Camp Strategy considerations

25 April 2023

Key points

- A defining characteristic of camps is that they often limit the rights and freedoms of refugees such as their ability to move freely, choose where to live, work or open a business, cultivate land or access protection and services and their ability to make meaningful choices about their lives.

- Pursuing alternatives to camps means working to remove such restrictions so that refugees have the possibility to live with greater dignity, independence and normality as members of the community, either from the beginning of displacement or as soon as possible thereafter.

- Programme design, including advocacy priorities, will be determined by the particular circumstances of each operation. Wherever possible, work to find alternatives to camps and toward the removal of obstacles for persons of concern to the exercise of rights and achieving self-reliance.

- Site selection for planned camps is a critical factor in the ability to provide a safe and healthy environment for persons of concern. Developing an inappropriate site or failing to develop a site to standards can result in further displacement causing unnecessary further loss and distress to refugees and may put some people/groups at further risk.

- Camps require significant investments in infrastructure and systems for the delivery of basic services. The running costs for maintaining and operating these dedicated facilities and systems are also considerable and often must be sustained for many years or even decades.

1. Overview

Suitable, well-selected sites and soundly planned refugee settlements with adequate shelter and integrated, appropriate infrastructure are essential from the early stages of a refugee emergency as they are life-saving and alleviate hardship. Accommodating refugees in emergencies may take the form of host families/communities, mass accommodation in existing shelters or
collective centres, or organized camps. It is of upmost importance to identify the most suitable option or combination of options for accommodating persons of concern appropriate to the context in which displacement is taking place.

UNHCR has developed the Master Plan Approach to settlement planning which provides a framework for the spatial design of humanitarian settlements. It establishes a unique response vision aligned to national, sub-national and local development plans and facilitates efforts to link humanitarian responses with long-term development efforts.

Through effective settlement design, the Master Plan Approach seeks to:

- Facilitate the achievement of long-term, area-based, development priorities through the development of humanitarian settlement plans which are in alignment with national development plans and policies;
- Provide an enabling environment for the sustainable integration of displaced populations within host communities through improved, equitable and safe access to basic services, including comprehensive health, education, and economic opportunities; and
- Mitigate risks to the protection of displaced people, peaceful coexistence of communities and sustainable local development.

Camps are a form of settlement in which refugees or IDPs reside and receive centralised protection, humanitarian assistance, and other services from host governments and humanitarian actors. These settlements can be planned and developed on land allocated by the Government, or created spontaneously when persons of concern settle on land which has not been designated to accommodate them.

The layout, infrastructure and shelter of a camp will have a major influence on the safety and well-being of its residents. Therefore, other vital sectors such as water (good quality, quantity and ease of access), sanitation, administration and security, food distribution, health, education, community services, and income-generating activities should be taken into consideration during the humanitarian response.

Initial decisions on the location of the camp should involve the Government as well as local authorities and communities. Likewise, layout should involve its residents. This approach is necessary to avoid long-term protection issues such as conflict with local communities and to ensure a safe environment for persons of concern and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. (See entry on Site planning for camps for more general information on camps and camp standards.)

## 2. Main guidance

**Context characteristics and risks associated**

When a refugee emergency occurs, the first question to ask is whether or not a camp is the most appropriate settlement option for the displaced population. All other options should be
considered as they may be more appropriate to the nature of the displacement. If displaced groups are lodging with host families or have self-settled within local communities that share cultural ties with them for example, consider these options and determine if these alternatives are more appropriate. Some of these alternatives to camps can promote self-reliance within the uprooted community; however such measures require the willingness and consent of the host government and the host communities themselves.

Camps should normally be considered as the last option. If accommodation in camps is necessary, avoid large settlements and high population density in settlements and in shelters and seek technical support as initial decisions on site selection and camp planning are very difficult to reverse. In addition to meeting the immediate needs, planning should take into consideration the long-term provision of services even if the situation is expected to be temporary.

Camps are often established for security reasons and to ensure that humanitarian agencies can easily monitor the situation and deliver humanitarian assistance. However, camps may not always offer better protection to refugees and the internally displaced. The closed environment of camps is particularly conducive to exploitative and manipulative activities by people who seek to gain from the vulnerable nature of the residents – especially during an emergency.

The specific nature of threats to the security of refugees and the internally displaced in camps may take a number of forms such as theft, assault, domestic violence, forced marriage, cattle rustling, vandalism and civil disputes; child abuse, rape and other sexual forms of sexual and gender-based violence, robbery (armed and otherwise); arson, fraud, forgery, aggravated assault, murder, forced prostitution, kidnapping, human trafficking, smuggling of people and arms, forcible recruitment into armed forces, extortion, enslavement, torture, war crimes, and withholding humanitarian assistance.

The size and the design of camps can contribute to the maintenance of a peaceful environment and the security for refugees and local residents.

The design of camp layouts should be comprehensive and aspects defined in a master plan. The size and growth of planned camps should be contained and no camp should be larger than 20,000 people, to minimize their environmental impact, facilitate camp management, and create a better social environment for camp residents. Camps must have adequate fire prevention strategies and firefighting capacity in place. Communal areas and/or central points should be provided with night lighting and shelters and/or layout designed with the participation of women, men, girls and boys.

**Context-specific protection objectives**

Conflict, violence and persecution continue to cause large-scale displacement in many parts of the world. To provide international protection, and ensure that the rights and dignity of persons of concern are respected, UNHCR must act in a variety of ways, which include the provision of adequate shelter and settlement. When developing an operational response, the following key protection issues should be considered:
To provide a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity to persons of concern.

To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, and poor access to services. Close ethnic and cultural affinities between refugees and their host communities should be identified at an early stage. Settlement planning and responses should aim to mitigate friction and reduce potential tensions between refugee and host communities and reduce other security risks.

To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.

To recognize, and encourage other actors to recognize, that every person, including every refugee, is entitled to move freely, in accordance with human rights and refugee law.

To assist refugees to meet their essential needs and enjoy their economic and social rights with dignity, contributing to the country that hosts them and finding long term solutions for themselves.

To ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on equal footing and are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives. (AGD approach)

To ensure security and protection of refugees. Camps should be located at a reasonable distance from international borders and other sensitive areas (such as military installations).

Principles and policy considerations for the emergency response strategy in this context

Camp development consists of three main phases: set-up, care and maintenance, and camp closure. Each phase requires considerable input from site planners, technical staff, national authorities, the camp population and the host community.

The camp's location, size, design and duration are context specific. The location and plan of a camp can significantly impact the protection of residents and their access to assistance, and can also affect decisions about camp closure and phase out. Settlement planning is not a merely technical process. It can promote community cohesion, and efficient and affordable access to services, mitigate disaster risks (flooding and disease), and enhance living environments, allowing families to enjoy a better quality of life.

Consider the following principles:

- Decisions on camp location should involve national and local government as well as host and refugee communities.
- Because decisions on site selection are difficult to reverse, seek and make use of technical support from the beginning.
- Most refugee operations last longer than expected. Take this into account when selecting a site, planning the camp, and estimating resources and staffing. The footprint of early planning assumptions may endure for decades.
- Prepare a plan for camp decommissioning from the start.
- Locate camps at a reasonable distance (at least 50 km or one day's travel) from national
borders and from other potentially sensitive areas such as military bases.

- Avoid very large settlements. (No camp should be larger than 20,000 people.)
- Site planning should take into account topography, land use, climate, soils, geology, hydrology, vegetation, infrastructure and key natural and cultural resources.
- An adequate supply of water throughout the year is vital. The settlement’s sanitation strategy should reflect the specific soil type at the site.
- Bear in mind that natural features of the site will reduce or affect the amount of usable space.
- Adopt a ‘bottom up’ approach to planning, beginning with the smallest social units, preserving traditional social arrangements and structures as far as possible. Reflect the wishes of the community as much as possible.
- Develop a comprehensive master plan with a layout based on open community forms and community services, such as water points, latrines, showers, cloth washing facilities and garbage collection to promote ownership and maintenance of the services.
- UNHCR neither rents nor purchases land for refugees.
- Policies and programmes must systematically apply an Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach to ensure that all persons of concern have equal access to their rights, protection, services and resources, and are able to participate as active partners in the decisions that affect them.

**Priority operational delivery mode and responses in this context**

The table below outlines some operational priorities in each phase of the camp life-cycle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Operational response consideration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 Set-up | Consider consultations with multiple stakeholders such as:  
  - National authorities.  
  - Camp Management Agency.  
  - Diverse representatives of the refugee and host population, including men, women, boys and girls.  
  - Representatives from other sectors (health, WASH, shelter, security, logistics, education, livelihoods, protection) and from appropriate government ministries, UN agencies, or NGOs.  
  - Technical experts (surveyors, Geographic Information System (GIS) experts, hydrologists, public health engineers, land tenure or customary land tenure experts). |
- Analyse and document the advantages and disadvantages of different site options. Consider protection risks, safety and security, social and cultural factors, location and condition of the land (size, access, distance from border, available resources)
  - Consider whether sites could be extended in the future; and whether phased development is an option

- Consider how housing, land and property rights (HLP) affect site use, including access to water and pastoral and agricultural activities.

- Consider whether sites could be extended in the future; and whether phased development is an option.

- Plan the camp in accordance with international best practice and standards.

- Consider the environmental impact and take steps to reduce harmful impacts.

- Adopt a 'bottom up' approach. Build the plan from individual household level. Pay special attention to persons or groups with specific needs.

- Self-settled/ spontaneous camps - where refugees or IDPs have formed a camp-like settlement on their own initiative. Re-designing or improving the site will be necessary or residents may need to be relocated as early as possible to a well suited site.

- Where the living conditions of camp residents are better than those of a host community, consider implementing Community Support Projects (CSPs) or sharing goods and services.

- Install a public address system to facilitate information sharing.

- From the start, prepare plans to phase-out and close the camp. Plans should consider land agreements, service contracts, documentation storage and confidentiality, asset management, and evaluation of durable solutions.

### 2 Care and maintenance

- Put in place a monitoring system for the camp's general and technical operations; make sure monitoring is always on-going.
- Convene meetings regularly with all stakeholders to identify gaps and problems and resolve them.

- Ensure that residents are consistently involved in decisions regarding care and maintenance.

- Make sure that shelters, infrastructure and facilities are regularly maintained, and upgraded when required, in consultation with the camp population.

- Effective camp governance and community participation / mobilization mechanisms should be in place. These mechanisms will provide maintenance of camp infrastructure, data collection and sharing, monitoring of service delivery with the participation of the community and of other providers in accordance with agreed standards, in order to avoid the duplication of activities and emergence of protection and assistance gaps, and will ensure community complaints mechanisms are established and known to all. For further and specific information refer to [Camp coordination, camp management (CCCM)](#).

### 3 Closure

- Plans to phase out, close and decommission camps should be prepared from the start.

- Ensure that residents have accurate, objective and up-to-date information on the situation, logistics and other procedures.

- Support and protect persons and groups who are most at risk throughout the process.

- Introduce administrative procedures that ensure that all documents are returned to residents before they leave, or held by (sector/cluster/protection) lead agencies or NGOs, or destroyed.
- Develop a monitoring process that ensures that returning refugees do so safely, in security and with dignity.

- Ensure service contracts and agreements are modified or terminated appropriately (including and 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.

- Ensure the site is returned to its previous condition, unless alternative plans have been developed and agreed by national authorities and surrounding communities.

Figure 2 - Priority operational responses.

**Priority actors and partners in this context**

- Consult relevant authorities, operational partners (UN, NGOs, and community organisations) and the affected population at all phases of camp development.
- For strategic decisions which require high-level advocacy, consult with concerned partners, including UN agencies, NGOs and donor representatives, as appropriate.
- From the start, collaborate closely with the technical offices of local authorities, and study local rules and regulations concerning land tenure, public works and housing, in order to reduce the risk of conflicts over land and ensure compliance with local building regulations.
- Develop and train site development and camp management committees.

**Annexes**

UNHCR - Global strategy for settlement and shelter (2014-2018)
3. Links

UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles The SPHERE Handbook 2018
UNHCR, IFRC, UN-HABITAT - Shelter Projects Camp management toolkit UNHCR's information management portal Shelter Cluster UNHCR Emergency Portals

4. Main contacts

Shelter and settlement section, Division of Programme Support and Management. At: HQShelter@unhcr.org