

Settlement Typologies in Emergencies

13 February 2026

Key points

- In emergencies, forcibly displaced people settle in different types of locations; Plan for a range and mix of settlement options.
- Plan for the long term from the outset and avoid decisions that are hard to reverse.
- Where forcibly displaced people settle drives the response, influencing protection needs, services, and operational complexity.
- Adopt a flexible, contextspecific and inclusive settlement approach that supports both displaced and host communities.
- Prioritize inclusion in host communities, enabling shared access to services, social cohesion, and reduced dependency from the start.
- Assess carrying capacity of various settlements as well as climate/environmental risks early to ensure sustainable settlement choices.

1. Overview

In displacement contexts " **Settlement**" is used as broad term to identify the geographical area in which forcibly displaced people settle, for short or longer periods. It also encompasses those settlements where forcibly displaced and host community populations live, either separately or together.

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. Main guidance

Emergency responses can occur across diverse settlement typologies. The ability to meet life-saving needs rapidly and at scale, depends not only on how well serviced and safe the settlements are, or their ability to support both displaced and host communities, but also on the rights granted to forcibly displaced people, including freedom of movement, which determine whether they can actually access and benefit from what these settlements offer. Understanding the different settlement typologies and their characteristics enables informed decisions on the outset of an emergency, and helps avoid planning decisions that will have a negative impact on both host and displaced communities.

UNHCR advocates for forcibly displaced people to be able to settle along hosting communities, enjoy freedom of movement, access local services and livelihood opportunities, and be included in development plans. Camps and formal settlements should be considered as a last resort.

1 - Settlement Considerations

This section looks at common settlement typologies and what needs to be considered to develop them to host displaced 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, and/or crops that a given territory can support. Site carrying capacity is therefore shaped largely by the land, its 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, for both human consumption and productive use; **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. when cash based

interventions are not feasible

- **Market assessments**, including local availability of construction materials, labour force, private sector companies that could be mobilized, etc.

The feasibility of developing new settlements in a given site should be carefully analyzed, using the [Multisectoral Site Assessment Form](#). In line with Sustainable Responses and Inclusion from the Start approaches, the suitability of any site should be assessed against existing services that could be expanded, upgraded or strengthened (preferred site development modality), rather than establish parallel systems (least preferred modality and only to be considered as last resort). As part of the [Master Plan Approach](#), this multi-sectoral site assessment form includes key guidelines for selection of new sites and the extension of existing ones to accommodate forcibly displaced people.

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. This housing option can facilitate freedom of movement, access to job opportunities and broad inclusion.

2	Formal settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ A type of planned settlement officially established and recognized by the authorities to host people affected by crises and disasters, addressing their immediate or longer-term needs. ◦ Provides centralized access to protection, basic services such as health, education, water, housing and others, typically coordinated by local governments, and delivered by them with the support of humanitarian and development actors, civil society organizations and partners. ◦ A camp is a variant of formal settlement typically conceived as temporary, emergency measure to meet the immediate needs.
3	Informal settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ In an informal settlement, a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs settle in self-identified spontaneous sites, usually on land which has not been authorized for, and/or designated to accommodate them. ◦ Informal settlements can be located on state-owned, private or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population and/or landowners. ◦ Forcibly displaced people choose to settle in informal settlements, because they believe they can better meet their safety and assistance needs and/or remain closer to their place of origin.

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 people living 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 in displacement contexts are a type of planned settlement officially established and recognized by the authorities to host people affected by crises and disasters, addressing their immediate or longer-term needs. Formal Settlements provide centralized access to protection, basic services such as health, education, water, housing and others, typically coordinated by local governments, and delivered by them with the support of humanitarian and development actors, civil society organizations and partners.

Additional Information on formal settlements can be found under the EHB entries on Formal Settlements and Principles and Standards for Settlement Planning.

2.3 Informal Settlements

Informal settlements in displacement contexts is where a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs settle in self-identified spontaneous sites, usually on land which has not been authorized for, and/or designated to accommodate them. Informal settlements can be located on state-owned, private or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population and/or landowners. There, forcibly displaced people choose to settle because they believe they can better meet their safety and assistance needs and/or remain closer to their place of origin.

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. These can be scattered across large areas and can be rather mobile particularly in contexts where evictions are frequent. As informal settlements are a widespread in urban areas in least developed contexts, forcibly displaced often decide to settle along the urban poor. Informal settlements may also emerge at the fringes of agricultural fields, where landowners allow forcibly displaced families to occupy portion of the field in exchange for low-cost or unpaid 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 collective centre is an accommodation, where a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs are accommodated in pre-existing buildings such as community centres, town halls, schools, hotels, gyms, warehouses, disused factories, farm structures, or unfinished buildings. Collective centres can be planned or unplanned. 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

Transit centres are used as temporary settlements for forcibly displaced and stateless persons, providing them with short-term, temporary accommodation. A transit centre is often used at the beginning of a new emergency that is followed by high influx. It hosts asylum-seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) pending transfer to more suitable accommodation (individual accommodation, hosting arrangement, formal settlement, etc.). 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 variant of a formal settlement, typically established as a **temporary, emergency measure** to meet the **immediate, life-saving needs** of forcibly displaced people. Camps are usually characterized by **restrictions on freedom of movement, limited interaction** with nearby communities, and **reduced opportunities** for socio-economic engagement or self-reliance. Basic services within camps are predominantly provided by humanitarian actors, and linkages to national and local services often remain weak.

Wherever possible, **forcibly displaced people should be included and supported to settle within or alongside host communities from the outset**, enabling shared access to services and fostering social cohesion from the beginning.

When camps do exist, particularly in **protracted situations**, or in contexts where integration with adjacent communities is feasible, camps should be **planned and progressively upgraded** with a longerterm perspective so they can evolve into **sustainable human settlements**. This transition requires expanding access to **local services**, strengthening **policy and governance frameworks**, improving **housing, land and infrastructure**, and creating livelihood and economic opportunities for both displaced populations and host communities. Supporting

displaced people to decrease dependence on external aid is central to this shift.

The **Master Plan Approach** provides a solid foundation for this transformation. By applying integrated, multisectoral spatial planning principles from the outset- or during camp upgrading-it guides settlements towards more **inclusive, functional, and resilient forms**, aligned with national systems and urban development standards. The same principles can be applied to all settlement types, including **informal settlements**, to support their transition into sustainable, wellconnected human settlements.

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 the forcibly displaced, 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

- Identify where displaced people are settling
- Analyze demographic factors, population movement, available resources, protection concerns, and local capacity. Collect and analyze all available information on the displacement situation and existing capacities within host communities.
- Identify the settlement options currently emerging and outline feasible next steps, including upgrading informal sites, relocating at-risk groups, or establishing formal settlements.
- Prioritize alternatives to camps and formal settlements where possible, advocating for displaced people to choose where to live.
- Always consider the potential for long-term, sustainable settlements from the start, regardless of the emergency's scale.

- Use the Multisectoral Site Assessment Form to assess the feasibility of new sites or extensions.
- Review land availability, spatial layout, hazard exposure, and environmental or climate risks.
- Ensure UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles are informing the settlement response.
- Assess supply and logistics requirements and constraints and set up arrangements to address them.
- Coordinate early with authorities and clarify HLP rights.
- Engage displaced and host communities through an inclusive AGD-sensitive approach.
- Meet the needs of the most vulnerable who may have no other choice but to settle in substandard settlement and shelter
- Prioritize safe, inclusive solutions that support access to services and hostcommunity inclusion.
- Plan for longterm sustainability and avoid irreversible decisions.
- Monitor settlement conditions and programme impact regularly.

3. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

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

[The Sphere Handbook 2018](#)

[Safe and secure settlements](#)

[UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#)

[Multisectoral Site Assessment Form](#)

Annexes

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

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

4. Main contacts

Technical Support Section, Division of Emergency and Programme Support.