UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Strategic Considerations in Shelter Responses

30 January 2025

Key points

- Shelter cannot be looked at in isolation; any response must consider the settlement or the context in which the households are sheltered. A variety of shelter options should be always considered
- An emergency shelter response should meet life-saving needs while considering its potential evolution and the need for more durable solutions over time
- Shelter design criteria should address hazard risks and safety, timeliness and construction speed, lifespan, privacy, tenure security and cultural appropriateness, thermal comfort; environmental considerations, cost, standards and building codes
- Promote local design and construction techniques as much as possible
- Involve forcibly displaced people and host communities from an early stage of the response design, so as to leverage their capacities and skills, and make sure that the shelter response will meet their most urgent needs
- Coordinate closely with protection staff to monitor and mitigate protection risks related to potentially exploitative situations (rental accommodation, host arrangements), tenure insecurity, GBV, etc.

1. Overview

A shelter is a habitable covered living space that provides a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity in order to benefit from protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings as well as privacy, comfort and emotional support.

Shelter responses, especially in emergencies, generally involve a mix of shelter solutions. Shelter is often one of the most significant household costs, even more in the case when people had to flee their homes. Where the affected population is located will also impact the response; dense

urban areas have specific characteristics and therefore the shelter solutions may differ from rural areas or dispersed settings.

The adaptation of shelter responses to local contexts should account for the climate, cultural practices and habits, local skills, and availability of construction materials. The use of familiar materials and shelter types, aligned with the preferences and practices of the forcibly displaced or local population, contributes to a more effective and culturally sensitive response.

The guidance provided in this entry is valid across a number of different contexts (urban, rural and dispersed settings; formal and informal settlements; etc.)This entry should be read in conjunction with the one on Shelter Needs Assessment.

Seldom does one shelter solution fit all the needs of displaced populations. It is best practice to provide, to the extent possible a palette of options which may include cash assistance, rental support, construction materials, transitional shelter, shelter kits, plastic sheeting, tents, etc.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

In emergencies, the right to adequate shelter for the forcibly displaced and stateless persons is of paramount importance as it directly addresses their immediate protection and well-being. Shelter responses play a crucial role in determining the overall living conditions of those affected by emergencies and are instrumental in addressing the diverse needs of displaced populations.

A shelter not only serves as a physical barrier against the elements but also provides a secure and healthy living environment that ensures privacy, comfort, and emotional security. The provision of shelter is integral to safeguarding displaced and stateless individuals from harsh weather conditions, offering a space to live and store belongings, and fostering a sense of dignity and stability during times of crisis.

While shelter responses in emergencies may follow standard solutions which are rather temporary in nature, considerations as the kind of shelter needed, what materials and design to use, who constructs them and how long they last will differ significantly in each situation.

3. Main guidance

Protection objectives

The right to adequate housing was first recognized with Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The principle: ‘Everyone has the right to adequate housing' is applicable to all, irrespective of a displacement status, and therefore is valid in all stages of the displacement cycle - prior to, during and after displacement. Adequacy of housing includes security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. Specific protection objectives met through shelter responses are:

- Meet life-saving needs and discourage further displacement by providing a secure and

healthy living environment with privacy and dignity. Shelters should provide sufficient covered living space to undertake essential household and livelihood activities including cooking, sleeping, learning, socializing, storing belongings, etc.
- Protect the affected population from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, and poor access to services. Threat of eviction is greater when persons of concern settle in land and property without permission.
- Recognize, and encourage other actors to recognize, that every person, including the forcibly displaced and stateless persons, is entitled to move freely, in accordance with human rights.
- Assist the forcibly displaced and stateless persons to meet their essential needs and enjoy their economic and social rights with dignity, contributing to their self-reliance and finding long term solutions for themselves.
- Ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons enjoy their rights on equal footing and are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives (AAP principle).
- Shelter assistance should prioritize the most vulnerable, including women (in particular female-headed households), children, older people, persons with disabilities, marginalized groups, etc. (AGD approach).

Underlying principles and standards

In all circumstances (urban or rural/dispersed settings, in temporary or more permanent dwellings), shelter response should consider the following criteria:

- Shelter layout, size and their locations should provide adequate living conditions, sufficient to give persons a sense of ownership and help them regain their livelihoods, while minimize the risk of further displacement.
- Shelter responses, including designs and construction techniques, should empower displaced populations to choose, build and/or maintain their own shelters with the necessary organizational and material support.
- Should be cost effective, using local materials to the extent possible, and adequately reflect cultural preferences and traditional lifestyle of the affected population.
- Designs should take into account: climate, topography, hazards and environmental risks, national and international minimum standards, livelihoods, and the local availability of resources, including materials, skills and infrastructure. Seek expert technical support in areas at risk of earthquakes.
- Should have the least possible impact on the natural environment. Careful consideration should be given to the sourcing of local materials to minimize environmental damage.
- Shelter responses will need to adapt to space constraints especially in the medium to long term (shelter extension through modular approaches, or two-story shelters, for example). The design of shelter should, to the extent possible, provide for modification by its occupants to suit their individual needs, while considering local rules and regulations.

For more detailed standards (covered living space, height, etc.) please consult the entry on "Emergency shelter solutions and standards".

Protection Risks

- Persons can be at greater risk of harassment, assault or exploitation if they live in shelters without proper walls, partitioning or the possibility to lock the shelter doors.
- Vulnerable groups such as female headed households and persons with disabilities might have difficulties looking for or constructing their own shelters or might need to share shelter with others. Unless they receive targeted support, they can find themselves in a precarious and undignified situation of dependency. Shelter design and response must be adjusted to their specific needs.
- During conflict, ethnic or religious minority groups might be unwelcomed among the host population or within the displaced population itself and, consequently, may experience difficulty finding shelter.
- Displaced people can also find it difficult to prove their identity and HLP rights, hampering their lives both in displacement and during return to areas of origin.
- Conflict may arise with the host community if the presence of displaced populations increases strain in rental markets and local services, making access to resources such as affordable housing and water more difficult.
- If shelter options are unaffordable for forcibly displaced, they may adopt **negative coping mechanisms,** such as:
  - be at risk of eviction if they do not have enough tenure security;
  - live in overcrowded conditions;
  - occupy public spaces such as parks, schools, public squares, which erode peaceful coexistence with local communities;
  - prioritize cheap accommodations, settling in high risk areas (e.g. flood/cyclone prone) and undesirable land (e.g. near landfills, ravine banks, canals, roads or railways, unused warehouses, factories or land that surround those facilities) where they are exposed to environmental and health risks, with little to no access to services;
  - separate families: children may be forced into early marriages, or sent to live with others, exposing them to neglect and abuse;
  - engage in survival sex or illegal acts;
  - be exploited by their landlords.

Operational Guidance

In emergencies, a variety of shelter solutions are used – either supplied by humanitarian actors and local authorities, found by the affected people themselves, or provided by hosting communities. It is likely that any operation will require a combination of approaches to meet the needs of the displaced population, including through cash-based interventions (CBI). Deciding which options to provide will be a key determinant in the quality of life the affected population are able to achieve during their displacement.

Nonetheless, if the needs assessment and the design of a response takes time, affected people may settle in new areas, find alternative arrangements (e.g. with hosting families), or start occupying buildings and lands without tenure security, or start living in hazard prone places. Therefore, an immediate shelter response is paramount to meet the needs of, at least, the most vulnerable.

Transit centers, collective centers, and other forms of multifamily shelter can meet the need for covered space quickly if empty buildings or other solutions can be identified. Nonetheless,

individual family shelters are preferred as they provide greater privacy, psychological comfort, and emotional safety. They also provide better safety and security for people and possessions, and help to preserve or rebuild family unity.

The UNHCR family tents are often used to save life during the onset emergencies with high volume displacement and when local construction cannot meet immediate shelter needs. The life-span of an erected canvas tent depends on the length of storage before deployment, as well as the climate and the care given by its occupants. Provisions for repair materials should be considered. In general, tents are difficult to heat as walls and roof provide limited insulation. However, UNHCR has developed a winterization kit for the family tent for cold climate. They can be an expensive item if not in stock (airlifting cost).

The design of shelters should, if possible, provide for modification by its occupants to suit their individual needs. In cold climates, for example, it is very likely that persons may remain inside their shelter throughout the day, thus more space will be required. In more traditional cultures, extra privacy may be requested by the affected population, for instance through porches or screens that prevent outsiders seeing inside the shelter.

If certain criteria are met, Cash Based Interventions (CBI) can greatly help meeting the needs of affected people quickly, at scale, and in a flexible manner. CBI can indeed help covering rental and/or other shelter related costs, either for materials, rehabilitation or upgrades. Considerations on the feasibility of CBI should be examined jointly with sector experts, especially to determine the viability of meeting shelter needs through such flexible modality.

The table below summarizes the various settlement options with associated shelter solutions as often found in many emergency contexts:

Settlement typology	Most frequently used shelter Solutions
Planned settlement, transit centers, informal settlements	◦ Tents ◦ Shelter kit ◦ Plastic sheeting ◦ Temporary shelters ◦ Local construction materials ◦ Refugee Housing Units ◦ CBI
Individual accommodation (hosting or rented arrangements)	◦ Plastic sheeting ◦ Shelter kit ◦ Local construction (room extension)/rehabilitation/basic repairs in exchange of free rent ◦ CBI

Collective centers	◦ Plastic sheeting ◦ Shelter kit ◦ Rehabilitation/repair/adaptation

For pros and cons of each of the shelter solution indicated above, please refer to the entry on ''Emergency shelter solutions and standards".

Specific considerations for shelter responses in Urban Areas

Operating in urban contexts requires a holistic and spatial approach, often within an existing complex system that already faces systemic challenges to the delivery of basic service welfare. While all considerations made thus far still stand for responses in urban areas, the following factors will influence the choice of appropriate shelter solutions:

- **Accessibility.** Urban environments may not guarantee adequate access and mobility for persons with specific needs. Support from neighbors, especially in case of language barriers, may be more difficult.
- **Targeting.** Displaced populations may blend into the urban poor making targeted assistance challenging, but ever more important to ensure resources reach the intended recipients.
- **Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues.** Most cities develop rapidly and informally. Land use plans and ordinances are often out of date, as are cadastral records. Risks of evictions are therefore heightened for both forcibly displaced and poor inhabitants.
- **Civil society.** Community organizations and civil society can play an important role in supporting the response. Their capacity, expertise and accountability must be taken into account.

For a more comprehensive guidance on the urban response, this entry must be read in conjunction with the following relevant entries Settlement overview, and Rental accommodation strategy considerations.

Key management considerations

- Consult and involve local and national authorities, and the affected population. To reduce any risk related to HLP or lack of compliance with local standards, 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.
- Permission to occupy public or private buildings should be set out in legal agreements. This reduces the risk of eviction.
- Identify climate related hazards (such as flooding, landslides, strong winds). If there are seismic risks, seek specialized technical advice even for the design of a simple shelter.
- At the outset of a crisis, it is sensible to consider a mix of shelter and settlement options that have to be discussed with affected people, hosting communities and authorities. Initial strategies can include the adaptation of unused public buildings, arrangements with

community groups, support for rent and to hosting families. Basic services like water, sanitation, access to energy need to be also available.
- Develop information strategies to increase the community's involvement in and ownership of shelter planning and maintenance.
- Establish and apply quality assurance measures. These may include to adequately train staff and laborers in relevant construction and quality assurance techniques.
- Coordinate and liaise with complementary sectors, including protection, HLP, cash, water and sanitation, energy, livelihoods, etc. to ensure solutions are integrated.
- Monitor carefully the protection risks associated with poor or unaffordable shelter; develop intersectorial responses to mitigate such risks.
- Work closely with development agencies and government authorities that may have complementary expertise and resources, especially for urban programs.
- Collaborate closely with local actors, grassroots movements, organizations, and government authorities that can help to map the location of forcibly displaced people or assess levels of the vulnerability in households and areas where they have settled.

Ensure that the emergency shelter response is implemented and managed by adequate expertise (in house or via partners). Consider deployment of skilled shelter or settlement officers at the onset of emergencies.

Resources and partnerships

- The affected population
- Local or central government authorities, municipalities, city officials
- Community and religious leaders
- Host community
- Other UN agencies, international and local organizations
- Academic institutions
- Orders of engineers and architects
- Private sector

Post emergency phase

As the immediate emergency response stabilizes and life-saving needs have been largely met, the post-emergency phase would prioritize more sustainable shelter solutions and longer-term approaches ensuring long lasting protection and resilience for forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

Following a comprehensive reassessment of shelter needs, responses are adapted to align with the evolving dynamics of affected population. Community empowerment, sense of ownership, tenure security, intentions to stay and access to income become pivotal, involving affected populations in decision-making and fostering skills for sustainable shelter provision.

Key Action Points:

- Continuity in livelihood support programs is crucial, ensuring ongoing self-reliance and economic stability. This may include exploring income-generating activities related to shelter construction.

- Prioritize durable solutions, the focus is on shelter options that uphold the principles of "a life in dignity" and address long-term housing needs.
- Advocacy for access to HLP rights aims to reduce eviction risks and enhance access to essential services.
- A robust monitoring framework guides adaptive strategies, ensuring flexibility in response to ongoing feedback and emerging challenges.
- Continued coordination with governmental agencies, NGOs, and international organizations remains, while also seeking inclusion of forcibly displaced into shelter and housing development plans and financing mechanisms. Collaboration with local businesses is explored to enhance economic opportunities.

Developing a Strategic Shelter Response

- An initial rapid shelter and settlement assessment should be carried out within the first three days of an emergency, to identify needs and resources. Commission multi-sectoral teams to make sure that all issues are taken into account. Use the findings to design and organize more in depth needs assessments as needed. For more information see the entry on Shelter needs assessment.

- Locate and map the location of forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

- Based on the assessment prioritize lifesaving activities and priorities and anticipate medium and long term shelter needs.

- Identify and prioritize shelter assistance for the most at risk groups (female-headed households, large families, elderly, people with disabilities, etc.). Vulnerability indicators for households and individuals should be contextualised. When doing this, consider their socio-economic vulnerabilities as they may be a barrier to affordable shelter.

- Identify the range of shelter solutions preferred by and available to the affected population. For more information see the entry on Emergency shelter solutions and standards.

- Analyse available accommodation options, housing affordability and availability, and the absorption capacity of host communities.

- Ensure that the affected population participates in the planning process.
- Develop a shelter response that includes arrangements to transition from shelter assistance to more durable and sustainable long-term solutions.
- Assess supply and logistical requirements and constraints; put in place arrangements to address them.
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of programmes over time.

Annexes

UNHCR Policy on alternatives to camps, 2014

UN Habitat, UNHCR, Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas, 2022

UNHCR Policy on Refugee protection and solutions in urban areas, 2009

UNHCR Shelter Design Catalogue January, 2016

4. Learning and field practices

Shelter Centre on-line library

UNHCR Shelter and Sustainability Guide

Family Tent

New Self Standing Tent

Shelter Strategy Standard Format

Shelter and Settlement Preparedness and Response Checklist

Refugee Housing Unit 1.2 Fact Sheet

Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UNHCR Shelter & Settlement Assessment Toolbox (...

5. Links

NRC/Shelter Centre, Urban Shelter Guidelines, Assistance in urban areas to popu... Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons Emergency Handbook entry - Safe and Secure Settlements

6. Main contacts

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