Formal settlements

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Key points

- Settlement options to host forcibly displaced people should uphold basic human rights, including freedom of movement, access to essential services, and livelihood opportunities.

- The establishment of camps and settlements that limit the enjoyment of such rights should be avoided to the extent possible.

- Alternative accommodation solutions, such as rental support, hosting arrangements, and/or inclusion into existing communities, should be prioritized over the creation or expansion of temporary settlements to host displacement populations.

- If establishing a formal settlement becomes unavoidable as a last resort option to accommodate forcibly displaced people, ensure the site selection adheres to recommended standards. Use the UNHCR Multi-Sectoral Site Assessment Form to guide decision-making and confirms the site's suitability for hosting forcibly displaced populations.

- Apply recognized standards and the UNHCR Master Plan Approach from the outset to ensure inclusive, sustainable, and well-integrated settlement planning.

- When planning and developing formal settlements, remain adaptable and plan for evolving needs during and after crises.

1. Overview

There is a wide range of options for accommodating displaced populations (as described in the [Settlement Typologies in Emergencies](#) entry), among which is Formal Settlements. Formal Settlements are a type of planned settlement officially established and recognized by the authorities to host people affected by crises and disasters, addressing their immediate or longer-term needs. Formal Settlements provide centralized access to protection, basic services and assistance, typically coordinated by local governments, and delivered by them with the support of humanitarian and development actors, civil society organizations and partners.

2. Main guidance

1. **Definition and Purpose of Formal Settlements**

Formal Settlements are planned, authorized, and purpose-built to host people affected by crises and disasters. Refugees or IDPs living there receive centralized protection, humanitarian assistance, and other services from local governments and humanitarian actors. They are developed to offer basic services to their residents and have formal recognition/approval from the authorities. These settlements are designed to meet national and international humanitarian standards and should be integrated into national and local development frameworks to support longer-term sustainability, social cohesion and inclusion.

They feature:

- Structured layouts based on settlement and urban planning principles.

- Essential infrastructure and services, including shelter, water, sanitation, health, education, and energy; preferably connected to existing national or municipal networks. Along with access to protection services, community spaces, and humanitarian assistance.

- Clear governance and coordination arrangements, with roles and responsibilities defined from the outset, preferably led by government/local authorities, or civil society organizations.

- Risk reduction and environmental considerations, including provisions for disaster risk reduction, environmental sustainability, and climate resilience in the settlement's planning and development.

2. **Key Principles**

- The needs of the forcibly displaced population all over the world is diverse, and the contexts in which those populations settle differ widely, so that no single settlement model can address all situations. To determine the most suitable and sustainable solutions, it is crucial to examine existing coping strategies and consult with displaced populations and host governments host populations, Life span of settlement persists longer than initially anticipated, as the duration and nature of the displacement is unpredictable, Planning must therefore incorporate sustainability criteria from the onset.

- Formal settlements should follow [the masterplan approach,](#) ensuring organized spatial layout, efficient infrastructure, and service delivery.

- Because displacement often becomes prolonged, formal settlements from the onset should be designed to enable transitioning into sustainable human settlements, that promote longer-term development and coexistence with host communities.

- Tenure security must be established through legal arrangements to protect forcibly displaced people from eviction and exploitation. Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues are often complex and multi-dimensional: early engagement with local authorities and technical departments is essential to understand land tenure systems, prevent disputes, and ensure access to specialized expertise needed to navigate legal frameworks.

3. **Site selection, Design and Planning Considerations**

- Conduct comprehensive assessments using the [UNHCR Multi-Sectoral Site Assessment Form](#) to evaluate environmental, social, cultural, protection, economic, and operational suitability.

- Assess risks such as flooding, drought, landslides, security threats, land disputes, and other possible threats and ensure responsiveness in planning, [referring to the safe and secure settlements entr](#)y.

- Prioritize sites that can be connected to existing municipal services (water, electricity, sanitation, waste management) rather than creating parallel systems.

- Apply urban planning principles; zoning, road hierarchies, density management, spatial organization, to ensure efficient service delivery and safe movement.

- Incorporate community facilities and public spaces to foster social cohesion.

- Evaluate, and then integrate measures to mitigate environmental impacts, natural resource availability, and exposure to hazards, referring to the entry on [Environmental and Extreme Weather-Related Considerations in Emergencies | UNHCR](#).

4. **Governance, Coordination and Service Provision**

- Stakeholder engagement is essential, including collaboration with government authorities, landowners, local leaders, development actors, and host communities.

- Settlement planning should be carried out by multi-functional teams to ensure that all sectoral perspectives and needs are incorporated. Relevant line ministries should be supported and empowered to lead coordination for shelter, WASH, energy, environment,

protection, health, education, livelihoods, and other key sectors, with the aim of ensuring equitable and safe access to essential services and basic rights.

○ Using Participatory approaches, both forcibly displaced populations and their hosts should be meaningfully involved in planning, implementation, and monitoring of settlement activities to ensure community preferences and cultural norms are reflected.

Transition, Integration and Sustainable Solutions

○ Formal Settlements should align with national development plans and urban expansion strategies to ensure long-term sustainability from the start.

○ Settlement design and layout can significantly influence income-generating activities, and enhance access to livelihoods in general, which is essential for supporting self-reliance and reducing dependency on aid.

Checklist

- Conduct a multisectoral site assessment using the [UNHCR Multi-Sectoral Site Assessment Form](#) to evaluate potential sites.
- Engage with government authorities and relevant stakeholders, including development actors, to advocate for a site that meets operational, environmental, economic and social criteria.
- Clarify land tenure arrangements and obtain formal agreements to ensure tenure security.
- Note: UNHCR does not rent or purchase land for forcibly displaced populations.
- Apply the [UNHCR Master Plan Approach](#) to guide settlement planning, in line with [UNHCR recommended principles standards for settlement planning](#).
- Ensure the proposed settlement hosting displaced people is '[safe and secure'](#), incorporating protection and other risks and related-mitigation measures from the outset.
- Use participatory methods to incorporate the preferences of both displaced populations and host communities for the site layout and design.
- Develop an exit strategy and decommissioning plan early, including potential handover to local authorities.
- Advocate for the integration into municipal services; such as electricity, water access and waste management, during the initial stages of settlement planning.
- Have a clear handover plan of services that may have to be set up during emergency phases, and that should transition to local authorities
- Promote the inclusion of the settlement within local development frameworks.
- Encourage livelihood and income-generating initiatives to foster self-reliance for forcibly displaced populations and hosting communities.

- Assess and select suitable shelter options, prioritizing locally designed and constructed shelter.
- Prefer Cash-Based Interventions (CBIs) to support self-built or upgraded shelters over in-kind distributions.

3. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

- UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning (2019)
- Multi Sector Site Assessment Form (Sep 2025)
- Settlement Layout Optimization, (Nov 2024)
- Nature-based solutions in humanitarian settlements: Guidelines for integrating nature-based solutions in settlement planning (2024)
- Alternative to Camps – Response in urban and rural settings