

Site planning for camps

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Key points

- Consider alternatives to camps whenever possible
- Consider national development plans, to ensure settlement planning is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable
- Be dynamic. Settlement plans should be adaptable and capable of responding to changes in a crisis situation
- Consult with all relevant stakeholders and Government when selecting sites. Seek appropriate technical support.
- Avoid settlements that are very large

1. Overview

This entry provides guidance on standards and basic requirements that should be considered when developing a site plan for refugee, IDP settlements or camps. UNHCR discourages the establishment of formal settlements and whenever possible prefers alternatives to camps, provided they protect and assist people of concern effectively.

Site planning is the physical organization of settlements. Camps are a form of settlement in which refugees or IDPs reside and can receive centralised protection, humanitarian assistance, and other services from host governments and other humanitarian actors. Good site planning has a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of a community. It also facilitates the equitable and efficient delivery of goods and services.

With this in mind, settlement plans should:

- Apply [UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#).

- Take into account national development plans to ensure that settlement plans are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.
- Be people-centred, promoting self-reliance and enabling communities to develop suitable solutions themselves.
- Take into account the characteristics and identity of the area, of the environment, and of the people and their habitat.
- Systematically apply an [Age, Gender and Diversity](#) (AGD) approach to ensure that all persons of concern have equal access to their rights, protection, services and resources, and are able to participate as active partners in the decisions that affect them.
- Be dynamic. Settlement designs should be adaptable and capable of responding to changes in a crisis situation. They should foresee an exit strategy when persons of concern find durable solutions.

2. Main guidance

Protection objectives

- To plan and manage settlements in a manner that encourages affinities, and mitigates potential friction, between refugee and host populations.
- To locate camps at a reasonable distance from international borders and sensitive sites, such as military installations.
- 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 (rather than the interests of UNHCR or Government).

Underlying principles and standards

[UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#) provide the framework for the definition of physical site layouts. The table below defines the guiding principles and expected outcomes.

Guiding Principles	Expected Outcomes
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Principle 1

National legislation, policies & plans provide a framework for settlement design.

- The spatial design of the settlement is in compliance with national and local planning regulations and emergency response minimum standards.
- Infrastructure improvements are designed to support national/regional development plans and priorities.

Principle 2

Environmental considerations drive design.

- Risk of natural disaster impact (e.g. due to floods, landslides) is identified and addressed.
- Risk of endangering natural resources (e.g. deforestation which can, in turn, increase the risk of natural disaster impact) is identified and mitigated.

Principle 3

Defining site carrying capacity.

- The capacity of the site has been defined taking into account sufficient access to water, fuel, and land for livelihoods.
- Risk of conflict between the displaced population and host community over access to natural resources is identified and mitigated.

Principle 4

Decisions about density must be taken in context.

- Site density is in 'harmony' within the physical context.

Principle 5

Supporting safe and equitable access to basic services.

- Equitable access to basic services for the displaced population and the host community is ensured.
- Development and upgrading of existing services facilities have been prioritized over the creation of new parallel services.
- Travel distance to basic services is within standards.

Principle 6

Providing an enabling environment for [livelihoods and economic inclusion](#).

- Site location and layout represent a positive choice in terms of impact to livelihood, economic opportunities and self-reliance of displaced population and host community.

Principle 7

Addressing [housing, land and property](#) issues, an incremental tenure approach.

- Risk of conflict link to land tenure has been addressed and mitigated.
- Following the initial emergency response, actions are taken to increase the security of tenure for the displaced population through pathways for the incremental establishment of tenure through formal or customary means.

<p>Principle 8 Defining localized critical design drivers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Site layout is informed and respond to physical and social factors and the spatial needs over time. ◦ Residential areas, key services and infrastructures are not susceptible to the risk of natural hazards such as flash floods and landslides
<p>Principle 9 Follow natural contours in the design of road and drainage infrastructure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Site layout respond to the natural topography and drainage patterns of the site. ◦ An effort has been made to reduce construction and maintenance cost of road and drainage infrastructure.
<p>Principle 10 Finalizing the settlement layout.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Site layout takes into account the social organization of the displaced population under the bases of an Age, Gender, and Diversity approach. ◦ The physical layout considers fire risk mitigation strategies and complies with standards for the provision of basic service.

SPHERE emergency standards are the key references when designing planned settlements. The table below sets out minimum standards which should be upheld when planning camps.

Description	Minimum Standard
Covered living area	<p>3.5 sqm. per person minimum</p> <p>In cold climates and urban areas more than 3.5 sqm. may be required (4.5 sqm. to 5.5 sqm. is more appropriate)</p> <p>Minimum ceiling height of 2m at highest point</p>
Camp settlement size	45 sqm. per person
Fire Safety	<p>30 m of a firebreak every 300 m</p> <p>Minimum of 2 m between structures - ideally 2 times the height of the structure</p>

Gradient for camp site	As a guide 1 to 5 %, ideally 2 to 4%
Drainage	Appropriate drainage needs to be put in place, especially relevant in all locations that experience a rainy season.

Table 1 - Minimum standard for planning camps

Refer to Entry on [Camp planning standards \(planned settlements\)](#) for more information on site selection and site planning standards.

Sites for planned camps should be selected in consultation with a range of sectors, including protection and supply, as well as with technical specialists such as hydrologists, surveyors, planners, engineers, and environmental engineers. Developing an inappropriate site or failing to develop a site to standards can result in further displacement causing unnecessary further loss and distress to persons of concern and may put some people/groups at further risk. The chart below lists some of the key critical factors which must be considered:

Protection Risks

Settlements and camps by their nature generate a number of specific risks as follows. Respect for planning standards can contribute to life with dignity in a safe and healthy environment for persons of concern.

- Prolonged stay can result in stress and tensions and can lead to social conflict and friction between families, clans or ethnic groups.
- High population density significantly increases health risks. Density is also proportionally related to increase in tensions and protection threats to vulnerable or marginalized individuals or groups.
- Environmental contamination may cause serious health problems for residents and those living in close proximity. Environmental damage especially related to water and sanitation is likely in the immediate vicinity of camps.
- High population concentrations and proximity to international borders may expose persons of concern to protection threats.
- Large camps may provide a hiding place and support base for persons other than refugees. It may be difficult to identify such people, who may continue to benefit from assistance.
- Camps can increase critical protection threats, including [sexual and gender based violence \(SGBV\)](#), threats to and abuse of children, and human trafficking.
- Living in camps can encourage dependency and reduce the ability of refugees to be independent and self-reliant.

Other risks

Camps are rarely occupied for short-term. Planners should always expect that once put in place, camps are likely to exist over a long period of time -in many cases years or even decades. Service provision over that period of time is likely to remain as the responsibility of humanitarian actors, and integration with local existing services will be challenging. Camps can also distort local economies and in the long run adversely affect development planning.

Key decision points

Settlement planning should start at the very early stages of preparedness planning. Preparedness measures in this phase should address [shelter solutions](#) and settlements, carefully taking into account of the specific context of the affected area, the host population, and adverse effects and dynamics generated by a developing crisis.

In addition to providing security, host governments are ultimately responsible for allocating land for camp and settlements. An overall site plan or map should detail the configuration of a proposed population settlement, its surroundings and characteristics, and location, and should set out principles of modular planning. The plan or map should include natural features and contain topographical information outlining the physical features of the landscape (rivers, valleys, mountains) and general planimetric information describing locations and facilities in the settlement. The plan or map should ideally have a metric scale between 1:1,000 and 1: 5,000. The plan/map should also provide social features including host communities, and the social organization of refugee populations.

Site planning should ensure that the spatial allocation of functions is such that refugees and displaced persons can reduce their dependence on aid, increase their independence, and potentially integrate fully with host communities. Whatever the circumstances, an overriding aim must be to avoid high density settlements. Ideally no camp should be larger than 20,000 people.

Coordination is a vital element of settlement planning, because it links land, shelter, services, infrastructure, livelihoods, environmental considerations, and governance. Many sectors need to cooperate to ensure that assistance gaps do not occur, and that the dignity of persons of concern is protected.

Local and International partners should be engaged whenever and soon as possible. UNHCR takes full operational responsibility only when circumstances require and it is in the interest of refugees.

Key steps

A planned camp settlement response should be implemented by means of the following steps.

- In consultation with Government identify a suitable site and carry out thorough suitability

assessments.

- Form and train the team who will manage the project, ensuring continuity with the planning phase.
- Work with relevant programmes to identify implementing partners. Project partnership agreements (PPA) may be appropriate.
- Determine the need for working groups and coordination mechanisms with key stakeholders and establish them as early in the process as possible. Consider local guidelines, regulations and practices. Ensure that adequate and effective liaison arrangements are in place with local and national Government offices and other sectors.
- Develop proposals and concepts into working drawings, with specifications, bill of quantities (BoQ), tender documents, etc.
- Commission and produce environmental impact assessments and incorporate their recommendations in implementation plans.
- Conduct soil tests, hydrological surveys, detailed topographical surveys, etc.
- Draft and establish project management techniques, checklists and operating procedures.
- Work with other programmes and supply on procurement and award processes.
- Establish monitoring and evaluation frameworks for continuous monitoring.
- Establish reporting criteria and project tracking mechanisms.
- Develop and deliver completion and handover certification.
- Develop and deliver maintenance and exit plans.
- Refer to UNHCR's Master Plan Approach Process Checklist

Key management considerations

- Ensure that shelter and settlement programming sets safeguards in place to prevent any action from inadvertently increasing marginalization, vulnerability, exclusion and stigmatization that may put some people/groups at further risk.
- Camps can generate economies of scale relative to more dispersed settlements and services can be provided to a large population efficiently. Identification of and communication with persons of concern is easier in camps, as it is meeting immediate needs.
- Most refugee operations last longer than expected. Take this into account when selecting a site, planning the camp, and estimating resources and staffing. The footprint of early planning assumptions can endure for decades.
- Decisions on camp location should involve national and local Governments as well as host and refugee communities. Because decisions on site selection are difficult to reverse, seek and make use of technical support from the beginning.
- Adopt a 'bottom up' approach to planning, based on the characteristics and needs of individual families. Ensure that persons of concern have a voice in settlement planning and reflect their wishes as much as possible.
- Develop a comprehensive approach ('master plan') to camp layout, which promotes community ownership and maintenance of water points, latrines, showers, facilities for washing clothes, and waste management.
- An adequate supply of water throughout the year is vital. The settlement's sanitation strategy should reflect the specific soil type at the site.
- Bear in mind that natural features of the site will reduce or affect the amount of usable

space.

- Prepare an exit strategy and plans for decommissioning from the start.
- UNHCR neither rents nor purchases land for refugees.

Resources and partnerships

Staff

- A variety of (technical and non-technical) support staff may be needed depending on the scale and complexity of the settlement planned.
- It is important to liaise closely with other sectors, including WASH, health, protection, and education, and with relevant programmes.

Partners

- Identify key partners, including Government, but also NGOs, other inter-governmental organisations and other humanitarian and private sector actors.
- Establish links with and consult representatives of the refugee community and host communities. Take steps to enable them to participate in decisions that concern them.

Resources

- Drawings, specifications, bill of quantities and tender documents will need to be commissioned, made accessible and filed securely.

Annexes

[UNHCR - Global strategy for settlement and shelter \(2014-2018\)](#)

[UNHCR - Policy on alternatives to camps \(UNHCR HCP 2014 9\)](#)

3. Links

[UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles](#) [UNHCR Master Plan Approach to Settlement Planning Guiding Principles Annexes](#) [The Sphere Project - Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian...](#) [UNHCR, IFRC, UN-HABITAT - Shelter Projects \(2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011-12\)](#) [UNHCR, emergency portals](#) [UNHCR, information management portal](#) [Camp management tool kit](#) [Global Shelter Cluster](#)

4. Main contacts

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