissioning:

- Ensure service contracts and agreements are modified or terminated appropriately (including lease agreements with respect to housing, land and property assets)
- Develop a plan for fair and transparent disposal, distribution or handover of assets or infrastructure. Hand responsibility for care and maintenance of infrastructure to national authorities or others (as appropriate).
- Ensure latrines, rubbish pits, and washing facilities are safely decommissioned.
- Ensure the site is returned to its previous condition, unless alternatives plans have been developed and agreed by national authorities and surrounding communities
- Prepare a list of environmental concerns and prepare plans to address them.

## Checklist

- Identify a **suitable site**, in consultation with Government, and carry out thorough suitability assessments. Use the [Multi Sectoral Site Assessment Form](#).
- **UNHCR neither rents nor purchases land for forcibly displaced people.**
- Identify **relevant and qualified actors** to implement the programs.
- **Establish coordination mechanisms** with key stakeholders. Form them as early in the process as possible.
- Consider **local guidelines, regulations and practices**. Ensure adequate and effective liaison with local and national Government offices and other sectors.
- Develop proposals and concepts into working drawings, with detailed specifications, bill of quantities (BoQ), tender documents, etc.
- Commission / produce **environmental assessments** and incorporate their recommendations in implementation plans.
- Conduct **soil tests, hydrological surveys, detailed topographical surveys**, etc.
- Draft and establish **project management** documents, checklists and operating procedures.
- Work with other programmes and supply on procurement and award processes.
- Establish frameworks and reporting criteria for **continuous monitoring**.

- Develop and deliver **completion and handover certification**.
- Develop and deliver **maintenance plans**.
- Advocate for a **public address system** (if non-existing).
- Prepare an exit strategy and plans for decommissioning from the start.
- Refer to [UNHCR's Master Plan Approach Process Checklist](#) for additional information.

## 4. Standards

There are several indicators determining the adequacy of settlement for forcibly displaced persons.

### 1. Site selection criteria

Sites for settlements should be selected in consultation with a range of sectors, including WASH, shelter, protection, as well as with technical specialists such as hydrologists, surveyors, planners, engineers, and environmental engineers. The operational context will determine site selection criteria.

The following factors need to be considered when selecting sites for displacement settlement:



**Topography, drainage, soil conditions**

- Bear in mind that the physical features of the site will reduce or affect the amount of usable space.
- The topography of the land should permit easy drainage and the site should be located above flood level. Rocky and impermeable soil should be avoided. Land covered with grass will prevent dust. Wherever possible, steep slopes, narrow valleys, and ravines should be avoided.
- Ideally, a site should have a slope of 2%–4% for good drainage, and not more than 10% to avoid erosion and the need for expensive earth-moving for roads and building construction.
- Avoid areas likely to become marshy or waterlogged during the rainy season. Consult national meteorological data and host communities before making a decision.
- Soils that absorb surface water swiftly facilitate the construction and effectiveness of pit toilets, and of drainage systems.
- Subsoil should permit good infiltration (permit soil to absorb water and retain solid waste from toilets). Very sandy soils may have good infiltration; but toilet pits may be less stable.
- Maximum depth of toilet pits should have 1.5 meters of safety distance from highest ground water level.
- The groundwater table should be at least 3 meters below the surface of the site.
- Avoid excessively rocky or impermeable sites as they hamper construction (for shelter, toilets, roads, drainage, etc.).
- Sites where the land is suitable for vegetable gardens or small-scale cultivation would be preferred.

**Water resources**

- Choose locations that are reasonably close to an adequate source of water of good quality. Once located, water sources should be protected.
- Choose locations that are on/near high ground that has good surface water run-off and drainage.
- Ideally, hydrological surveys will provide information on the presence of water. A site should not be selected on the assumption that water will be found by drilling. Trucking water over long distances should be avoided to the extent possible.

<b>Land Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ UNHCR neither purchases nor rents land for settlements that host forcibly displaced people.</li> <li>◦ Forcibly displaced people should enjoy exclusive use of the site in which they live, by agreement with national and local authorities.</li> <li>◦ Governments often make public land available.</li> <li>◦ Private or communal land (including unclosed pastoral land) may only be used if the Government has agreed a formal legal arrangement with the owner(s), in accordance with the laws of the country.</li> <li>◦ The status of land occupied for sites should be clarified in writing by the Government.</li> <li>◦ With Government and host community, agree and clarify the entitlement of forcibly displaced people to carry out given activities (forage for food, firewood without compromising the environment, collect timber and other shelter materials such as grass or mud, gather fodder and graze animals). Take into full consideration the long-term consequences over scarce natural resources and make early plans to avoid or minimize damages, also on the longer term</li> </ul>
<b>Accessibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Ensure the site has an adequate road infrastructure; access to it should be reliable, including during the rainy/winter season.</li> <li>◦ Assess the site's proximity to national services, including health facilities, schools, markets and towns. Access to mainstream services is encouraged wherever possible and avoids the need to develop parallel services for the population in the settlement.</li> <li>◦ Liaise with development agencies, including related Government ministries, to secure improvement of access routes.</li> </ul>
<b>Security and Logistics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ The site should be located a sufficient distance from international borders and conflict zones, and other potentially sensitive areas (such as military installations).</li> <li>◦ Avoid locations that experience extreme climatic conditions, or present evident health, environmental or other risks.</li> <li>◦ High winds can damage shelters and increase fire risks.</li> <li>◦ Evaluate seasonal variations. Sites that are ideal in the dry season may be uninhabitable in the rainy season.</li> </ul>
<b>Environment and Vegetation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Ensure the site has sufficient ground cover (grass, bushes and trees). Vegetation provides shade, protects from wind, and reduces erosion and dust.</li> <li>◦ Avoid sites where dust clouds are common; these cause respiratory diseases.</li> <li>◦ Avoid sites within 1 day's walk of an environmentally protected area (such as a wild-life reserve).</li> <li>◦ Take steps to ensure access to a sustainable supply of cooking fuel, in collaboration with local forestry authorities, and in negotiation with the host community.</li> </ul>

Table 2 – Site selection factors of importance

Use the [Multi-sectoral Site Assessment Form](#) to guide the selection of new sites, and for the extension of existing ones. Environmental assessment components are mainstreamed throughout this document, incorporating aspects from the [Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool \(NEAT+\)](#) as well as contributions from WASH, energy and environment sectors.

## 2. Space allocation

The size of a settlement and area per capita is critical as crowded conditions lead to increased morbidity and stress, also complicating service delivery. The provision of adequate space, both outside and inside shelters and for basic services, is an essential requirement.

The 'average area per person (Sqm.)' indicator measures the average living space to which a person has access in a settlement. This space should accommodate all services while promoting dignified living conditions

- **45 sqm per person is the recommended standard**
- **30 Sqm** per person is necessary for shelter plots, roads, foot paths, educational facilities, sanitation, firebreaks, water storage, distribution points, markets, storage for relief items and administration and security. It **excludes any land for significant agricultural activities or livestock.**
- **15 Sqm** per person is allocated to **household gardens** attached to the family plot which should be included in the site plan from the outset.
- Going below **the minimum standard (e.g. less than 29 sqm/person), is strongly discouraged.** Although it may have to be considered for specific situations (e.g. when certain services are already present; in transit centers where household gardens are not required; very specific topographies that may limit meeting the minimum standard; etc.).
- Take into account the necessity of accommodating future expansions, including for the **natural demographic growth** (average of 3-4% per year).

<u>Population size</u>	<u>Minimum settlement area (sqm)</u>	<u>Minimum settlement area (hectares)</u>
<u>5,000 persons</u>	<u>225,000</u>	<u>22.5</u>
<u>10,000 persons</u>	<u>450,000</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>20,000 persons</u>	<u>900,000</u>	<u>90</u>

## 3. Emergency standard for planning settlements

The plan should include natural features and contain topographical information outlining the physical features of the landscape (rivers, valleys, mountains) and general planimetric information describing locations and facilities in the settlement. The plan should ideally have a

metric scale between 1:1,000 and 1: 5,000.

Description	Minimum Standard
<b>Covered living area</b>	3.5 sqm. per person minimum  In cold climates and urban areas 4.5 sqm. to 5.5 sqm. See <a href="#">Emergency Shelter Standard</a> entry for more guidance.
<b>Fire Safety</b>	30 m of a firebreak every 300 m Minimum of 2 m between structures – ideally 2 times the height of the structure
<b>Gradient for camp site</b>	1 to 5 %, ideally 2 to 4%
<b>Drainage</b>	Appropriate drainage needs to be put in place, especially relevant in all locations that experience a rainy season.

Table 3- Minimum standard for planning settlements

#### 4. Modular Planning Units

- Settlement planning should **begin from the scale of the individual family plot**, addressing needs at household level, such as their distance to water collection points, access to communal services, recreation facilities, access to showers and toilets, waste management, etc.
- **A tailor-made modular approach** enables the **rationalization of facilities and the management of the settlement**. At the same time, it fosters a sense of **familiarity and originality** in settlements. It is essential to avoid rigid layouts, that would give a sense of alienation. Consider that the cultural specificities of a displaced population will affect the layout of the community. Where possible, ensure there is a type of buffer between modules.

It is advisable to consider the **social structures and relations** within forcibly displaced people and their nearby hosting communities, including clans, ethnic groups and extended family arrangements, as well as their traditional settlement layouts and shelter preferences. The cultural specificities of the displaced population, will influence all modules layout with the community one being the most critical. This consideration will yield a **greater degree of satisfaction, and sense of ownership, while fostering social connections** within the displaced community.

The following table uses the family unit as the smallest planning 'module' and builds up to larger units:

Module	Structure	Approximate number
Family	1 x family	4 - 6 persons
Community	16 x families	80 persons
Block	16 x communities	1,250 persons
Sector	4 x blocks	5,000 persons
Settlement	4 x sectors	20,000 persons (max)

Table 2 – Indicative modular planning units

## 5. Settlement Planning Standards for services and infrastructure

The following are recommended settlement planning standards for services and infrastructure.

For public services (e.g. health and education), consider whether existing facilities that are near the settlement location can be used (rather than creating parallel systems inside the settlement). Make sure to involve other sectors such as shelter, WASH, health, education, livelihood and protection to adjust standards to the specific context and population' needs and vulnerabilities.

Description	Standard	Further considerations
<b>Communal toilet (*)</b>	1 per 50 persons - emergency phase	Separate toilet areas for men and women. For long-term accommodation use one household latrine per family.
<b>Toilet distance (*)</b>	Not more than 50m from shelter	Latrines must be close enough to encourage their use but far enough to prevent problems with smells and pests.
<b>Shower (*)</b>	1 per 50 persons	Separate, well drained, shower areas for men and women

<b>Water tap stand (*)</b>	1 per 500 persons	To be increased to 1:250 persons or less as the emergency stabilizes
<b>Water distance (*)</b>	Max. 500m from household	'To be decreased as the emergency stabilizes
<b>Health centre</b>	1 per 20,000 persons	1 per settlement Include water and sanitation facilities
<b>Referral hospital</b>	1 per 200,000 persons	1 per 10 settlements
<b>Feeding centre</b>	1 per 20,000 persons	1 per settlement
<b>School</b>	1 per 5,000 persons	1 per sector 3 classrooms, 50 Sqm.
<b>Distribution centre</b>	1 per 5,000 persons	1 per sector
<b>Market place</b>	1 per 20,000 persons	1 per settlement
<b>Communal areas (gathering)</b>	As appropriate	Provided with night lighting and shaded areas/shelters. Layout designed with the participation of women, men, girls and boys
<b>Warehousing/ Storage area</b>	15 to 20 Sqm. Per 100 persons	
<b>Solar Lighting</b>	As appropriate	Consider priority locations such as toilets, wash areas, public service areas, roads. Refer to the <a href="#">Energy Needs</a> for more details
<b>Registration area</b>	As appropriate	May include arrivals area, medical triage, distribution, parking
<b>Administration / office</b>	As appropriate	

<b>Security post</b>	As appropriate	
<b>Security fencing</b>	Highly discouraged (unless specific circumstances apply)	Security fencing may give a false sense of security. It may also give the impression that freedom of movement is limited, and give a negative connotation to the people living inside the settlements

(\*) Read the [Wash in Emergencies](#) for more details.

Table 4 – Site planning standards for services and infrastructure

## Annexes

[UNHCR Policy on alternatives to camps, 2014](#)

[UNHCR, Multi-Sectoral Site Assessment Form, 2021](#)

[UN Habitat, UNHCR, Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas, 2022](#)

[UNHCR Needs Assessment for Refugee Emergencies \(NARE\) Checklist](#)

## 5. Links

[The Sphere Handbook 2018](#) [NEAT+ - Nexus Environment Assessment Tool](#) [UNHCR Master Plan](#) [Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#) [Emergency Handbook entry - Safe and Secure Settlements](#)

## 6. Main contacts

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