UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

# Safe and Secure Settlements

26 July 2025

## Key points

- Ensure that locations where forcibly displaced persons settle are safe and secure
- Work with multifunctional teams to consult members of communities, using an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach, and to ensure their active participation in decisions that concern them. Promote this approach from the start of an emergency
- Comply with local building and safety standards. Conduct regular risk analysis that assesses the physical safety risks involved in accessing settlements, shelter and infrastructure
- Regularly monitor different types of protection risks, including gender-based violence (GBV), and adjust activities throughout all phases of programming. Conduct regular safety audits and take actions to mitigate protection risks identified by different AGD groups
- Identify requirements that may cause a barrier to accessing services and infrastructure. Determine the needs of specific groups, such as those caring for young children, and adjust activities throughout all phases of programming
- Consider the impact of climate-related risks upon the most vulnerable individuals or the displaced population and the necessary actions needed for their adaptation and mitigation. Prevent or mitigate negative environmental impacts that significantly increase the vulnerability of forcibly displaced and stateless persons

## 1. Overview

In an emergency context, it is imperative that locations in which forcibly displaced and stateless persons settle are safe and secure. In a number of settlement types [see Settlement Typologies in Emergencies], forcibly displaced and stateless persons may face a range of security and safety threats and hazards, including disasters, fire, climate-change-related risks such as floods or strong winds, physical injury, child protection risks and gender-based violence (GBV). To prevent, mitigate and reduce exposure to protection risks, it is essential to **establish safe and secure**

**settlements from the start of an emergency**.

Staff should make sure settlements for forcibly displaced persons respect minimum standards of shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), energy and beyond, and follow best practices for the provision of **safe and secure living conditions** for the displaced populations as well as their host communities. These goals cannot be achieved in isolation and require the engagement of a multifunctional team (from Shelter and Settlement, WASH, Energy, Environment, Protection, Health, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), etc.), as well as consultation with local authorities and communities. A specific effort should be made to understand and address barriers to participation that people we work with face, particularly children, women and girls, people with specific needs, older people, and marginalized groups, among others. Adopting universal design principles will make settlements more accessible, more secure and safer for everyone.

# 2. Relevance for emergency operations

Settlements may be prone to a series of risks. These include direct protection threats for the population, such as GBV, barriers to access (for example for older people and people with disabilities), risks for the environment, disaster risks, and conflict with host communities over resources. Ensuring from the start that settlements are safe and secure is not an additional burden that will delay emergency action; it is an integral element of good settlement planning and response. Priority risks and threats that are not properly identified and addressed early on, such as risk of flooding or inadequate measures to prevent GBV, might become unmanageable a few weeks or months into the emergency.

To achieve a good balance between speed and quality, emergency teams may start by identifying and acting upon priority risks, in collaboration with key stakeholders such as local authorities, displaced populations and key sectors/clusters such as Protection, WASH and Health. Planning and action can then become more detailed and refined as teams gain more detailed information over time.

# 3. Main guidance

**Underlying policies, principles and/or standards**

- Respect the minimum requirements for ensuring safe and secure living conditions. These should take into account the operational context, including but not limited to: the profile of the forcibly displaced population and their host communities; logistical and budgetary factors; and local and national laws.
- Construction standards should be based on local building and safety codes where these exist, or international best practice.
- When planning or developing a safe and secure settlement and related services (shelter, WASH, energy, communal infrastructures, etc.), observe the following elements of protection mainstreaming: prioritize safety, privacy and dignity; avoid causing harm;

ensure inclusive and meaningful access; establish feedback and complaint mechanisms as part of accountability to affected people; strive for tenure security; and promote communities' participation and empowerment.
- Mitigate the risk of GBV at every stage of programming in accordance with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Action and the UNHCR Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-based Violence.
- Promote child protection at every stage of programming in accordance with the relevant standards. [See Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Minimum Standards for Child protection in Humanitarian Action (2019), Standard 27, Shelter and Settlement and Child Protection.]
- Careful consideration should be given to housing, land and property issues, to mitigate potential conflict and guarantee the rights of forcibly displaced and stateless populations and host communities, including protection from forced eviction, harassment and other threats.
- Based on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), take all necessary steps to prevent, mitigate the risks of and respond to sexual misconduct and to put the protection, rights and dignity of victims at the forefront of the response.

**Good practice recommendations**

**Protection risk mitigation.** Waiting for or seeking population-based data on the true magnitude of any protection risks, including GBV and child protection, should **not** be a priority in an emergency due to **safety and ethical challenges in collecting such data**.

With this in mind, **humanitarian personnel ought to assume GBV is occurring and take action to mitigate risks** (See IASC's "Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action", 2015, Part 1. Available from here). From the onset of the emergency, consultation with women and girls should focus on collecting **information on their perception of risks and barriers** they may face in accessing services. Consultations could also include **safety audits** that, when conducted regularly, can help to monitor the effectiveness of established mitigation measures and GBV risks. (UNHCR, "UNHCR policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence", 2020. Available from here.)

Today, children represent almost 50 per cent of forcibly displaced and stateless persons. It has been proven that children's survival, protection, well-being and healthy development are seriously jeopardized in humanitarian settings. Sectoral interventions not only contribute to child protection outcomes, but when carried out in line with protection principles, they ensure that children are safe and protected and that programming does not pose additional risks. Consultations with children not only fulfil a legal obligation (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children have the right to be heard in decisions that affect them.), and demonstrate our commitment to children's participatory rights, but also provide a unique evidence base to design, implement and adapt programming and ensure that the specific needs of children are met. From the onset of an emergency, children and caregivers should be able to participate, and child-friendly communication, feedback and complaint mechanisms should be in place. This will help identify potential risks and barriers to access and prevent harm before it occurs.

**Conflict-sensitive approaches** should be considered in the development of settlements, to maximize **peaceful coexistence** with the neighbouring host community/communities.

**Key multisectoral actions.** Plan settlements in collaboration with relevant technical sectors (Settlement Planning, Shelter, WASH, Energy, Public Health, Education, etc.) to ensure that the operational plan and strategy are comprehensive and aligned. **Work with Protection staff** and explain to members of the community the risks and challenges associated with the type of settlement, shelter, WASH and energy. Pay particular attention to risks and challenges that might compromise family and community unity, safety, access, etc.

**Participatory assessments and people-centred approach.** If data are not available already, collect disaggregated data and information from a range of community members to help inform planning. It is particularly important to consult people from different AGD groups as soon as possible to obtain their recommendations on how to enhance safety, security, privacy and dignity, remove accessibility barriers, and mitigate different protection risks (including GBV) in settlement, shelter, WASH, energy and other sectoral designs. Use the UNHCR registration process as well as community-based outreach activities to identify marginalized groups and make sure that people with specific needs are consulted. **Consult the community more broadly to understand cultural, familial and societal structures**, as well as to obtain information on the natural, cultural, religious and historical importance of potential settlement locations and how related services are designed. Consider the specific needs of individuals and families. Where it is possible and safe to do so, consult other groups in the community who could be directly or markedly affected by planning. For example, consider the specific needs of child-headed households, people in same-sex partnerships, transgender people, gender non-conforming people, older people, people with reduced mobility, people with disabilities or other groups, depending on the context. Assess available resources, including those in the community, and agree a management plan with stakeholders. Conduct a needs assessment for refugee emergencies (NARE) to obtain basic information on needs and resources, such as water and energy. Detailed sectoral assessments may require more sector-specific analysis.

**Planning.** Building on information from participatory assessments, use an **AGD** and community-based protection **(CBP)** approach to involve a range of displaced persons and ensure that design and planning of facilities and services take account of their recommendations. Comply with national laws and regulations, including national standards on accessibility; in their absence, apply international standards. Plan land use with stakeholders, taking account of the restraints on land use and time, to ensure that issues relating to housing, land and property **(HLP)** are highlighted and addressed early on. Where possible, promote action planning by the community and assist communities to meet their needs using their own capacities.

**Implementation.** Where it is possible to do so, **build on the resources, skills and capacities of the displaced populations and their host communities**. Enable them to construct their own household facilities and encourage community members to support each other, especially people with specific needs, including child-headed households.
Promote income generation and skills development as appropriate, for instance when communities are involved in self-construction. Ensure that targeting and prioritization take into consideration people with specific needs. Regularly monitor implementation in consultation with the community, using an AGD approach, to identify potential protection risks and adjust

programmes based on results.

**Maintenance.** Where possible, make sure that **the displaced community carries out routine maintenance of their own shelter, WASH, solar street lights and other facilities**. Provide the materials, tools and training they need to do so. Encourage members of the community to support people who have specific needs, including child-headed households, and ensure measures are in place to carry out maintenance if no community support is available.

**Monitoring.** To strengthen accountability to affected people, **establish community-based systems** that are adapted to different AGD groups (including children, women and girls) to provide feedback and regular monitoring. Make sure that these mechanisms include a **clear referral and response system**, so that community members receive responses to their complaints or questions in a timely manner. Make sure the information that such systems collect is applied to improve programming.
Monitor programmes continuously to **identify any harmful unintended effects and exacerbation of protection risks**. Act quickly to prevent or mitigate these. To monitor programmes, hold **frequent feedback sessions** with community members, particularly **from different AGD groups**. Make sure that all groups are aware of feedback mechanisms and can access them, and that information is adapted to children. In collaboration with GBV and child protection specialists, **plan regular GBV safety audits** and monitor and adjust programmes accordingly.

**Environmental and climate risk considerations.** Negative environmental impacts can significantly increase the vulnerability of both displaced and host communities. They also make emergencies more complex and complicate future recovery efforts.

As a first step, identify environmental and climate risks by conducting a Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) assessment. Depending on the results, a formal environmental impact assessment (EIA) according to national legislation may have to be undertaken.

Taking account of potential climate-related risks and in coordination with local authorities, advocate for the inclusion of settlements and broad areas hosting forcibly displaced persons in **early warning systems**. If such systems do not exist, advocate with relevant actors to set them up, in close collaboration with competent entities.

Make sure that **communities are informed of local policies and rules concerning the use of natural resources**. If there are any protection risks (including GBV) associated with accessing particular resources, such as water or wood, adjust such programmes to mitigate GBV risks.

## Considerations for practical implementation

Essential technical sectors (Shelter, Settlement, WASH, Energy and Environment) should appoint a **protection focal point** who can also act as a focal point for child protection and GBV in the sector and support and advocate for the implementation and monitoring of GBV risk mitigation actions. To ensure a “do no harm” approach, **all UNHCR workforce and partners should be trained to safely handle disclosures of GBV incidents and to make referrals** (UNHCR,

“UNHCR policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence”, 2020. Available from here), **and should be able to identify and safely refer children at risk** (UNHCR, “Policy on child protection”, 2024. Available from here).

**I. Settlement planning**

- Wherever possible, **design settlements in a manner that serves the needs of both displaced and host communities**, to minimize protection risks, reduce potential conflicts and encourage peaceful coexistence.
- Consult the community, including people from all AGD groups, on the proposed layout. Separate consultations should be held with women and girls to ensure they can express their views. Configure settlements in a way that will **reduce exposure to GBV risks, ensure physical safety for everyone, particularly children, reduce the risk of family separation** and facilitate access to services. Consider the following: plot sizes; shelter arrangements; the location and design of shared facilities, especially washing and sanitary facilities; access to and distance from public spaces and institutions such as schools, health-care facilities, distribution centres, etc.
- Ensure that the site and its surrounding areas are **free of all landmines and unexploded ordnance** (UXO).
- Ensure that sites are safe and sufficiently distanced from sensitive areas.
- Ensure the site is an **appropriate distance from military installations** and other potentially dangerous locations. Settlement locations should be at least 1 km from standard dumpsites and at least 5 km from dumpsites that contain hazardous waste.
- Avoid areas that are steep and/or subject to **landslides, flooding, animal crossings**, etc. Ensure that sound civil engineering mitigates the impact of unavoidable risks.
- The settlement should remain reliably **accessible** during rainy periods. This is important in case a fast response is necessary to deal with an emergency, as well as for regular movements of residents. Align roads, drainage and plots with contour lines.
- Reduce **erosion** risks by retaining as much vegetation cover as possible, or by investing in plant-based soil stabilization methods. Avoid heavy earth-moving equipment where possible. During construction, install an adequate drainage system. Integrate nature-based solutions where possible.
- Establish 50 m **buffer zones around surface waters**. Within these zones, vegetation should be left intact, to prevent drowning and water pollution.
- Place settlements at least **15 km from ecologically sensitive or protected areas**.
- Seek the maximum achievable **security of tenure** for settlements. Take into consideration that land-related disputes may occur between the displaced and host communities.
- Define **usable land** area and allocate individual plots to displaced persons, taking the context and cultural aspects into account. Avoid congestion and make sure the population does not exceed the site's absorption capacity. Where necessary, request more land to cater for **natural demographic growth (average of 3 to 4 per cent per year)**.
- In collaboration with GBV and child protection specialists, **plan regular GBV safety audits** and monitor and adjust programmes accordingly. Reduce **risks associated with construction activities**. For instance, cover or fill in borrow pits caused by road construction or brickmaking to avoid accidents, and ensure that stagnant water does not cause health risks in mosquito-breeding areas.

- Take steps to reduce the risk of injuries from slipping, sharp objects or hazardous waste.
- After construction has been completed, clear the site of all dangerous waste such as nails and leftover iron sheets.
- At the end of their lives, structures should be appropriately decommissioned. Steps should be taken to reduce the risk of injury (from uneven terrain, open latrine pits, etc.).

**II. Shelter**

- Shelters should be appropriate for the displaced populations that live in them. They should be **culturally acceptable and reflect their living habits** while providing privacy, dignity and physical safety.
- Prioritize **the rapid provision of individual family shelters** through cash-based interventions for rental/construction purposes. Reduce the length of time the displaced population spends in collective accommodation that does not offer sufficient privacy and dignity.
- Ensure child heads of households and children who are unaccompanied or separated can access assistance in their own names. Work with child protection actors to (a) discourage families from intentionally separating to access additional benefits and (b) avoid making children targets of theft or exploitation.
- Shelters shall have at least one internal **partition** and **non-translucent walls**, particularly for adolescent girls, women and female-headed households. To reduce the risk of GBV and to facilitate menstrual hygiene management, make sure that women and girls have adequate privacy.
- Consider similar **privacy needs** for people who will spend most of their time inside the shelter (e.g. older people, people with reduced mobility, people who are bed-ridden, blind, etc.)
- Collective accommodation must be partitioned to accommodate individual families and allow gender separation.
- Consider the size and composition of families, and make provision for pets and belongings.
- Include space for porches and fencing around the plot to increase privacy, if this is the preference of affected communities.
- Install locks, making it possible to lock shelters internally and externally. This should increase privacy and security. As with other safety features, the provision of locks should be discussed with the community and the agreed arrangements should be monitored so that any unintended harmful consequences can be identified and mitigated.
- Openings should amount to at least 10 per cent of the total floor area to allow for adequate natural lighting. Windows should include safety guards to **prevent break-ins and intrusions**.
- At night, shelters should be **lit internally and externally** to increase safety, limit transparency to ensure privacy and reduce the risk of GBV. If lighting options are limited, communities should set their priorities.
- Collective and individual shelters should be **accessible to people with disabilities**, older people and people with temporary impairments.
- The roofing and walls of shelters should be fully sealed to prevent leaks and **maximize thermal comfort**. Roof drainage should be fitted on the outside of shelters to direct rainwater away from shelters to a drainage system.
- Where strong winds and snow load are common, the foundations, roof and walls of shelters

should be sufficiently robust.
- In cold climates, shelters should be sealed from draughts to reduce heat loss during winter. When stoves are used for heating, ventilation should be sufficient to evacuate fumes. In hot climates, shelters should allow air to circulate. To achieve adequate **ventilation**, the area of the openings (windows and vents) should amount to at least 5 per cent of the total floor area.
- Structures should not be composed of materials or material treatments (such as asbestos) that are hazardous to health.
- Ensure shelters are designed to protect from snakes, scorpions, rodents, disease vectors and similar threats.

**III. Fire risk mitigation**

- The settlement layout should establish a **30 m firebreak every 300 m between built-up areas**. A minimum distance of twice the height of the shelters (to the ridge) should be left open between structures.
- Establish **fire points** at every firebreak. These should be equipped with basic firefighting tools (shovels, sand buckets, etc.).
- Collective accommodations must include **emergency exit routes** to enable quick evacuation.
- It is recommended that sliding latch locks are used for internal locks, and that padlocks are avoided, to facilitate rapid evacuation in the event of fire.
- As soon as feasible, distribute **information on fire safety and fire risk education** throughout the community. Adopt a range of formats to ensure that all groups can obtain the information, including people who are illiterate, housebound or blind, people who have difficulty communicating, etc. Make sure to reach marginalized members of the community who might not be reached through obvious channels.
- Community-based initiatives are particularly important, ranging from early warning systems to evacuation procedures, focal points to maintain or request the maintenance of fire points, etc.

**IV. Communal areas and facilities (for health care, education, distribution, markets, mobility, etc.)**

- Consult communities to understand how cultural and societal structures or habits impact their use of communal areas. Make sure to consult women and girls separately to ensure they can express their views.
- The risks of GBV may be higher in partly-lit areas and requires careful consideration. Therefore, **ensure that communal areas, including roads and pathways, are well-lit** by outdoor lighting (e.g. street lights) and laid out to provide good visibility. Discuss the placement of lights with members of the community, including speaking to different AGD groups separately – especially women and girls who are at increased risk of GBV, or other groups who may have threats to their safety.
- Provide a sufficient number of **child-friendly spaces** and **safe spaces for women and for cultural ceremonies**. Consult with women and girls, people with specific needs and marginalized groups on the barriers to accessing services such as health centres, schools and markets.

- Consider the specific needs, as well as the safety, of the displaced population when distributing food and non-food items (NFI). For example, set up a fast lane or community arrangements to meet the needs of older people, pregnant women and people with disabilities, and create gender-segregated queues to mitigate GBV risks, etc.
- Ensure NFI distribution modalities are not exacerbating protection risks for children (e.g. using children for transporting NFI – child labour).
- Community spaces and facilities should be designed to **safely include transgender and gender non-conforming people and other groups who might have accessibility challenges, such as older people, people with disabilities and people with temporary impairments**. It is critical that all members of the community (e.g. not only traditional leaders) are consulted appropriately on this matter in a manner that does not create additional protection risks or stigma.

**V. WASH**

- Use an AGD approach to design the WASH response. To the extent possible, involve child protection, gender, GBV and disability experts in designing, implementing and monitoring WASH interventions.
- Ensure that WASH facilities are in safe areas. Consult members of the community to understand the perceived safety of different locations.
- Consult with the host community when developing water sources, to ensure that consumption for the settlement does not impact on existing users.
- Support caregivers and communities to encourage safe water collection by children that is adapted to their individual gender, age, disability, size and development. The size of water containers and the height of water distribution points should be considered when designing facilities.
- **Prioritize individual household washing and sanitary facilities wherever possible.** Where it is not possible, install facilities that a maximum of three families share. Where it is culturally appropriate and technically feasible, WASH facilities should be constructed inside homes.
- Communal facilities should be segregated by gender. Signage should be clear and agreed/proposed by the community.
- It is also good practice to include several larger wheelchair-accessible “gender-neutral” units that can be used by either females or males.
- Provide internal **locks** on the doors of all toilet and bathing units (whether these are communal, shared or household). Doors and walls should be solid, reach the ground and be of sufficient height; where walls are made of cloth, it should not be easy to poke holes through them.
- Provide appropriate **lighting** for toilets and bathing units. Consider how lighting could be deployed to lower the risk of GBV, in agreement with the facilities’ users. Discuss the placement of lights with members of the community, including speaking to different AGD groups separately, especially women and girls or other groups who may have threats to their safety. In addition, plan to provide at least one solar lamp per family.
- **Women and girls** should be specifically included in developing the design features of bathing and sanitation facilities to ensure their safety and privacy in the management of menstrual hygiene, such as the provision of hooks (to hang up clothes/bags to keep hands free) and appropriate solid waste disposal mechanisms.

- **Sanitation facilities for children** should be provided, including bathing spaces, potties or child-friendly toilets. Consult with children and their caregivers on the design features of these facilities, including the size of the squat holes, space for the caregiver and child to move in the toilet unit, and doors and locks. It should not be assumed that doors on child-friendly toilets should have locks.
- Ensure that pit toilets are not dug in areas with a high water table. They should be a safe distance from water sources or water points (taking account of the topography), including those of the surrounding host community.
- Ensure that the design of toilets provides sufficient **ventilation**. Where appropriate, install screening nets on vent pipes to deter flies and other insects that spread disease. Check that drainage channels from water points move excess water efficiently into the main drainage system, avoiding stagnant pools (a major factor in diseases such as malaria).
- Ensure that **emergency toilet slabs** are stable. The decay of timber is a common problem in emergency toilets that can cause people to fall into toilet pits.
- Provide **culturally and age-appropriate hygiene, dignity and menstrual products**. This should include incontinence materials and hygiene items designed specifically for children. Consult with users (including caregivers) on their preferences. These interventions should be designed and monitored with feedback from the users.
- If reusable cloth sanitary products (diapers, menstrual hygiene products or incontinence products) are considered an option, consult with the users regarding associated needs, including facilities to wash and dry the materials and the availability of water and soap. Provide information on menstrual hygiene in shelters and toilets as well as public facilities such as schools, hospitals and other frequently used locations.
- Provide inclusive, **child-friendly guidance and educational activities** when distributing WASH kits.
- Where possible, **prioritize cash-based arrangements** for hygiene-related items (potties, scoops, reusable cloth nappies, etc.). When planning cash-based programmes, consider GBV risk mitigation measures.
- Provide **adequate waste collection** systems in the settlement, including collection, transport, treatment and disposal mechanisms. These systems should prioritize waste minimization, recycling, reusing and repurposing to the extent possible.
- Develop separate systems to collect hazardous substances, e-waste and medical waste.

### VI. Energy

- **Cooking** solutions should be determined in consultation with the host and the displaced community, and after assessing the fuels and cooking technologies available locally.
- To minimize the risk of GBV, before setting up cooking areas, consult women and girls from the displaced and host communities on cooking habits and access to resources for cooking. Design the response to meet their cooking needs.
- Consider energy solutions that mitigate or prevent the risks of fire and conflict with host communities.
- Kitchens may be communal, grouped or individual. **Cooking areas** should be located at a safe distance from shelters and flammable materials, well-lit and safe for women to access.
- **Fence off power generation systems** and limit access to authorized individuals only.
- **Only qualified personnel** may handle all **electrical installations and distribution networks**. They must provide regular safety certification.

- Raise awareness of forcibly displaced persons around **electrical safety and associated risks** (e.g. electrocution).
- In cold climates, consider the need for **heating** inside shelters and for hot water for bathing purposes.

**Resources and partnerships**

- As early as possible, recruit an experienced **settlement planning officer** to lead or actively participate in the selection and design of settlements for forcibly displaced persons.
- Encourage the **recruitment of female staff** in Settlement, Shelter and WASH workforces.
- Where possible, **set up a technical task force with relevant expertise**. It might include WASH, Energy, Environment, Shelter, Settlement and GBV staff. Appoint a **protection focal point** to ensure protection risk mitigation is mainstreamed from the onset of the response. Include representatives from government technical units, and implementing partners.
- Leverage local knowledge by consulting with local key informants such as mayors, local NGOs and local leaders on a range of aspects, such as the social and economic impact of a large population settling in the host community, the historical risk of flooding, etc.

# 4. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

UNHCR, WASH, Protection, and Accountability Briefing Paper

UNHCR, The Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning, 2019

IASC, Guideline The Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action, 2018

UNHCR Compendium: Protection-sensitive access to lighting, 2022

UNHCR Compendium: Protection-sensitive access to clean cooking, 2021

# 5. Links

The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) Site planning - Guidance to reduce the Risk of Gender-Based Violence GBV and Shelter Constant Companion

# 6. Main contacts

Technical Support Section, Division of Resilience and Solutions – DRSTSS@unhcr.org