

Settlement Typologies in Emergencies

26 June 2025

Key points

- In emergencies, affected populations may settle in diverse types of settlements
- Decisions on settlements are difficult to reverse in the future; irrespective of the size and magnitude of the emergency, planning assumptions and approaches should carefully evaluate the possibility of a sustainable longer-term settlement
- A sound settlement response strategy shall combine several settlement approaches, which may be highly context specific
- The types of settlements where affected population (decide to) live will define several aspects of an emergency response
- Assessing the carrying capacity of settlements and their hosting areas is paramount
- Climatic and environmental considerations must be integrated into settlement planning from the start of an emergency

1. Overview

Settlement refers to the physical spaces and environments in which households are sheltered, and how one shelter relates to others. The term is generally used in the context of displaced populations to describe the temporary, or sometimes more permanent living arrangements, of people forced to flee their areas of origin.

Well-designed settlements take into consideration spatial allocation of functions while maintaining equilibrium between the needs of the population, the availability and allocation of resources, socio-economic dynamics, amelioration of living conditions, provision of services, among others. A settlement must address the needs of the community at large and be designed with the active involvement of displaced populations, hosting communities, partners, and different sectors.

This entry aims at defining the most common settlement typologies and highlights a series of considerations regarding their characteristics, that may determine how humanitarian responses will take shape.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Emergency responses may happen in diverse forms of settlements. Whether humanitarian actors will be able to meet life-saving needs at speed and scale, and the level of complexity of such responses, is highly dependent on how well serviced these settlements are, what is their carrying capacity, exposure to hazard risks, and how the displaced population will be able to cope with what is offered in these settlements, among other factors. Understanding the different typologies and their characteristics enables informed decisions on the outset of an emergency, and limits **planning decisions that will have a negative impact on both host and displaced communities.**

3. Main guidance

1 - Settlement Considerations

This section looks at common settlement typologies and what needs to be considered to develop them to host affected people (either before their arrival, or if they have already settled in). Ensure that the following information is available and informs either the selection process of, or the development/expansion of new settlement:

- **Spatial analysis** that describes the availability, uses, and suitability of land.
- Evaluation of the **carrying capacity** of hosting areas, which is defined as the number of people, animals, or crops that a given territory can support. Site carrying capacity is therefore shaped largely by the available natural resources, their quality, and the competition to access them.
- The availability of **natural resources** and associated risks if they cannot be sustainably utilized: availability of **water** of acceptable quantity and quality; **wood** for construction and other needs.
- Feasibility of setting up **supply chains** and swift distribution of aid, including logistical facilities for transport of goods, airstrips, space for warehousing, etc.
- **Market assessments**, including local availability of construction materials, labour force, private sector companies that could be mobilized, etc.

2 - Overview of Settlement Typologies

Below is a brief overview of the main settlement typologies. They may have different characteristics based on whether they are in urban, peri-urban or rural areas.

Settlement Typology	Definition
---------------------	------------

1	Individual accommodation in communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ People living in individual housing or with host families in cities, towns, villages
2	Formal settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Planned settlements where official land is allocated for a group of asylum seekers, refugees or IDPs. They are accommodated in on purpose-built settlements with access to facilities and services. ◦ An official management entity is assigned. ◦ Camps are a type of formal settlement.
3	Informal settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ In an informal settlement, a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs choose to settle in self-identified spontaneous sites. ◦ Self-settled settlements can be located on state-owned, private or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population or private landowners.
4	Collective center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ An accommodation, where a group of asylum-seekers, refugees and IDPs reside / are accommodated in pre-existing buildings such as community centres, town halls, schools or unfinished buildings or newly established ones. ◦ They often occur when there is a sudden influx and rental markets are overwhelmed. ◦ Collective centres are intended to be of a temporary nature.
5	Transit Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ A transit center is used at the beginning of a new emergency with often high influx and is hosting asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs pending transfer to a suitable formal settlement, individual private accommodation, or to areas of return.

2.1 Individual Accommodation in Communities

Access to spontaneous community support mechanisms can encourage self-reliance, independence and a sense of belonging. In this type of settlement, displaced people commonly rent apartments, or are hosted by relatives, friends, or people previously unknown. Usually, such arrangements entail that forcibly displaced live on land or in properties that are mostly owned by local people. While this may result in a rapid solution, shelters that are either rented or shared may not be adequate. The host population may have limited resources. Absorption capacity may be limited and competition for scarce resources may result in tensions and lack of peaceful coexistence. In these cases, support should be considered at both neighborhood level (e.g.

through Quick Impact Project and area-based approaches), or at household level, to either the hosting family, or to the owner via shelter repairs/upgrades in exchange of a lower/free rent.

Additional information can be found in EHB section [Alternatives to Camps](#).

2.2 Formal Settlements

Formal Settlements are a form of settlement specifically conceived to host people affected by crises and disasters. Refugees or IDPs living there receive centralised protection, humanitarian assistance, and other services from local governments and humanitarian actors. Formal settlements are designed and developed to offer basic services to its residents and have formal recognition/approval from the authorities. The term “Camp”, widely used among the humanitarian community, is one type of formal settlements.

Additional Information on formal settlements can be found under the EHB entry [Formal Settlement Considerations](#).

2.3 Informal Settlements

Informal settlements are characterized by

- **Lack of tenure security**, as people usually settle in a given area or building without prior formal authorization from the landowner or the government;
- Poor or non-existent **basic services** such as water, sanitation, solid waste management and electricity;
- May **not comply with current planning and building regulations** and is often situated in geographically and environmentally hazardous areas.

Due to their socio-economic vulnerability, forcibly displaced people may choose to settle in such self-identified sites. They can be scattered across large areas and can be rather mobile as evictions happen. As informal settlements are a wide phenomenon in urban settings in least developed contexts, forcibly displaced often decide to settle along the urban poor. Informal settlements can also emerge at the fringes of agricultural fields, where the owner of the land agrees for forcibly displaced to access part of the land to settle in exchange for (cheap/free) labour.

Some informal settlements, however, can be formalized and upgraded if the site is suitable and approval is granted by the authorities. In such instances, thorough consideration should be given to the impact of climate related risks and hazards, and the feasibility and cost to mitigate those risks, versus the option of resettling, before committing (usually large) resources. These processes can take a long time, depending on the context-specific complexities.

More information can be found in the EHB entry [Informal Settlements](#).

2.4 Collective Centres

A variety of pre-existing buildings or structures may be used as collective centres - community centres, town halls, hotels, gymnasiums, warehouses, unfinished buildings, disused factories,

farms, etc. These facilities are seldom fit for habitation and must be rehabilitated and/or upgraded to meet basic living conditions for affected people. Collective centres are usually used as short-term accommodation to gain time to provide more suitable shelter. They can quickly respond to shelter needs when a sudden and large-scale need for accommodation arises, rental markets are overwhelmed or unaffordable, or for persons with specific needs. Collective centres are intended to be of a temporary nature.

Additional information can be found in the EHB entry **Collective Centres**.

2.5 Transit Centers

A transit center is used at the beginning of an emergency to host forcibly displaced people pending transfer to a suitable formal settlement or individual private accommodation, or to return to areas of origin. They can be found:

- In the proximity of border crossing points;
- In inland locations that can facilitate further transfer to other locations of choice (train/bus stations, airports, etc.);
- scattered around safe areas near to other settlement typologies where forcibly displaced people may be redirected to (e.g. formal settlement, urban centers, etc.)

More information can be found on the entry on the [Transit Centres](#).

3 - Shifting from camps and other forms of settlements to Human Settlements

A **camp** is a type of formal settlement which is usually imagined as a **temporary solution** to address the most immediate needs of forcibly displaced, with little opportunities for integration as **freedom of movement may be limited**, and opportunities for self-**reliance and solutions are out of sight**. However, in protracted situations as well as in cases where the displaced population may integrate with the nearby hosting community, **a camp approach should be formulated toward a human settlement** one, taking into consideration the long-term livelihood opportunities of the integrated community, as well as the **gradual independence of the displaced population from external aid support**. The **Master Plan Approach** is a good foundation to ensure that a camp can move to a more formal settlement that eventually evolves into an **inclusive, integrated human settlement**. The same concepts also apply to any other form of settlements (e.g. informal ones).

4 - Settlement typologies and most frequently used shelter solutions

The table below summarizes the various settlement options with associated shelter solutions as often found in many emergency contexts:

Settlement Typology	Most Frequently Used Shelter Solutions
---------------------	--

Individual Accommodation in Communities	Plastic sheeting Shelter kit Local construction (room extension)/rehabilitation/basic repairs in exchange for free rent CBI
Formal Settlement	Tents Shelter kit Plastic sheeting Temporary shelters Local construction materials Refugee Housing Units CBI
Informal Settlement	Tents Plastic sheeting Shelter kit CBI
Collective Center	One room accommodation Plastic sheeting Shelter kit Local construction (rehabilitation/repair/adaptation) CBI
Transit Center	Tents Shelter kit Plastic sheeting Temporary shelters Local construction materials Refugee Housing Units CBI

5. Underlying principles and standards valid across all settlement typologies

- Settlement designs and developments should reflect the needs of persons of concern, their cultural habits and their capacities. An **inclusive approach** fosters ownership, improves maintenance of settlements and can generate information and support that may be crucial to a programme's success and sustainability. Thus, meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless communities, as well as host communities, in accordance with UNHCR's **Age, Gender and Diversity** approach is essential.
- **Support self-reliance**, allowing displaced persons to live constructive and dignified lives.
- Promote safe and secure settlements. This includes identifying, preventing and responding to hazards and disasters such as fire, flooding and damage to the environment, as well as protection risks including evictions, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, health risks,

poor access to services, and conflict with host communities. Please refer to the entry [Safe and secure settlements](#).

- **Accessibility to land** constitutes a fundamental element for the realization of the **right to adequate housing** and must also provide sustainable and non-discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, nutrition, security, and comfort.
- Forcibly displaced and stateless persons should have **access to essential services** in all types of settlements. These services include water, sanitation, roads and infrastructure, community spaces, shelter, health, nutrition, education, food, and livelihoods.
- [UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#) is a key reference when defining a settlement response.

6 - Key considerations valid across all settlement typologies

- **Displacement tends to last longer than expected:** camps, formal and informal settlements are rarely occupied for short-term. Planners should always expect that once put in place, settlements are likely to exist over a long period of time. Service provision over that period of time is likely to remain the responsibility of humanitarian actors, and integration with local existing services will be challenging.
- Seldom does one settlement option fit the needs of the entire displaced population. Explore the available options and solutions displaced persons may have already found and agree the most suitable settlement options, and humanitarian assistance plan, with the host government.
- **Housing, Land and Property (HLP)** regulations are often complex and difficult to navigate. Ensure you have the appropriate technical support to clarify HLP issues and processes.
- To reduce the risk of conflicts over land, from the start **collaborate closely with local authorities**, technical departments, and inform yourself of local rules and regulations on land tenure, public works and housing.
- **Identify hazards** (such as flooding, landslides, strong winds). If there are seismic risks, seek specialized technical advice.
- Conduct a **cost benefit analysis of different settlement options**, determine resource requirements, and establish priorities, to ensure that adequate human, financial and material resources will be available.
- **Coordinate and liaise with other sectors**, including protection, HLP, water and sanitation and livelihoods, to ensure solutions are integrated.
- Involve **development actors** as early as possible. Consider how both humanitarian and broader development objectives can be advanced by sharing information, plans, projections and other resources.
- Ensure that the emergency settlement response is implemented and managed by **adequate expertise** (in house or via partners). Consider deployment of skilled settlement officers at the onset of emergencies.

7 - Resources and partnerships

- Affected populations (forcibly displaced and hosting communities).
- Local and central authorities, municipalities.
- Community and religious leaders.

- National and international NGOs.
- Other UN and international organizations.

Checklist

- Pursue alternative to camps and formal settlements to the extent possible by advocating for forcibly displaced to choose where to live.
- Meet the needs of the most vulnerable who may have no other choice but settle in substandard settlement and shelter.
- Ensure UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles are informing the settlement response.
- Irrespective of the size and magnitude of the emergency, assumptions and approaches should evaluate the possibility of a sustainable longer-term settlement.
- Analyse demographic factors, population movement, available resources, protection concerns, and local capacity. Survey available documentation on displacement and what communities can offer, but also specific needs and hazards.
- Determine the suitable settlement solutions for the needs of the displaced population. Determine follow up actions such as: which informal settlements should be upgraded, which populations should be relocated at which protection risks, should formal settlement be developed, etc.
- Assess supply and logistical requirements and constraints; put in place arrangements to address them.
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of programmes over time.

4. Policies and guidelines

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

[Safe and secure settlements](#)

Annexes

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

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

5. Links

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

6. Main contacts

Technical Support Section, Division of Resilience and Solutions - DRSTSS@unhcr.org