Settlement in urban areas

25 April 2023

Key points

- No one option is ideal. Settlement planning is context specific and must be adapted to the specific urban context, addressing a variety of environmental, socio-cultural and economic factors.

- A sound settlement strategy may combine several settlement options. Accommodation in collective centres, although not ideal, may be the most common in some urban areas. Camps may not be avoidable, but may be combined with other alternatives.

- Host arrangements in cities can be particularly overcrowded and prolonged shared accommodation may strain relationships with host families. Rental accommodation may be more appropriate.

- Natural resources are scarcer in urban areas; access to water, cooking and heating fuel may be limited and/or be cash based.

1. Overview

A ‘settlement’ is an environment of household shelters: it is to a community what a shelter is to a household or family. Urban settlement options support settlements in (small and large) towns and cities.

A human settlement derives from the structured landscape of a territory. It takes into consideration spatial allocation of functions while maintaining equilibrium between the needs of the population, the availability and allocation of resources, economic dynamics, the amelioration of living conditions, the provision of services and enhancing transportation networks, as well as recreational spaces. A settlement must address the needs of the community at large and be designed with the active involvement of persons of concern, partners, and all sectors.

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 permanent living arrangements of displaced families. In this context settlements can range from planned camps to dispersed accommodation in host villages/neighbourhoods, collective centres, spontaneous camps, rental accommodation, etc.

An **urban** settlement is where displaced populations settle within an urban agglomeration such as a town or city. A master plan usually divides towns or cities into zones regulated by norms based on specific sectors such as housing, hygiene, habitat, and environment. Zones are inclusive of residential areas, services and infrastructures, and spaces for administrative, commercial and industrial activities.

Land availability is limited in cities and towns; persons of concern often settle in informal areas or marginalized neighbourhoods which have inherent issues of access, availability of services, lack of sanitation, and limited space for shelters. Displaced population may blend into the urban poor which makes targeted assistance challenging, but ever more important to ensure resources reach the intended recipients.

This section looks at common urban settlement options and the development of urban settlement strategies. These require analysis that should be undertaken during the preparedness planning phase, in which settlement options are identified in collaboration with stakeholders. Responses should take account of the capacity of displaced communities, and resources offered by the city and its communities. Prior to determining suitable options, ensure that the following information is available:

- Spatial analysis that describe the availability, uses, and suitability of land
- Evaluation of the absorption capacity of hosting areas and the extent of natural resources
- Sources of water and their capacity
- Market assessments including - infrastructure, logistical resources, storage capacity, the availability of construction materials, and the feasibility of setting up supply chains into affected areas

**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. These facilities are seldom fit for habitation and must be rehabilitated and/or upgraded to meet the shelter needs of residents. Collective centres should be used only as short-term accommodation to gain time to provide more suitable shelter.

Considerations:

- Families and communities may be able to be kept together maintaining existing support mechanisms
- If the building is connected to the water and sanitation system it may only require upgrades to achieve adequate standards. If buildings are in good condition, it is very cost effective and can be easily winterized
- Collective centres can get overcrowded; psychosocial problems can arise if displaced
individuals remain in collective centres for too long without privacy and independence
- Increased security, fire and communicable disease risk due to the concentration of people

**Host neighbourhoods**
Displaced people may live with and amongst local households, on land or in properties that local people own. Hosts may be relatives, distant family members, friends or acquaintances, or people previously unknown to those who have been displaced.

Considerations:
- Host arrangements provide immediate shelter for persons of concern.
- Access to spontaneous community support mechanisms can encourage self-reliance, independence and a sense of belonging. Host population may have limited resources; and already living below the poverty line. Absorption capacity maybe limited and competition for resources can be fierce in urban areas.
- Long-term accommodation with host families in dense urban areas can be over-crowded, with detrimental effects to health and welfare of both host and displaced families.
- Housing may already be substandard; host families may be in need of improved shelter.

**Short-term tenancy (land, a house, an apartment, a room)**
Persons of concern may rent from the local population via formal or informal agreements. As with host neighbourhoods rental accommodation may be available immediately, and persons of concern will have greater independence and self-reliance. However, in a competitive market, refugees, IDPs, and returnees may be vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation by unscrupulous land lords; rental accommodation that is available and affordable is often substandard; the relationship between landlord and tenant may be exploitative.

**Dispersed self-settlement without legal status**
Persons of concern may settle in scattered locations across large areas, on land or buildings which they have no approval to occupy. Urban land, housing, services, and resources are all limited, and settling without permission in urban areas is extremely problematic for persons of concern; the threat of forced eviction, violent conflict with local populations, exploitation and abuse, and denial of rights is greater in dense urban areas, especially in informal settlements and slums towards which displaced populations are likely to gravitate.

The local population may also need support, for example in ensuring that resources and communal service infrastructure are not overburdened. Full consultation with formal and informal authorities is necessary to avoid conflict with existing inhabitants and plans. It is important that traditional or informal land tenure is recognized and supported to ensure the best protection of the displaced.

Considerations:
- Access to livelihoods may be possible in urban areas
- Persons of concern have some degree of choice on where to settle, and may settle within local communities that share cultural ties with them
- Gathering data from and communicating with persons of concern will be difficult and costly
- Persons of concern are less likely to report security or protection concerns to authorities for
fear of eviction or abuse
- Reaching formal agreements to occupy property may be more difficult if HLP legal framework is inadequate, or if the property is in informal settlements which may not have legal recognition from the state and therefore no formal property titles

**Self-settled, unplanned camps**
Spontaneous settlements or unplanned camps occur when groups of displaced people populate areas without assistance or guidance from local government or the humanitarian community. Such settlements are located on land the displaced population does not officially have the right to occupy. This constitutes the establishment of an entirely new settlement within the boundaries of this land.

Considerations:
- Spontaneous settlements in urban areas will likely occupy undesirable land in high risk areas such as along ravines or hillside slopes, or the limited public areas such as public squares or parks
- Access to adequate supply of water supply, sanitation and other infrastructure is unlikely
- An assessment will be needed in order to determine if the population can and should be relocated to another settlement such as a planned camp or if arrangements can be made in host neighbourhoods
- Some spontaneous settlements, even in urban and peri urban areas can be formalized and upgraded if the site is suitable and approval is granted by the authorities. For more information see entries on spontaneous settlement strategy considerations and on managing and supporting spontaneous settlements

2. Main guidance

**Protection objectives**
- To provide a safe and healthy living environment for persons of concern.
- To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, poor access to services, and natural hazards.
- To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.

**Underlying principles and standards**
- Settlement and shelter designs should reflect the needs of persons of concern, their cultural habits and their capacities, and should also attempt to build on existing resources and enhance access to infrastructure.
- Settlement and shelter interventions need to be planned and implemented to mitigate, to the extent possible, the impact on the natural environment and to prevent hazard risks
such as landslides, floods and earthquakes, among others.

- Inclusive and meaningful participation of persons of concern in accordance with UNHCR's *Age, Gender and Diversity* approach, is essential to ensure that men, women, girls and boys have their voice heard, identify their needs, and have the opportunity to contribute to the search of adequate solutions.

- Accessibility to land constitutes a fundamental element of 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.

- Durable solutions are the ultimate goal, taking into consideration appropriate technology, capacity-building of both refugees and local communities, and use of local skills, materials, techniques and knowledge.

- Refugees and other persons of concern should be empowered to participate actively in decisions that concern them at all stages. An inclusive approach fosters ownership and acceptance of programmes and improves maintenance of shelters and settlements. It facilitates communication and can generate information and support that may be crucial to a programme's success and sustainability.

- International human rights law and refugee law recognize the right of every individual, including refugees, to move freely.

- Persons of concern should be supported to become self-reliant, enabling them to contribute to their host country and find long term solutions for themselves.

- Settlements policy and decisions should be driven primarily by the best interest of persons of concern.

- Persons of concern 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.

- Settlements should provide sufficient space for shelter and associated basic services. Though in host situations, for example, it can be difficult to ensure accommodations meet standards, interventions should aim to achieve minimum international or national standards.

- Housing Land and Property (HLP) considerations are fundamental in planning and implementing settlement activities. Mechanisms should be in place to protect persons of concern from forced eviction, exploitation or abuse derived from a lack of tenure security.

## Protection Risks

- In protracted situations, deteriorating living conditions of families hosting large number of persons might lead to health and psychosocial problems, as well as risks of stigmatization, harassment, economic or sexual exploitation, and violence against the displaced families.

- In areas where refugees are not welcome, both host and displaced families might become targets of retaliation by parties to the conflict or by surrounding communities.

- Those settled spontaneously on private or public land are often under constant threat of eviction by landlords or authorities. Monitoring and responding to harassment and threats may not be achieved in a timely manner if settlements are scattered and legal tenure has not been clarified.

- Prolonged stay in camps or collective centres can result in stress and tensions and can lead to social conflict and friction with host communities, between families, clans or ethnic
Persons of concern in collective centres are often under threat of being evicted by landlords. Those occupying schools, religious, and other public buildings are under increased pressure to leave.

The presence of ethnically, culturally, religiously or linguistically different groups may give rise to tensions.

A proliferation of high quality shelters in an area where housing standards are low can create tension with local communities.

High population density significantly increases health risks.

The above protection risks are applicable to rural and urban settlements. Persons of concern will encounter a number of specific risks associated with the urban environment:

- Public areas are scarce in cities; relations with the local community might deteriorate if the persons of concern occupy already limited number of public spaces such as parks or public squares.
- Criminal groups can be prolific in urban areas; persons of concern can be targeted in dispersed or groups settlements.
- Economies in urban environment are primarily cash based; agriculture is nonexistent; water points require payment. Access to food, water, and other necessities will come at a cost, which may force persons of concern to adopt negative coping mechanisms.
- Displaced children in urban areas face great risks. Lack of access to education can be caused by lack of resources, fear of the local community, or the need for children to complement household income. Lack of parental supervision and access to schools, and the overall poverty can lead girls and boys to try and fend for themselves and exposing them to child labour, sex work and theft. For girls especially the risks of early sex, exploitative sex and sex work is greater in cities and towns.
- Persons of concern may be accused and blamed for neighbourhoods' problems such as conflict between families, criminal acts – often despite lack of evidence, thefts, etc. Verbal abuse or accusations can become physical abuse, and persons of concern may not receive protection by the authorities.
- Inadequate housing can forced families to live in overcrowded conditions, or to separate. Children may be sent to live with other neighbours exposing them to neglect and abuse.

**Other risks**

Persons of concern in urban areas tend to settle in high risk areas or hazardous environments such as unused warehouses, factories, unfinished buildings, and the land surrounding those sites. Exposure to contaminants can be high.

The presence of displaced populations, especially in dispersed self-settlement without legal status or spontaneous settlements can become a political factor and their removal a political platform for elected city officials often resulting in forced evictions.
Key decision points

- Planned camps are less likely in urban settings; spontaneous camps can appear if no other solutions are available and residents will need similar levels of support as planned camps. At the outset of a crisis, it is advisable to consider a mix of settlement and shelter options in consultation with the host Government. Initial strategies can include the adaptation of unused public buildings, arrangements with community groups, rent support. Water and sanitation services need to be available in all cases.

- In cities and towns rental support can be a viable shelter solution. See entry on rental accommodation strategy considerations for more information.

- Ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the decision-making process to determine the appropriate settlement solutions to support.

- In cities and towns Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues will be more complex. Regulations can be difficult to navigate. Most cities develop rapidly and informally and land use plans and ordinances are often out of date. Built up areas of informal settlements may for example still be designated as green belts and housing in those areas have no legal recognition. Acquiring tenure security in those areas for displaced populations will be as, or more, difficult than it already is for its regular residents.

- Ensure you have the appropriate technical support to clarify HLP issues and processes. Informal agreements may be the only agreements possible during the emergency response.

- Analyse settlement patterns, the topography, and the resource base, to reduce adverse impacts on the natural environment. Make use of existing planning processes (where this is possible), and follow best practice, to minimize the risks and vulnerabilities that settlement will trigger.

- Ensure that persons of concern can safely access shelter and settlements locations and essential services.

- Non-formal coordination, decision making, and support mechanisms often exist in neighbourhoods. Make sure all stakeholders are involved, including community groups and associations, in addition to the authorities.

- In heavily centralized countries communication between national and local officials may be inadequate. Always ensure that city officials are represented when planning a response and are involved during implementation.

- Involve development partners as early as possible, notably UNICEF, UNDP, and (where appropriate) the World Bank. Consider how both relief and broader development objectives can be advanced by means of the resources that those who have been displaced will attract.

- 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.

- Ensure that the specialized technical support required is in place and that physical planners are deployed in a timely manner.

- Seek technical support from the technical department of the host Government and ensure that local authority experts are involved in settlement planning.
**Key steps**

- 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.
- Obtain information on rules and regulations, building codes, environmental analysis, lists of contractors and material suppliers. Obtain information from local and regional associations of engineers and architects, to help identify potential local partners.
- Determine the suitable settlement solutions for the needs of the displaced population. Determine follow up actions such as: which spontaneous settlements should be upgraded, which populations should be relocated, should host family accommodation be upgraded, etc.
- Identify the range of shelter solutions that are preferred by, and that can be made available to persons of concern.
- Develop a shelter and settlement strategy.
- Assess supply and logistical requirements and constraints; put in place arrangements to address them.
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of programmes over time.

**Key management considerations**

- Integrate settlement strategies and potential layouts in preparedness planning processes.
- Ensure systematic deployment of senior settlement and shelter experts at the onset of emergencies.
- The physical information on cities available at planning offices is often out of date. Determine the appropriate technology needed to accurately map settlements (open street map, drones, etc) or consider low tech rapid mapping exercises if the overall picture is more important than the accuracy of the mapping (for example social mapping).
- Consider how the settlement and shelter response can boost the local economy in marginalized neighbourhoods. Try to gain an understanding of the informal economy and how persons of concern can access income generating activities.
- To reduce the risk of conflicts over land, collaborate closely from the start with local authorities' technical departments, and inform yourself of local rules and regulations on land tenure, public works and housing.
- Establish and apply quality assurance measures. These may include training on best practices to build capacity.
- Identify natural hazards (such as flooding, landslides, strong winds). If there are seismic risks, seek specialized technical advice even for the design of a simple shelter.
- Coordinate and liaise with other sectors, including water and sanitation and livelihoods, to ensure solutions are integrated.

**Resources and partnerships**

Numerous actors become involved following the arrival of a large number of displaced people. To achieve a well-coordinated response, it is vital to clarify and distinguish their different roles and
responsibilities, and to understand the structures and procedures of the local and national authorities.

Technical experts will generally carry out specific tasks. The table below suggests appropriate experts at different stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning stage</th>
<th>Who can help</th>
<th>What they can do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs assessment; understand the persons of concern's profile and demographics</td>
<td>Sociologist/ economist Anthropologist Architects/ engineers/ Protection experts</td>
<td>Carry out comprehensive surveys, including market surveys  Evaluate information Gather background information Analyse traditional practices and cultural habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement analysis and planning</td>
<td>Urban planner Physical planner Architect Civil Engineer Water/sanitation engineer Environmental engineer Geologist/hydrologist</td>
<td>Determine possible upgrades to urban infrastructure Map hazards and identify settlements which face unacceptable levels of risk Carry out surveys and topographic studies Assess the capacity of water sources Recommend solutions and most suitable settlement options Estimate costs, and resource requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Physical planner Urban planner Civil engineer Architect Logisticians</td>
<td>Prepare the work programme and risk management plans Supervise implementation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annexes

UNHCR 2014, Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018

Shelter Centre 2010, Shelter after disaster. Strategies for transitional settlement and reconstruction, Shelter Centre, Geneva

The World Bank, Open Knowledge Repository, Safer homes, stronger communities. a handbook for reconstructing housing and communities after natural disasters

3. Links

UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles UNHCR Intranet: Shelter and Settlement Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons: Shelter Centre online library ALNAP. Strengthening humanitarian action through evaluation and learning, Respo... World Bank, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery The Sphere Project 2018

4. Main contacts

Shelter and Settlement Section (SSS), Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). At: HQShelter@unhcr.org.