

Informal settlements

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Key points

- Informal settlements often occur during the onset of displacement crises, when displaced populations self-settle in spontaneous locations, where they determine they can meet basic protection needs.
- Informal settlements may exist pre-displacement crisis. Thus, it is not uncommon to find both forcibly displaced people as well as poor local population living side by side and which vulnerabilities may be similar.
- Informal settlements are generally characterized by high tenure insecurity, lack of proper infrastructure and services, precarious security and safety including exposure to environmental and health hazards, and socio-economic marginalization.
- Decisions on modification or relocation of an informal settlement should be made in close consultation with its residents, landowners and relevant authorities, based on: degree of humanitarian needs, preference of residents, external risks (e.g. proximity to hazard-prone areas), national, regional and local development plans, and alternatives where to accommodate the residents.

1. Overview

In an informal settlement, a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs choose to settle in self-identified spontaneous sites, usually on land which has not been designated to accommodate them. Informal settlements are often located on state-owned, private or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population and/or landowners. There, forcibly displaced people determine they can meet their safety and assistance needs and/or be close to their location of origin.

Informal settlements are not planned: their residents shape the land, available space and related services (e.g. water and sanitation facilities, pathways) the way they can best do. They may be a

reality even pre-displacement crisis, thus the manifestation of a chronic phenomenon of marginalization of poor people. Residents, which are often a mix of forcibly displaced and local poor people, might not receive access to centralized protection, full humanitarian assistance, and other services from host governments and humanitarian actors due to the informality of their location.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

In displacement crises, vulnerable people may settle in new or existing informal settlements as they cannot afford other accommodation options, do not have ties with local communities that could host them, or are used to settle in lands close to temporary jobs that may have existed even before their displacement.

In emergencies where accommodation options are limited and/or non-affordable, the proliferation of informal settlements may happen at a fast pace, also in a very fluid manner – with people moving from one location to another as they identify better location to settle, or because of evictions. Thus, protection and assistance modalities will have to be rapid and flexible. Ensure various forms of humanitarian assistance and protection in informal settlements is critical: taking timely action to assist people living in these settlements, while promptly identifying alternative better accommodation options, is crucial for their protection and well-being.

3. Main guidance

1. Informal Settlement characteristics and risks associated

Characteristics of Informal Settlements

Informal settlements can take various forms: scattered along borders, or in the fringes of towns, villages, collective centers or formal settlements. They tend to be in vacant or underutilized pockets of land, or in high-risk areas (e.g. fires, floods, hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons, landslides; hazardous waste such as toxic effluents and discharge from polluting factories and dump sites; conflict wreckage like landmines and unexploded ammunition). At times, forcibly displaced people may settle in empty areas that are near sensitive locations (e.g. military zones).

Informal settlements can host both forcibly displaced as well as host population with the same degree of vulnerabilities like poverty and marginalization. Thus, they can appear in case of displacement, although they can be a long-term and pre-displacement crisis phenomenon (e.g. slums) that worsen in case of sudden population movements. The main drivers of informal settlements proliferation are: the shortage in housing options, particularly those affordable, and the loose requirements for formal documentation and long-term commitment from tenants. At the beginning of an emergency, it is important to gain a basic understanding of why forcibly displaced persons establish themselves in informal settlements.

Informal settlements typically lack basic services such as running water, electricity, sewerage, roads, connection to school systems, healthcare facilities and institutional presence. Informal

settlements, such as those often occupied by displaced people, tend to be in vacant or underutilized pockets of land within the city, or high-risk areas that have been formally excluded from planned development.

Irrespective of the informality of such settlement types, their residents (including forcibly displaced people) should have access to water, sanitation, energy, roads, community spaces, shelter, health, education, food, and livelihoods. Consider if it is more feasible to provide those in situ, by formalizing and upgrading the settlement, or if it is more sensible to identify alternative accommodation for the displaced population (collective centres, alternative housing options via hosting arrangements or rental assistance; or, as a last resort, planned settlement).

Protection and other Risks

- **Land tenure:** If existing, the agreements to occupy the land where the informal settlement is located may not protect the forcibly displaced from abuse, exploitation or forced eviction. The power relationship between landlord and tenant(s) may be unequal. At times, tenure security is achieved when inhabitants of informal settlement are engaged in livelihood activities (often agricultural or cheap labor) in exchange of the permission to occupy the land/building.
- **Violence and Exploitation:** The environment of informal settlements is particularly conducive to exploitative and manipulative activities by people who seek to gain from the displaced due to the range of risks they face and specific needs they have – especially during the emergency phase.
- **Lack of Legal Protection:** In informal settlements it may be even more difficult to identify and protect the displaced communities. In refugee situations, without official recognition refugees may face legal uncertainties and lack protection under host country laws, increasing the risk of unlawful evictions.
- **Social Integration:** Informal settlements may be very visible, displaying the poor living conditions of their inhabitants. Thus, displaced populations may face socio-economic exclusion and discrimination, making integration into the host community difficult.
- **Access to Services:** Conflict may also arise with the host community if the presence of displaced communities limits their access to basic services like water, health, education, energy, food security and natural resources which in existing informal settlements and surrounding areas are already strained.
- **Environmental and Health Hazards:** Informal settlements are often located in high-risk areas vulnerable to environmental and health hazards. Overcrowding increases health risks as well as tensions, violence and crime.

For more information on risks and mitigation measures, consult the entry on “[Safe and secure settlements](#)”.

2. Key considerations in assisting populations in informal settlements

When addressing an existing informal settlement, UNHCR should engage in advocacy and plan its operational response in such a way which facilitates a transition to more integrated **human settlement** solutions – or, to phase them out provided alternative accommodation solutions exist.

The decision to maintain an informal settlement or relocate the affected population might have long-term impact, on the host and displaced populations as well as the environment. On the other hand, this decision can be an opportunity to enable an integrated approach that will have long term benefits for both host and displaced communities.

Informal settlements often display diverse density characteristics; some are very **densely populated, some are dispersed, while others have a dense core** and a sparsely settled periphery. In some cases, the informal nature of such settlements can complicate efforts to establish communal facilities and infrastructure.

Determine who has the right to the land (**HLP concerns**) where the informal settlement is located and to understand what arrangements, if any, have been put in place to use that land. The permission to settle on these sites is usually informal, often an ad hoc agreement with host community, and requires reconsideration or negotiation with authorities or private landowners. UNHCR neither rents nor purchases land for refugees.

Informal settlements generally require phased upgrading to meet international standards and local and international good practices. They might need **considerable investment to be protected from climate related and other threats**, like firebreaks, soil stabilization, and drainage and provided with access to infrastructure such as schools, water supply and recreational areas.

Consideration should be given to relocation if the **site has been assessed to be unsafe**. Relocation should be done in coordination with the local authorities and government. The longer displaced groups have been in an unsuitable site, the more difficult it gets to relocate them, and if this becomes impossible, **ensure that new arrivals will be supported with other accommodation solutions**.

Informal settlements have **disadvantages**; land tenure can be disputed; the environment can be unsafe, and the provision of services can become cumbersome and costly to meet immediate needs. On the other hand, informal settlements may display certain **advantages**, as displaced populations have the freedom to cluster with their immediate communities and extended families, following a spatial layout which is **closer to their cultural specificities, preferences and needs**.

The layout and organization of an informal settlement often reflects the priorities and preferences of the displaced community and should be considered when upgrading a site or relocating its residents. If the displaced groups have spontaneously settled in a scattered manner, **follow the existing settlement pattern** if protection and assistance services can be provided safely and if this settlement pattern does not generate risks to life or property. Relocating these groups in a more dense, rational yet unfamiliar arrangement might break community bonds and support systems and increase conflicts.

Once informal settlements are established, **introducing or improving facilities may be challenging** due to a number of factors such as: congested sites, lack of expansion space, lack of permission to build permanent structures and infrastructures, etc. Also, these upgrades often lead to the settled population losing resources and investments made on those thus far. It is important to consider the perspective of the displaced community, as **they invest both**

financially and socially in adapting the sites where they settle. When discussing upgrading or relocation plans, sensitivity to their investments is crucial. Residents should participate meaningfully in all decisions affecting their current and future accommodation.

Once the decision to upgrade an informal settlement has been made, the same principles and standards that apply to formal, planned settlements will apply to the retrofitting of an informal settlement, including the Masterplan Approach to Settlement Planning, Sphere standards and other standards detailed in the entry on Principles & Standards for Settlement Planning. In all cases consider how to enable and facilitate transition to an integrated human settlement in the future, if conditions permit.

3. Priority actors and partners in this context

- Land owners (public or private) should be consulted to agree on the level of assistance at the site, and on the tenure security that can be granted. If needed and appropriate, negotiate tenure arrangements also with local community and religious leaders, village chiefs and mayors.
- Map relevant community-based organizations, and consult with informal settlement residents and host community to design the response.
- Establish an immediate link and collaborate with local authorities' technical departments. Study local rules and regulations about land tenure, public works and housing to reduce risk of conflict over land and to ensure compliance to local land and building regulations.
- Coordinate the response in informal settlements with all relevant sectors (shelter, settlement, WASH, protection, HLP, etc.).
- For longer term upgrading of informal settlements, leverage development actors and line ministries.

Post emergency phase

It is crucial to offer informal settlements' residents a sustainable alternative, whether through formalization, upgrades and/or relocation to suitable settlement alternatives. Transitioning to more sustainable settlement should be prioritized if the risks of living in certain informal settlements may deteriorate residents' vulnerabilities. This ensures better living conditions and opportunities for the residents, addressing their long-term needs including better tenure security and overall protection. Involvement of and advocacy with local authorities and development actors to ensure informal settlements are included in development plans is paramount. In parallel, income generating activities and livelihood opportunities for the residents of informal settlements should be pursued, so that they can afford better accommodation options.

Key Decision Points when assisting populations in Informal Settlements

- Map settlement patterns of displaced people to inform the overall emergency response.
- Explore alternatives to informal settlements, such as rental support, hosting

arrangements, or other forms of accommodation – including upgrading informal settlements.

- Negotiate with the host Government and relevant local actors, humanitarian assistance for displaced people living in informal settlements.
- Clarify ownership of buildings and land where informal settlements have been established. Consequently, seek formal agreements to enhance their tenure security.
- Advocate with stakeholders (especially local authorities, development actors, community-based organizations and representatives of the displaced and host community) to transition informal settlements into formalized ones. Advocate for them to be integrated into local services and development plans. Agree how they can be supported to do so.
- When permissions are allowed to upgrade informal settlements, conduct a thorough site assessment considering topography, land use, climate, soils, geology, hydrology, vegetation, infrastructure and key natural and cultural resources. Conduct soil tests, hydrological surveys, detailed topographical surveys, etc.
- Make use of the settlement's layout and topography to minimize the settlement's adverse impact on the natural environment while mitigating climate and natural risks such as floods, landslides, etc.
- In upgrading informal settlements, use a participative approach that involves both residents and nearby hosting communities.
- Consider CBI to allow for shelter and WASH facilities upgrade executed by residents.
- If applicable, consider extending existing water networks to phase out water trucking.
- Advocate for municipal services to cover informal settlements (e.g. provision of electricity, wastewater management and solid waste management).

- Take into consideration safety of services, avoiding illegal connection to electricity grids and proper disposal of wastewater, runoff water and solid waste.
- Seek technical support from relevant Government departments for the upgrades of services. Ensure that local authority experts are involved in settlement planning when upgrading informal settlements.
- Ensure residents of informal settlements are aware of where to seek protection and assistance services. Disseminate information on hotlines and/or complaint and feedback mechanisms. Such approach will be highly efficient when there is a multitude of informal settlements, and/or when the population is highly mobile.
- If residents of informal settlements are organized or have developed relevant self-protection strategies, such as electing community representatives, reinforce those mechanisms rather than replacing them.
- Establish monitoring frameworks for continued monitoring, reporting criteria and project tracking mechanisms.
- Involve development partners as early as possible. Advocate for their support in either formalizing informal settlements, or providing alternative shelter options.

4. Standards

Principles & Standards for Settlement Planning

Refer to the relevant [entry](#) for principles and standards for settlement planning.

5. Policies and guidelines

[UN Habitat, UNHCR, Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas, 2022](#)

[UNHCR Policy on alternatives to camps, 2014](#)

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

Annexes

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

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

6. Links

[The Sphere Handbook 2018 Safe and secure settlements Urban NEAT+ - Nexus Environment Assessment Tool](#)

7. Main contacts

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