Emergency shelter standard

18 September 2023

Key points

- Ensure minimum standards of covered living space per person are respected
- Shelter solutions should be adapted to the geographical context, the climate, the cultural practice and habits, and the local availability of skills as well as accessibility to adequate construction materials in any given country.
- The provision of core relief items is inherently linked to the adequacy of settlement and shelter. Core relief items may include shelter-related materials, as well as other domestic items.
- Consider the life span of shelter materials as they deteriorate with time. Further to the initial distribution, replacement, reinforcement or maintenance may be required.
- Individual family shelter should always be preferred to communal accommodation as it provides the necessary privacy, psychological comfort, and emotional safety.
- Whenever possible, persons of concern should be empowered to build their own shelters, promoting a sense of ownership and self-reliance.

1. Overview

This section will provide guidance on the expected standards when providing emergency shelter. A shelter is defined as a habitable covered living space providing a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity. Persons of concern to UNHCR have the right to adequate shelter in order to benefit from protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings as well as privacy, comfort and emotional security.

Individual family shelter should always be preferred to communal accommodation as it provides the necessary privacy, psychological comfort, and emotional safety. It also provides safety and security for people and possessions and helps to preserve or rebuild family unity.
Emergency shelter needs are best met by using the same locally available, sustainably sourced materials and construction methods as would be normally used by the refugees themselves or the local hosting population. Only if adequate quantities cannot be quickly obtained locally should emergency shelter material be brought into the country. The simplest structures, and labour-intensive building methods, are preferable. Materials should be environmentally friendly and obtained in a sustainable manner. That said, plastic sheeting has become the most important shelter component in many humanitarian response operations often in combination with rigid materials, as they offer flexibility and can be used in a variety of ways in both urban and rural settings.

Regardless of the type of emergency shelter used the following principles generally apply:

- Shelters must provide protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings, privacy and emotional security.
- Blankets, mats, and tarpaulin must be provided as needed.
- Refugee shelter should be culturally and socially appropriate and familiar where possible. Suitable local materials are best, if available.
- Shelter must be adequate regardless of seasonal weather patterns, if not it should be adapted accordingly.
- Wherever possible, persons of concern should be empowered to build their own shelter, with the necessary organizational and material support. This will help to ensure that the shelter will meet their particular needs, promote a sense of ownership and self-reliance, and reduces costs and construction time considerably.

Each type of emergency shelter has advantages and disadvantages depending on the context in which it is used. Consider the following points when deciding on the emergency shelter or combination of shelter types to be used in any given response:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shelter solution</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family tents</td>
<td>Traditional relief tent; lightweight; proven design; good headroom; can be winterised; large production capacities.</td>
<td>inflexible; may be unstable in high winds or heavy snow, difficult to heat. Where tents are used for long durations, provisions for repair materials should be considered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plastic sheeting</td>
<td>Most important shelter component in many relief operations; UV-resistant; heavy duty; lightweight, flexible; large production capacities.</td>
<td>Collecting wood for shelters' support frames or stick skeletons can considerably harm the environment if collected from surrounding forests. It is therefore important to always consider sustainable sources of framing material which is sufficient to support plastic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials and tools for construction (shelter kits)</td>
<td>Suitable local materials are best, if available, and must be suitable for variance in the seasons, culturally and socially appropriate and familiar.</td>
<td>Required time and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefabricated shelter and containers</td>
<td>Permanent or semi-permanent structures; long lasting.</td>
<td>High unit cost; long shipping time; long production time; transport challenges; assembly challenges; inflexibility; disregard cultural and social norms.</td>
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<td>Rental subsidies</td>
<td>Greater sense of independence; greater integration in a community; influx of income to host community.</td>
<td>Difficult to monitor that shelter meets standards; competitive market may result in exploitation and abuse; inflation and speculation may occur; upgrades or repairs may be needed.</td>
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2. Main guidance

**Emergency standard**

At the beginning of an emergency, the aim should be to provide sufficient material to the
refugees to allow them to construct their own shelter while meeting at least the minimum standards for floor space as follows

- Minimum 3.5m² covered living space per person in tropical or warm climates, excluding cooking facilities or kitchen (it is assumed that cooking will take place outside).
- Minimum height of 2m at the highest point.
- Minimum 4.5m² to 5.5m² covered living space per person in cold climates, including kitchen facilities as more time will be spent inside the shelter (cooking, eating, and livelihoods). 2m ceilings to reduce the heated space.

The design of shelter should, if possible, provide for modification by its occupants to suit their individual needs.

Cold climates where cold weather with rain and snow prevails over extended periods (3 to 5 months) demand that people live primarily inside. In particular, persons with specific needs will require heated, enclosed spaces. Shelters which are sufficient to withstand cold conditions have to be of a high standard and are complex and expensive to build. The following should be considered:

- Structural stability (to withstand snow- and wind-loads)
- Wind protection of walls, roofs, doors and windows
- Protected and heated kitchens and sanitary facilities
- Provision for heating.

To help people survive the impact of cold weather in an emergency, a strategy should focus on the following:

**Individual survival.** It is extremely important to protect the human body from heat loss. Particularly during sleep, it is important to be able to keep warm by retaining body heat with blankets, sleeping bags, clothing and shoes. Heat can be generated by providing food with high calorific value.

**Living space.** It is very important to concentrate on a limited living space and to ensure that cold air can be kept out of this space. This can be done by sealing the room with plastic sheeting and sealing tapes. Windows and doors should be covered with translucent plastic sheeting and stapled on window and door frames. Walls, ceilings and floors of the living space should be designed to insulate from cold air and to retain warm air as efficiently as possible.

**Heating.** Keeping the inside of a shelter at a comfortable temperature (15 to 19°C) depends to a large extent on the outside temperature, the type of construction, the quality of the insulation, the orientation of the building, and on the type and capacity of the stove. Depending on conditions, a stove with 5 to 7 kW performance should have the capacity to heat a space with a floor area of 40 to 70 m² in most cold areas. When the stove for heating is used for cooking as well, particular attention should be given to its stability.
**Longer-term standard**

The SPHERE standards (2018) referenced above remain the *minimum* internationally recognised quantifiable standards applicable throughout all operational phases. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that these remain *minimum* standards and that it is imperative to consider the next stages of the sheltering process as early as possible in the response. An approach that is able to breach the division between emergency, temporary, and permanent shelter and that links relief, rehabilitation and development should be sought.

While it may be difficult during an emergency to look beyond the provision of life saving shelter support, it is imperative to keep in mind that persons of concern should be supported to reach durable solutions. Within and beyond the emergency phase *shelter solutions* should be adapted and contextualized according to the following elements:

- geographical context
- climate
- cultural practice and habits
- local availability of skills
- access to adequate construction materials

Standards to be applied to temporary and/or permanent shelters will be depend on the context in which they are applied and will be commonly defined by shelter partners and in close coordination with government authorities and development partners.

**Annexes**

Sphere Handbook (2018)

**3. Links**

[UNHCR Emergency Information Management Toolkit – Shelter and Settlement](https://www.unhcr.org) UNHCR, *Global strategy for settlement and shelter 2014-2018*

**4. Main contacts**

Shelter and Settlement Section ([HQShelter@unhcr.org](mailto:HQShelter@unhcr.org))