Shelter solutions

28 March 2023

Key points

- Shelter cannot be looked at in isolation; any response must consider the settlement or the context in which the households are sheltered.
- Preferred shelter solutions must be designed and engineered on the basis of context-specific structural and performance requirements.
- A shelter strategy should provide emergency shelter solutions initially (immediately after displacement) and more durable solutions over time.
- When displacement is protracted, a variety of shelter options should be considered.
- In short shelter design criteria should address hazard risks and safety, timeliness and construction speed, lifespan, size and shape, privacy, security and cultural appropriateness, ventilation and thermal comfort; environmental, considerations, cost, standards and building codes.
- Promote local construction.
- Transfer technology where required, to improve best practice and manage hazards. Seek technical support in areas of seismic risk and with strong winds.
- Involve host communities and persons of concern from an early stage.
- Favour shelter strategies that enhance integration and benefit the local economy.
- The development of an appropriate shelter response is a process and not simply the delivery of a product in this order of ideas it is important to bear this in mind to ensure social aspects and needs becomes also design drivers.

1. Overview

Refugees and others of concern to UNHCR have the right to adequate shelter - to protection from
the elements, to a space in which they can live and store belongings, and to privacy, comfort and emotional security. 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 programmes generally involve a mix of sheltering solutions such as kits, plastic sheeting, tents, and cash assistance. Shelter is likely to be one of the most important determinates of general living conditions and is often one of the significant items of non-recurring expenditure. While the basic need for shelter is similar in most emergencies, such considerations as the kind of shelter needed, what materials and design to use, who constructs them and how long must they last will differ significantly in each situation. Where persons of concern are located will also impact the response; dense urban areas have specific characteristics and therefore the shelter solutions may differ from rural areas. Emergency shelter needs are best met by using the same materials or shelter as would be normally used by the refugees or the local population. Shelter responses should be adapted to take account of the local context and climate, cultural practices and habits, local skills, and available construction materials.

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.

The table below summarizes the various settlement options with their most commonly associated shelter solutions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Most frequently used Shelter Solutions</th>
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| Planned and managed camps           | • Tents  
                                       • Shelter kit  
                                       • Plastic sheeting  
                                       • Transitional/Temporary shelters  
                                       • Local construction materials |
| Hosting villages                    | • Plastic sheeting  
                                       • Shelter kit  
                                       • Local construction (one room)  
                                       • Cash assistance |
| Dispersed self-settlement without legal status | • Tents  
                                       • Plastic sheeting  
                                       • Shelter kit  
                                       • Cash assistance |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short-term land, house, apartment, or room tenant</th>
<th>Individual or shared accommodation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Cash assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Plastic sheeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Shelter kit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Local construction</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective centres, non-functional public building, transits centres</th>
<th>One room accommodation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Plastic sheeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Shelter kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⚬ Local construction (adaptation)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 2. Main guidance

**Protection objectives**

- To provide a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity to persons of concern.
- To protect persons of concern from a range of risks, including eviction, exploitation and abuse, overcrowding, poor access to services, and unhygienic living conditions.
- To support self-reliance, allowing persons of concern to live constructive and dignified lives.
- To recognize, and encourage other actors to recognize, that every person, including every refugee, is entitled to move freely, in accordance with human rights and refugee law.
- To assist refugees to meet their essential needs and enjoy their economic and social rights with dignity, contributing to the country that hosts them and finding long term solutions for themselves.
- To ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on equal footing and are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives. (AGD approach)
- To ensure that settlement and related policies and decisions are driven primarily by the best interests of refugees.

**Underlying principles and standards**

- Shelter assistance should prioritize groups with specific needs, including women (in particular female-headed households), children, older people, and persons with disabilities. Criteria have been developed to help identify those most in need of assistance.
- Displaced populations should be empowered to build their own shelters with the necessary organizational and material support and to participate in all phases of the shelter programme.
- Shelter solutions should be cost effective, use local materials to the extent possible, and adequately reflect cultural preferences and traditional lifestyle of persons of concern.
- Shelter solutions should have the least possible impact on the natural environment. Careful consideration should be given to the sourcing of local materials to prevent environmental
damage. Shelters should provide covered living space that is sufficient to allow a household to carry out essential household and livelihood activities (including space to cook, sleep, and store belongings)

- 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.

To ensure "a life in dignity", SPHERE Standards and UNHCR Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018 provide practical advice on how best to design a different types of shelters and uphold the rights of displaced persons.

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

- Minimum 3.5m² covered living space per person in tropical or warm climates, excluding cooking facilities or kitchen. (it is assumed that cooking will take place outside. Minimum height of 2m at the highest point

- Minimum 4.5m² to 5.5m² covered living space per person in cold climates including kitchen and bathing facilities, as more time will be spent inside the shelter (cooking, eating, and livelihoods). 2m ceilings to reduce the heated space

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

**Protection Risks**

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 in all stages of the displacement cycle prior to, during and after displacement, and is relevant to all people of concern, including women, girls, men, and boys. Adequacy of housing includes security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy.

- Displaced unaccompanied children, particularly child-headed households, are particularly exposed to protection risks due to a lack of appropriate shelter, including trafficking and various forms of violence, abuse or exploitation.
- 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.
- Unaccompanied older persons might have difficulties 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. Older persons heading households and/or caring for children have specific needs requiring targeted support.

- Persons with disabilities also need to receive specific attention, and shelter 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.

**Other risks**

- Shelter solutions should take into consideration hazards in the area such as earthquakes, floods, landslides and other. In dispersed settlement and spontaneous camps persons of concern may find accommodation in high risk areas and informal settlements which are hazard prone.
- Conflict may arise with the host community if the presence of refugees increases strain in local services and makes access to resources such as water more difficult.

**Key decision points**

Shelter solutions must provide protection from the elements, privacy, emotional security and a space to live and store belongings in a dignified manner. They should be culturally and socially appropriate and familiar. Suitable local materials are best, if available, and shelters must be able to cope with changes of season. Whenever possible, persons of concern should build their own shelters, with appropriate technical, organisational and material support. This helps to ensure that dwellings meet their users’ particular needs, generates a sense of ownership and self-reliance, and reduces costs and construction time.

Individual family shelter should always be preferred to communal accommodation as it provides the necessary privacy, psychological comfort, and emotional safety. It also provides safety and security for people and possessions and helps to preserve or rebuild family unity.

Emergency shelter needs are best met by using materials and designs that persons of concern or the local population would normally use. Emergency shelter materials should not be imported unless adequate local materials cannot be obtained quickly or in an environmentally responsible manner. The simplest structures, and labour-intensive building methods, are preferable.

The UNHCR family tent may be considered, for example, when local materials are either not available at all or are only seasonally available. The UNHCR family tents are also 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. Where tents are used for long duration, provisions for repair materials should be considered. In general, tents are difficult to heat as walls and roof provide limited insulation and can be an
expensive item if not in stock (airlifting cost). However, UNHCR has developed a winterization kits for the family tent for cold climate.

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. Where there are daily extremes of temperatures, lack of adequate shelter and clothing can have a major adverse effect on protection and well-being of refugees, including health and nutritional status. It is likely that any operation will require a combination of approaches to meet the needs of the displaced population. Deciding which options to provide will be a key determinant in the quality of life persons of concern are able to achieve during their displacement. The following table provide some guidance on the advantages and disadvantages of several types of shelter solutions.

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

**Key steps**

- 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 a 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.
- Based on the assessment prioritize life saving activities and priorities, and anticipate medium and long term shelter needs.
- Identify the range of shelter solutions that are preferred by, and that can be made available to persons of concern.
- Develop a shelter and settlement strategy.
- Assess supply and logistical requirements and constraints; put in place arrangements to address them.
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of programmes over time.

**Key management considerations**

- Integrate settlement strategies and potential layouts in preparedness planning processes.
- Ensure shelter programmes have sectors strategies.
- Ensure systematic deployment of senior settlement and shelter experts at the onset of emergencies.
- If access is limited, gather essential information from local authorities, NGOs and local civil society organisations, or secondary sources and technology.
- Develop information strategies to increase the community's involvement in and ownership of shelter planning and maintenance.
- As you develop a shelter response plan, consult and involve local and national authorities, and persons of concern.
- To reduce the risk of conflicts over land, 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.
- Establish and apply quality assurance measures. These may include training in best practices to build capacity.
- Identify natural hazards (such as flooding, landslides, strong winds). If there are seismic risks, seek specialized technical advice even for the design of a simple shelter.
- Coordinate and liaise with complementary sectors, including water and sanitation and livelihoods, to ensure solutions are integrated.
Resources and partnerships

- Persons of concern.
- Local or central government authorities
- Community and religious leaders
- Host community
- National and international NGOs
- IFRC and ICRC
- Other UN and international organizations
- National (particularly local language) and international news media

Annexes


Shelter Design Catalogue January 2016

Family Tent

New Self Standing Tent

Refugee Housing Unit Fact Sheet

Shelter Strategy Standard Format

Shelter and Settlement Preparedness and Response Checklist

Sphere Handbook (2018)

3. Links

UNHCR Intranet: Shelter and Settlement
UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls
Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014-2018
Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons
Shelter Centre on-line library
World Bank, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
4. Main contacts

Shelter and Settlement Section (SSS) – Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM)
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