

Transit centres

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Key points

- Transit centres are intended to provide short-term shelter to displaced persons in transit to other, longer-term accommodation arrangements/destinations, or during evacuation processes
- The role and responsibility of local and national authorities in the identification of transit centres is of fundamental importance, with UNHCR providing support and technical advice to ensure that minimum standards are maintained and that potential risks, including protection risks, are mitigated
- Transit centres should provide safe, secure and dignified living conditions, with due consideration for the age, gender and diverse characteristics of the populations that will be accommodated
- The layout and management of a transit centre will have a major influence on the safety, security and well-being of a displaced population. Therefore, the set-up of transit centres should be done with the involvement of various sectors, including shelter/settlement, protection, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and health. Communities should also be consulted, and their views and feedback should be taken into consideration as much as possible
- Although transit centres provide temporary accommodation, risk-mitigation measures should be taken into account, to avoid congestion and overcrowding, maintain adequate privacy, ensure accessibility and adopt other necessary measures to mitigate protection and other risks

1. Overview

There is a wide range of options for accommodating displaced populations (as described in the [Settlement Typologies in Emergencies](#) entry), among which is **transit centres**. 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.). Transit centres can also be considered within the context of repatriation operations, as a staging point for return. They may also be used in the context of relocation, permanent or temporary, following an operational requirement or emergency, for instance, a humanitarian evacuation. In protracted situations, they may serve as temporary accommodation for a few nights. Transit centres may also be used when transport capacity to more permanent accommodation is outpaced by the arrival trend.

Transit centres can be found:

- close to **border crossing points**;

- in **inland locations** that can facilitate further **transfer to other locations** of choice (train/bus stations, airports, etc.);

- **scattered around or close to** other settlements, where forcibly displaced persons may be redirected (e.g. urban centres, formal settlements, etc.)

Despite the short, temporary stay they are intended to offer, transit centres shall provide a habitable and dignified covered living space and a secure and healthy living environment, ensuring privacy and dignity to the extent possible, and considering the age, gender, diversity and other characteristics of the populations. Transit centres should provide adequate protection, access to water and sanitation, hygiene, health services (including mental health and psychosocial support [MHPSS]), cooking areas, nutrition and other life-saving interventions, including provision of information and communication to affected populations. These facilities are ideally used for a period of two to five days.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Transit centres may be necessary, especially when movements of forcibly displaced persons overtake the swift-absorption capacity of other types of accommodation/shelter (e.g. hosting arrangements, rented accommodation, formal settlements, etc.). Thus, they are a life-saving accommodation measure, providing a first, temporary yet vital shelter option to displaced populations that is often critical for their survival if they have no other immediate shelter solutions.

The stay in a transit centre is temporary, intended to bridge the period between the onset of a population's displacement and the identification of an appropriate shelter solution (by the forcibly displaced persons themselves, or with support from humanitarian or other actors). Exceptions may be made for certain families/individuals that may stay for longer periods due to a lack of alternative onward accommodation.

3. Main guidance

1. Key planning decision points

- Transit centres are preferred in situations where a steady flow of more than 150 people per day are in transit and need more permanent and dignified accommodation, or any other situation that might require a form of intermediate accommodation.
- While local and national authorities are generally responsible for choosing the location of transit centres, UNHCR and its partners shall contribute to reviewing the suitability of location choices to avoid negative consequences on the protection and well-being of the population in transit.
- Local communities should be consulted before a transit centre is established, to avoid tensions with the transiting population.
- Transit centres should be located in a place that is socially and environmentally appropriate, and that meets public health standards.
- In choosing the location, allocating resources and carrying out organization for a transit centre, it is necessary to consider water (quality, quantity and access), sanitation, resources for proper administration, safety and security (in coordination with local authorities), food distribution/cooking areas, health and other services, including child-friendly spaces for the well-being of children and confidential spaces for protection-related interventions.
- Consider the partnerships that UNHCR will need to establish to manage and ensure adequate assistance in the transit centre, including with local authorities, civil society organizations and other organizations.
- Furthermore, transit centres should meet the **Emergency standard for planning settlements** presented under the [Principles & Standards for Settlement Planning](#) entry.

2. Planning standards for transit centres

The standards referred to below should be contextualized to reflect the overall situation and purpose, and the required capacity of a transit centre (which will largely depend on how many, and at what rate, people will be passing through it), as well as the immediate needs and vulnerabilities of the population.

Aspects such as immediate protection needs and the overall health status of the arriving population, including the potential need for psychological first aid, additional nutritional treatments and preventive isolation, must be considered in the design of transit centres. See the entries under [Nutrition](#) for more information.

Transit centres are usually constructed/identified on land allocated by the government. They should ensure land rights, and adequate access to a covered living space and basic services:

- Communal buildings or large tents (subdivided for groups and/or families of five for privacy) should be heated in cold climates. A covered space of 85 m² can accommodate approximately 14 to 25 persons.
- Sanitation: 20 persons per toilet facility and 50 persons per shower (gender-segregated,

with frequent cleaning organized). See the [WASH](#) entry for more information.

- Water supply: an absolute minimum provision of 7 litres/person/day with an additional provision for cooking, cleaning and sanitation purposes (20 litres/person/day) is recommended to avoid/mitigate disease outbreaks.
- Food preparation area: approximately 100 m² per 500 persons.
- Storage: 150–200 m³ per 1,000 persons.
- A public address system, , where relevant.
- Adequate lighting at night and access to electricity for phone charging.
- Arrival zones and departure zones that are separated from accommodation zones.
- Parking spaces for transport vehicles.
- Space for cattle that forcibly displaced persons may arrive with.
- Administrative offices (and staff accommodation, if relevant).
- One health-care facility per 10,000 persons (for more information, see [Health at points of entry and access points](#) and [Primary health care coverage standard](#)). When deciding the location of transit centres, their proximity to such facilities should be considered, to avoid costly referrals in case of far distances.
- Where protection actors are present, consider a space for confidential conversations with individuals that may require support.
- Where feasible, consider space for recreational activities for children.
- At the request of authorities and depending on the circumstances, security fencing may have to be considered.

3. Protection considerations and risk mitigation

- Avoid considering transit centres as accommodation for periods longer than five days, unless they offer appropriate support, including privacy, dignity and adequate accommodation. A prolonged period of stay may result in stress and tension within and among families, or with local communities.
- Provide a safe and secure living environment for new forcibly displaced arrivals and transiting populations, and support authorities in maintaining the [civilian character](#) of the transit centre.
- When relevant, during spontaneous (non-organized) movements, consult forcibly displaced (or returning) populations to better understand their intentions regarding their further movements, and provide them with information as needed.
- When relevant, during spontaneous (non-organized) movements, consult various segments of the forcibly displaced (or returning) population to gather information on their profile (e.g. age, sex, presence of persons with specific needs, ethnicity, etc.) and their situation/intention (e.g. security situation, points of entry, routes, etc.), to better adapt the response to immediate needs.
- Gain understanding of the intended destination and accommodation options preferred by the displaced persons.
- Promote good relations between transit centre residents and the nearby hosting community (see also **Key planning decision points**).
- Mitigate risk to the safety and security of all residents, paying due attention to persons in situations of vulnerability. Run safety audits to mitigate various protection risks, including by ensuring adequate lighting at night and segregated latrines for female residents; providing partitions and lockable shelters for privacy; and maintaining family unity.

- Make adequate arrangements for safe evacuation in the event of fire and inform residents.
- Ensure that smoke from stoves or open fires does not pose a health and disease risk.
- If the transit centre is near a point of entry/border with the country of origin of the population, consider setting up a system for pre-registration/emergency registration, in coordination with the authorities.
- Establish complaint and feedback mechanisms, which need to be monitored and responded to in a regular and timely manner.
- Consider the ethnic and cultural characteristics of the population in arranging the layout and accommodation.
- Consult the [Safe and Secure Settlement](#) entry for more protection considerations.

4. Key management considerations

Because large-scale emergencies are usually unpredictable and happen quickly, managers should take steps to:

- assess available resources and request resources as required;
- request support from other local or international implementing partners and organizations;
- avoid duplication and inefficiency in assistance delivery;
- support self-settlement options (if possible), such as accommodation in host communities, provided these do not generate protection risks;
- adopt temporary emergency arrangements when required, while preparing longer-term solutions;
- strengthen coordination between all stakeholders involved in the provision of assistance and with the transit centre;
- identify the most suitable option or combination of options for the next accommodation solutions for the forcibly displaced population, to minimize their stays in transit centres. Provide them with information on available options so they can make an informed decision.

Post emergency phase

Given the short-term, temporary nature of transit centres, there is no longer-term standard. A transit centre should be designed for short stays ranging from two to five days on average, with a foreseen high turnover rate. Nonetheless, they can exist for several months, based on the needs and flow of the population on the move and in need of safe and dignified accommodation. Design and construction 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.

At the end of their use, transit centres and the land surrounding them need to be returned for their original purpose. Handover/donation of materials that have been in use at transit centres (for instance, to local authorities and communities) can be considered.

Planning of transit centres

- Ensure that appropriate locations are selected, in close coordination with authorities as applicable. Consider security, accessibility, acceptability (by communities), environmental and climate risk-related factors, access to basic services and infrastructure, cultural identity, etc.
- Assess the suitability of transit centres and ensure that they meet basic standards throughout their life cycle.
- Onward transport from transit centres to the location(s) where the displaced population will settle more permanently should be considered if so required by the population, particularly for those in most vulnerable situations.
- Be prepared to adapt and maintain transit centres for long-term use if necessary, if the transit of the population is continuous.
- Apply UNHCR's age, gender and diversity approach in designing and managing transit centres and in providing assistance.
- Ensure that planning minimizes the need for subsequent costly repairs, modifications and retrofitting, especially if the centre will already be in use by forcibly displaced persons.
- Ensure the most efficient use of land, resources and time.
- Maintain health and safety standards; make clear who is responsible in case of accidents, including arrangements with authorities for security incidents; prepare sites (level, mark out, dispose of construction waste, clear vegetation, lay hard surfaces, provide landscaping, drainage and utilities, etc.); and plan for handover.
- Avoid creating very large transit centres where possible, and take steps to avoid congestion and overcrowding, leading to lack of privacy and triggering protection,

health and other risks.

- Apply a multisectoral approach in planning and managing transit centres by involving protection (including gender-based violence and child protection), WASH, health and security expertise.

4. Policies and guidelines

[UNHCR, The Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning, 2019](#)

[UNHCR, Multi-Sectoral Site Assessment Form, 2021](#)

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

5. Links

[The Sphere Handbook 2018](#)

6. Main contacts

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