Safe Sites

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Key points

- Only settle PoCs in safe and secure locations.
- Work with multi-functional teams, consult members of communities, especially women and girls, and ensure their active participation in decisions that concern them.
- Comply with local building code and safety standards. Consult members of the community, especially women and girls, on locks, lights and gender segregation.
- Mitigate GBV risks and promote child protection from the start of an emergency; monitor these issues through all phases of programming.
- Prevent or mitigate negative environmental impacts, which significantly increase the vulnerability of PoCs.

1. Overview

In an emergency context, it is imperative that all sites in which refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) settle are safe and secure. In a number of settlement scenarios [see ‘Description of settlement scenarios’ in Appendix 2 of the Sphere Handbook (2018)], persons of concern to UNHCR (PoCs) face a range of security and safety threats and hazards, including fire, natural hazards such as floods or strong winds, physical injury, crime, and gender-based violence (GBV). To prevent, mitigate and reduce exposure to such protection risks, it is essential to establish ‘safe sites' from the start of an emergency.

When making sites safe, staff should make sure they respect minimum standards of settlement and shelter and follow best practices for the provision of safe and secure living conditions for PoCs. These goals cannot be achieved in isolation and require the engagement of a multi-functional team (from Shelter and Settlement, WASH, Energy and Environment, Protection, CCCM, Health, etc.), as well as consultation with local authorities.

Action should be taken from the start to make sure that PoCs - particularly those who face higher
physical and information barriers - can meaningfully participate in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sites. Their involvement is critical to ensuring that the priorities and needs they identify are addressed. In addition, PoC participation enables UNHCR staff to better understand the community's structure, as well as cultural and social factors that may be associated with protection risks. A specific effort should be made to understand and address barriers to participation that women and girls face. Applying accessibility standards and adopting universal design principles will make sites more accessible but also safer for everyone. Whenever you establish a new site to accommodate PoCs, consult and involve appropriate technical experts.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

- Respect the minimum requirements for ensuring safe and secure living conditions. These should take account of the operational context, including: the operational setting; the profile of the PoCs who will be accommodated; logistical and budgetary factors; and local and national laws. Minimum construction standards should be based on local building and safety codes (where these exist) or international best practice.
- In the Sphere Handbook (2018) safety is clearly referenced across all shelter and settlement standards. These cover planning, location, living space, household items, technical assistance, security of tenure, and environmental sustainability.
- When developing a safe site, observe the following elements of protection mainstreaming: prioritize safety and dignity; avoid causing harm; ensure inclusive and meaningful access; establish accountability; and promote participation and empowerment.
- Mitigate the risk of GBV during all stages of programming in accordance with the IASC Guidelines for Integrating GBV in Humanitarian Action.

Promote child protection at every stage of programming in accordance with the relevant Sphere standard on child protection. [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.]

Good practice recommendations

Essential
GBV survivors should not be sought out or targeted as a group during assessments. Always conduct specific GBV assessments (to investigate GBV incidents, interview survivors about their experiences, or conduct research on the incidence of GBV) in collaboration with GBV specialists or partners or agencies that specialize in GBV.

Key multi-sector actions. Plan settlement actions in collaboration with relevant technical sections to ensure that the operational plan and strategy are comprehensive and aligned. When designing settlements, adopt an integrated multi-sectoral approach that incorporates best
practices and standards and meets national or international building regulations.

**Participatory assessments.** If data are not available already, collect disaggregated data and information from a spread of community members to help inform planning. It is particularly important to consult women and girls in order to obtain their recommendations on how to enhance safety and security, remove barriers, and mitigate the risk of GBV. 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 to obtain information on the natural, cultural, religious and historical importance of potential settlement locations. Assess available resources, including those in the community, and agree a management plan with stakeholders. Conduct a [needs assessment for refugee emergencies](https://www.unhcr.org/) (NARE) to obtain basic information on needs and resources, such as water and energy. Detailed sectoral assessments may require more sector specific analysis; you can find tools for sector specific analysis in: the four Annexes of the Master Plan Approach (MPA) to Settlement Planning; Shelter Needs Assessments; Energy Assessments; and Natural Disaster Risk Assessment.

**Planning.** Building on information from participatory assessments, use an age, gender and diversity (AGD) and community-based protection (CBP) approach to involve a range of PoCs in designing facilities and services. 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 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 PoCs. Enable them to construct their own household facilities and encourage community members to support each other, especially persons with specific needs. Promote income generation and skills development as appropriate.

**Maintenance.** Where possible, make sure that PoCs carry out routine maintenance of their own facilities. Provide the materials, tools and training they need to do this. Encourage members of the community to support and show solidarity with people who have specific needs.

**Monitoring.** To strengthen accountability to affected people, establish community-based systems to provide feedback and monitoring. Make sure that these mechanisms include a clear referral and response pathway, so that community members receive responses to their complaints or questions. Make sure the information that such systems collect is applied to improve programming.

Monitor programmes continuously to identify any harmful unintended effects. Act quickly to prevent or mitigate these. To monitor, hold frequent feedback sessions with community members, particularly women and girls. Make sure that all groups are aware of feedback mechanisms and can access them.

Taking account of potential natural hazards and in coordination with local authorities, set up early warning mechanisms in settlements. Make sure that communities are informed of local policies and rules concerning the use of resources.
Environmental considerations. Negative environmental impacts can significantly increase the vulnerability of both PoCs and host communities. They also make emergencies more complex and complicate future recovery efforts. As a first step, identify environmental impacts by conducting a Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) assessment. Depending on the results, you may need to undertake a formal environmental impact assessment (EIA). Be alert to the fact that protection risks may be associated with resource depletion; for example, substituting alternative sustainable sources of energy for wood fuel can reduce the incidence of GBV.

Considerations for practical implementation

Essential
Technical sectors should appoint a specific GBV focal point in the sector to facilitate coordination and follow up agreed actions and the recommendations of GBV safety audits. It is recommended that all staff in all sectors are trained in the GBV Guiding Principles, GBV risk mitigation, how to safely handle a disclosure, and how to make a referral in their location. This training should be supported by GBV specialists.

I. Settlement planning

- Ensure that sites are located at least 50 km from national borders, to protect against potential security threats.
- Ensure the site and its surrounding areas are free of all landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO).
- Ensure the site is an appropriate distance from military installations and other potentially dangerous locations.
- Seek the maximum achievable security of tenure for sites and for all PoCs. Take into consideration that land related disputes may occur between PoCs and host communities.
- Avoid areas that are subject to landslides, flooding, animal crossings, etc. Ensure that sound civil engineering mitigates impacts that cannot be avoided.
- 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.
- Define useable land area and allocate individual plots to PoCs, 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.
- The settlement should remain reliably accessible during the rainy season. This is important in case a fast response is necessary in order to deal with an emergency. Align roads, drainage and plots with contour lines.
- Reduce erosion risks by retaining as much vegetation cover as possible. Avoid heavy earth moving equipment where possible. During construction, install an adequate drainage system.
- Establish 50m buffer zones around surface waters. Within these zones, vegetation should be left intact, to prevent drowning and water pollution.
- Place sites at least 15 km from ecologically sensitive or protected areas.
- Consult the community, in particular women and girls, on the proposed layout, and
Configure sites in a way that will reduce exposure to GBV. Factors to consider include: 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, police stations, distribution centres, etc.

- In association with GBV specialists, plan regular GBV safety audits and monitor and adjust programmes accordingly.
- Mitigate hazards due to construction work. 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.
- Fence off power generation systems and limit access to authorised persons. If solar photovoltaic systems are employed, ensure that fences do not shade the panels.
- All electrical installations and distribution networks should be undertaken by qualified personnel and regularly certified for safety.

II. Shelter

- Prioritise the rapid provision of individual family shelters. Reduce the length of time PoCs spend in collective accommodation. (As far as possible, this period should not be longer than 72 hours.)
- Consult women and girls as soon as possible and ensure their recommendations are factored into design and planning. Consult more broadly with other community members to understand cultural, familial and societal structures. Where it is possible and safe to do so, consult other groups in the community who could be directly or markedly affected by shelter planning. When allocating shelters or making shelter arrangements, consider the specific needs of individuals and families. For example, consider persons in same-sex partnerships, and transgender and gender non-conforming people. Liaise with protection staff and explain to members of the community the risks and challenges associated with all types of programming, especially risks and challenges that might compromise family unity, safety, etc.
- All the proposed design features of the site should be discussed with the community to ensure they are acceptable.
- To reduce the risk of GBV and to facilitate safe management of menstrual hygiene, make sure that women and girls have adequate privacy.
- UNHCR recommends that you should 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 monitored so that any unintended harmful consequences can be identified and repaired.)
- Windows should include safety guards to prevent break-ins and intrusions.
- Where possible, shelters should be lit internally and externally to increase safety and reduce the risk of GBV. If lighting options are limited, communities should set their priorities. The incidence of GBV may be higher in partly-lit areas and this should be considered carefully.
- Shelters should be appropriate for the PoCs who will live in them. They should be culturally acceptable and reflect their living habits. Make sure shelters provide sufficient privacy, have at least one internal partition and non-translucent walls. Consider the size and composition of families as well as their privacy and dignity.
Collective and individual shelters should be accessible to persons with disabilities and persons with temporary impairments. Consult POCs before setting up cooking areas. Kitchens may be communal, grouped or individual. Communal or household cooking areas should be located at a safe distance from shelters and flammable materials. 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 the shelters to a drainage system. Where high winds are common, the foundations, roof and walls of shelters should be sufficiently robust. Where possible, collective accommodation must be partitioned to accommodate individual families and allow gender separation. Structures should not be composed of materials or material treatments (such as asbestos) that are hazardous to health. 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% of the total floor area. To provide adequate natural lighting, openings should amount to at least 10% of the total floor area. Cooking solutions should be determined in consultation with the host community and PoCs, and an assessment of what fuels and cooking technologies are locally available. To minimize the risk of GBV, consult PoCs and the host community on cooking habits and culture. It is recommended that emergency response kits should include a clean cooking stove, appropriate clean fuel, and a solar light with mobile charger. Working with GBV specialists, plan regular GBV safety audits to monitor and adjust programmes as required. Ensure shelters are designed to protect from snakes, insect disease vectors, and similar threats.

III. Communal areas

Consult communities to understand how cultural and societal structures or habits impact the use of communal areas. Ensure that communal areas, roads and pathways are well lit by street lighting and laid out to provide good visibility. Discuss the placement of lights with members of the community, especially those who face particular risks from GBV or other threats to their safety. Provide a sufficient number of child friendly spaces, and spaces for women. Make provision for schools, police stations, health centres, etc. Consider the specific needs as well as the safety of PoCs when distributing non-food items. For example, set up a fast lane or community arrangements to meet the needs of older people, pregnant women, people with disabilities, etc. 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.).
Make sure that public facilities, including health posts, are connected to a reliable source of energy. Where possible, energy should be renewable.

Light latrines and bathing units appropriately. Consider how lighting could be deployed to lower the risk of GBV. In addition, plan to provide at least one solar lamp per family.

Communal latrines/ bathing facilities should always be segregated by gender. Signage should be clear and agreed/proposed by the community. To reduce barriers to access, consider the particular needs of transgender and gender non-conforming people. Work with Protection to explain to the community the risks and challenges associated with all types of programming. Pay particular attention to matters that might compromise access and safety.

Community spaces should be accessible to persons with disabilities and persons with temporary impairments.

Facilities should be designed to safely include transgender and gender non-conforming persons and other groups who might have accessibility challenges. On this aspect of access, it is critical to consult all members of the community who might use such facilities to forestall or mitigate any risk or stigma that could be created unintentionally.

Together with GBV specialists, plan regular GBV safety audits; monitor programmes and adjust them as necessary.

IV. Fire risk mitigation

The settlement layout should establish a 30-metre firebreak every 300 metres between built-up areas. A minimum distance of twice the height of the shelters (to the ridge) should be left open between structures).

Collective accommodations must include an emergency exit route 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, blind, have difficulty communicating, etc. Make a specific effort to reach marginalized members of the community who might not be reached through obvious channels.

Establish fire points at every firebreak. These should be equipped with basic firefighting tools (shovels, sand buckets, etc.).

V. WASH

Prioritize household washing and sanitary facilities wherever possible. Where it is not, instal facilities that a maximum of two to three families share. Where it is culturally appropriate, WASH facilities can be constructed inside homes.

Consult women and girls as early as possible and ensure that design and planning take account of their recommendations. Consult a range of community members to obtain information on cultural, familial and societal structures. Wherever it is possible and safe to do so, consult groups in the community who may be especially affected by WASH planning. To reduce barriers to access, consider the particular needs of transgender and gender non-conforming people. Work with Protection to explain to the community the risks and
challenges associated with all types of programming. Pay particular attention to matters that might compromise access and safety.

- Discuss all proposed design features with the community to ensure they are acceptable.
- Provide internal locks on the doors of all latrine and bathing units (whether these are communal, shared or household). Doors and walls should be solid; where walls are made of cloth, it should not be easy to poke holes through them. Communal facilities should be segregated by gender.
- Ensure WASH facilities are in safe areas. Consult members of the community to understand the perceived safety of different areas.
- Use an age, gender and diversity approach to design the WASH response. Where possible, prioritize cash-based arrangements for non-food items (potties, scoops, re-usable cloth nappies, etc.). When planning cash based programmes, consider GBV risk mitigation measures.

Take steps to reduce the risk of injuries, from slipping, sharp objects or hazardous waste.

- Ensure that emergency latrine slabs are stable. The decay of wooden logs is a common problem in emergency latrines that can cause people to fall into latrine pits.
- Ensure that the design of emergency latrines provides sufficient ventilation. 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 pit latrines are not dug in areas with a high water table, and are a safe distance from water points (taking account of the topography).
- Provide adequate waste collection areas in the settlement. These should separate organic from inorganic waste, be sustainably managed, and exclude rodents. Prevent the dumping and discharge of refuse into surface waters. Sites should be at least 1 km from standard dumpsites and at least 5 km from dump sites that contain hazardous waste.
- Give thought to providing facilities that promote and support menstrual hygiene. Provide information on menstrual hygiene in shelters and latrines as well as public facilities such as schools, hospitals and other frequently user locations.
- Together with GBV specialists, plan regular safety audits; monitor programmes and adjust them as necessary.

Resources and partnerships

- As early as possible, recruit an experienced settlement planner to lead or participate actively in the site’s selection and design.
- Where possible, set up a technical task force with relevant expertise. It might include the WASH officer, energy officer, environment officer, shelter officer and settlement planner. Include representatives from government technical units, and implementing partners if they are available.

Annexes

UNHCR WASH Manual - 7th Edition 2020
IFRC All-under-one-roof Disability-inclusive shelter and settlements in emergencies 2015

UNHCR Environmental Guidelines 2005

UNHCR Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy 2019-2024

UNHCR Master-Plan-Approach to Settlement Planning 2019

IASC Gender in Humanitarian Action Handbook, 2018

3. Links

UNHCR Settlement Information Portal (SIP) UNHCR WASH Page UNHCR, Energy and Environment Portal and Internet Page UNHCR, Need to Know Guidance: Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement UNHCR, Gender Equality Toolkit Global Shelter Cluster, Site Planning - Guidance to reduce the risk of GBV Global Shelter Cluster, Distribution: Shelter materials, NFI & Cash - Guidance ..., The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+)

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