

# Collective centres

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## Key points

- In all collective centres, from set up to closure, strive to ensure that residents find alternative accommodation and housing options, through durable solutions at the earliest possible opportunity.
- HLP rights have to be assessed, and permissions given to use collective centres as accommodation for forcibly displaced people.
- Through an AGD approach, ensure the participation of residents in decision making and governance of collective centers. Provide platforms for inclusive participation, build their confidence, and promote their involvement in governance structures of collective centres.
- Rather than substitute local authorities in organizing and running collective centers, provide support that enables them to assume such responsibilities effectively.
- Ensure that residents of collective centres are informed of the services available to them and how to access them, paying attention to PSEA, GBV and CP. Identify residents' needs and assist them to address those through strong feedback and complaint mechanisms.

## 1. Overview

A **collective centre** is an **accommodation**, where a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or IDPs are accommodated in **pre-existing buildings** such as **community centres, town halls, schools, hotels, gymnasiums, warehouses, disused factories, farm structures, or unfinished buildings**. Collective centres can be:

- **Planned** - when a responsible authority (for example, a State) designates them as a space to be used by displaced populations. Such buildings may or may not have been prepared for use as temporary shelters. They can also include pre-designated or purpose-built shelters such as cyclone, hurricane, storm and flood shelters.
- **Unplanned** or **self-settled** - when people occupy buildings at their own initiative,

without formal approval or coordination with the authorities or owners.

A thorough assessment must be conducted to determine the **conditions** of the building and for **how long** it may be used. They should be **rehabilitated** and/or **upgraded** to meet the shelter and accommodation needs of their residents, including **facilitating access to basic services**. They should be **managed** from the onset with direct involvement of local authorities as well as their residents.

## 2. Relevance for emergency operations

Collective centers are established (**formally** or **informally**) to host displaced populations that seek safety, where rental markets are overwhelmed and/or no other alternative accommodation solutions exist. Collective centres are mostly intended to be of **temporary nature** and can be an **adequate solution** especially in emergencies as long as they are appropriately **serviced** and **maintained**. Ideally, individual accommodation options should meanwhile be pursued. The life span of collective centers varies widely and depend on when the building is due to return to its original purpose.

## 3. Main guidance

### Context characteristics and risks associated

Both planned and self-settled collective centres should provide a **safe and secure living environment** with **privacy** and **dignity**, protecting their residents from **internal** and **external hazards**. As displacement situations may last for years, it is vital to ensure that collective centers are soundly planned and organized, and that the assistance they provide promotes **as much self-sufficiency as possible**. Displaced populations should play an active role in planning and establishing governance mechanisms in collective centers.

Collective centres have certain **advantages**:

- They can **accommodate** displaced people **immediately**.
- **Services** such as water, sanitation and electricity are likely **immediately available**, although they may be inadequate or insufficient for the number of people using them.
- **No new buildings** need to be constructed specifically for such a purpose.

However, due to the high concentration of displaced people in collective centres, and when coupled with long term stay, safety and security become important **risks** that need to be addressed:

- Collective centers can quickly become **overcrowded**.
- **Residents** of collective centers are often those who **cannot afford better accommodation** options. Thus, **vulnerable groups** tend to settle in them and can become **isolated** from mainstream society and from other forcibly displaced persons.
- Residents may suffer **stress** and **tension**, possibly leading to depression, substance abuse, social conflict, friction between or within families, conflicts with host communities or

- between clans or ethnic groups, and other individual or psychosocial problems.
- **Family privacy** is not guaranteed, and residents may be vulnerable to **attacks** and **abuse**, especially for older and single people, women, children and other groups.
- In most cases, the buildings are not used for their original purpose, which may **disrupt services to the host population** (like in the case of schools).
- **Equipment** and **structures** may be **damaged** or in state of disrepair, thus requiring important renovation works both before the use of the building and once it is returned to its initial use.
- The **supporting infrastructure** of the building (water, electricity, sanitation, solid waste) can **deteriorate quickly** from concentrated use. This may result in unhealthy living conditions for the residents and those living in close proximity if not addressed on time, and preferably before they are used as accommodation.

### Priority operational delivery mode and responses in this context

- **Assessments** must be conducted to determine the **conditions of the buildings** and for **how long** they may be used. Such assessment should be run in a **multisectoral** fashion, and corresponding interventions designed to meet both **protection and basic assistance needs** of the residents.
- UNHCR and partners shall **advocate** for **rent-free accommodation** in collective centres. The length of their use at free-cost should be clearly spelled out in a written agreement with their owners. In the case of **upgrades** of unfinished buildings, the **financial value** of upgrade works can be negotiated **in exchange of free rent** for a given number of months/years.
- Using collective centers as accommodation option may happen in **scattered displacement situations**, spanning over **large geographical areas**. Make sure that smaller and/or peripheral collective centers are **not left behind** from monitoring and assistance due to their decentralized locations.
- Collective centers, whether large or small, may need some support to be properly organized and managed: **consider a dedicated manager** (preferably appointed from local entities, ensuring that capacity building is provided); an **accountability system** should be in place, through participation/coordination mechanisms for different services, and a set of regulations that residents are expected to follow.
- **Local capacities**, including those of occupants, CSOs and local authorities should be the preferred option for organizing and **managing Collective Centers**. This will boost localization efforts, community engagement and empowerment, in line with Inclusion from the Start principles. Mainstreaming collective centers into localized social services should thus be the principle (and specific assistance from external actors be the exception).
- **Coordination super-structures** are only needed to support, rather than replace existing mechanisms, i.e. if centers are already well-run by local entities. CSOs and local authorities may have previous, localized experience in running collective centers and this needs to be tapped into, rather than over-harmonized if there is no need.
- **Public buildings** should only be used as **short-term** accommodation while more suitable shelter or accommodation is arranged, so as not to create any disruption in the use the building is made for, and put its residents under eviction orders.
- **UNHCR's** and **Sphere** shelter **standards** should be applied, with contextualization based on local climatic, social, cultural and other strategic considerations.

## Priority actors and partners in this context

- **Line ministries** under which responsibility collective centers falls: they need to provide formal agreement for the use of buildings such as schools, unused health care facilities, dismissed hotels, etc., to accommodate forcibly displaced persons (e.g. Ministries of Education, Social Affairs, Health, Tourism, etc.). They can also provide valuable support in the governance of and running such collective centers.
- **Governments** and their **technical departments** (planning, infrastructures, public works, housing, civil protection, etc.): they can provide valuable technical input and expertise when upgrades of collective centers are needed
- **Municipalities**, mayors' offices and other relevant local authorities: they can help identifying unused buildings to convert into collective centers. They can also provide valuable support in the governance of and running such collective centers.
- **Hosting communities**, including community and religious leaders, and CSOs: they can facilitate support to forcibly displaced people, as well as their social integration in the communities where collective centers are located.
- **UN agencies** and other **non-governmental organizations**: they can provide sectorial support to meet minimum living conditions in collective centers.
- **Development actors**: they can help local providers in strengthening services required for the good functioning of collective centers (e.g. access to water, electricity, solid waste management, wastewater, etc.).

## Underlying principles and standards

Collective centres host displaced people in **buildings that may not be designed for accommodation**. Although the physical space may appear adequate, the living conditions may not offer sufficient dignity and privacy. With this in mind, **collective centers should be planned and organized in a way that meet the residents' needs** beyond having just a roof and four walls.

The ruling principle when setting up collective centres should be '**a fit structure on a suitable site**'.

With this in mind, managers and staff should ensure that collective centres are safe for occupation, can be upgraded to meet standards, are secure, and that their location minimizes exposure to threats to its residents.

**Building rehabilitation** / renovation may be necessary to ensure **proper sanitation services** are in place. **Partitions for families** / individuals may be necessary to ensure a minimum level of privacy. **When large structures** are used (e.g. stadiums) and time does not allow for more (semi)permanent structures, **tent inner layers** can be considered to create partitions while paying great attention to fire risks.

**Basic NFI** shall be provided to make sure living conditions are met **from the first day of occupancy** (e.g. mattresses, cooking utensils, etc.). CBI top-up can help residents purchasing any other item they may be in need of.

**A fast-deteriorating infrastructure** and building decay due to continued use will pose **serious risks** to the health of the residents. It is vital to maintain collective centres and their

services adequately to protect the health of the residents, reduce the economic risks they generate for the host government, and limit their impact on local society and the environment.

Please refer to the [Safe and Secure Settlements](#) for further considerations that Collective Centers shall meet.

## Post emergency phase

When a displacement situation extends, collective centers may become a more permanent accommodation solution that initially planned. Displaced people that are able to secure **self-sustainable accommodation** may leave the collective centers, which remain the home for those more **vulnerable** with a limited capacity to find employment and secure an accommodation on their own (like elderly, people with disabilities, minority groups, etc.). Therefore, it is important that in the medium- and long-term, **accommodation strategies** are accompanied by **socio-economic inclusion programs**. The **multifaceted, long-term needs** of their residents, such as for accommodation, jobs, daily childcare and access to education need to be looked into **simultaneously**.

On the **long term, running costs** of collective centers (e.g. utility fees for water, electricity, heating) can also become unbearable, thus provision of sustained support on behalf of their residents needs to be ensured.

It is also important to consider the **need** for a collective center to be **returned to its original use** (e.g. as school). Local and national governments may thus **revoke** the use of those buildings, leaving its residents **under eviction**. **Contingency plans** are essential to address such instances and alternative plans be made in advance. In no case should occupants be evicted without acceptable **alternative accommodation**.

## Setting up, Organizing and Running Collective Centers

### • Setting up Collective Centers:

- Consult the Government to identify suitable buildings. Involve representatives of displaced people, and host communities, in order to avoid unrealistic expectations.
- Conduct a thorough assessment of the site and structure including safety (especially related to structural stability and fire hazards), security, accessibility, available infrastructure, access to livelihoods and basic services (health and education), environmental factors including proximity to hazards, etc.
- Avoid using buildings that contain asbestos.
- Sphere standards should be followed when upgrading, and facilities should meet the needs of residents to provide an appropriate level of comfort and privacy. Factor in the requirement for residents to store their belongings safely (in a

lockable space).

- Ensure that local building codes are met.
- Identify the owners of collective centres and sign an agreement (or a memorandum of understanding), indicating maximum occupancy, arrangements in case of emergency, and the condition in which the building will be left after its use as a collective center.
- Ensure that infrastructure for water supply, electricity (for lighting, cooking and heating), wastewater and solid waste management are available in the collective centre; or that adequate facilities are available externally, with the permission of the host community.
- Make arrangements to upgrade the building as required (scope of works, design documents, tendering, pre-selection of local contractors, etc.), as well as manage it (pre-selection of organisations or staff to run and maintain the facility, etc.).
- Develop and deliver maintenance and exit plans.
- Prepare and disseminate effective messages around available services for the residents of collective centers, how the collective center will be governed, where to find services, etc.

#### • **Organizing and Running Collective Centers**

- Analyze the social composition of occupants and the potential for collaboration or conflict within the centre and with host communities.
- Buildings used as collective centers will deteriorate due to its intense use. Factor maintenance and rehabilitation costs
- Monitor that lighting, and heating (in cold climates), must be sufficient and safe to avoid fire at all time.
- Water, electrical and fuel charges may be expensive for residents. Make sure there is a clear agreement on who will cover those
- Ensure that smoke from stoves or open fires does not pose a health and disease risk.
- Always agree early with the building's owner how the building should be returned after its use.
- Ensure that there is a service delivery monitoring in place.
- Based on the principle of Inclusion from the start, it is strongly recommended that local actors are at the forefront in organizing and running collective centers.
- Involve the residents in the organization and management of collective centers, so as to foster a sense of ownership and self-governance.

## 4. Standards

Refer to the relevant entry for [Principles and Standards for Settlement Planning](#).

## 5. Learning and field practices

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Handbook for the Design of Temporary Collective...](#)

[Key considerations for on-site assessment of refugee transit points and accommo...](#)

## 6. Links

[UNHCR-IOM, Collective Centres Guidelines, 2010](#) [The Sphere Handbook, 2018](#) [Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas](#) [Safe and Secure Settlements](#) [Settlement Typologies in Emergencies](#)

## 7. Main contacts

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