



The Sphere Project
PO Box 372
17 chemin des Crêts
CH-1211 Geneva 19
Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 730 4501
Fax: +41 22 730 4999
Email: sphere@ifrc.org
Web: <http://www.ifrc.org/pubs/sphere>

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The Sphere Project

The Sphere Project is a programme of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and InterAction with Voice, ICRC and ICVA.

This document is the product of international inter-agency collaboration. The Project Team included: Nicholas Stockton, Chair of the Management Committee; Peter Walker, Project Coordinator; Susan Purdin, Project Manager; John Adams, Sector Manager, Water Supply and Sanitation; Lola Gostelow, Sector Manager, Nutrition, and Anna Taylor, Nutrition Sector Researcher; Harlan Hale, Sector Manager, Food Aid; Joachim Kreysler and Jean Roy, Sector Managers, Health services; Philip Wijmans, Sector Manager, Shelter and Site Planning.

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Minimum Standards in Shelter and Site Planning

Sector Manager: Philip Wijmans

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The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response are the product of the collective experience of many people and agencies. They should not therefore be seen as representing the views of any one agency.

Minimum Standards in Shelter and Site Planning

Introduction

1 The importance of shelter and site planning in emergencies

Along with water supply, sanitation, nutrition, food and health care, shelter is a critical determinant of survival in the initial stage of an emergency. Beyond survival, good shelter enhances resistance to disease and provides protection from the environment. It is also important for human dignity and to sustain family and community life as far as possible in difficult circumstances.

The purposes of shelter, site selection and physical planning interventions therefore are to:

- Meet the physical needs of individuals, families and communities for safe, secure and comfortable living space.
- Meet their primary social needs, incorporating as much self-sufficiency and self-management into the process as possible.

Interventions must be designed and delivered in such a way as to minimise any negative impact on the host population or on the environment.

Three possible scenarios dictate the basic shelter needs of people directly affected by a disaster. These scenarios are determined by the type of disaster, the number of people involved, the political context and the ability of the community to cope.

Scenario A: people stay at home

People in communities directly affected by a natural disaster almost always want to stay in or near their homes. Even if homes are destroyed or damaged, assistance to people 'where they are' is more sustainable, and helps restore normality more quickly than assistance which causes them to move away in search of temporary shelter. Inputs directed into the area where people live and know each other help them to maintain social structures and allow them to continue life as normally as possible. In the extreme emergency phase, people may have to be assisted with temporary lodging in schools, places of worship or even large tents, but one member of the family often remains behind to guard property and land. If this scenario is handled well by local authorities and humanitarian agencies it is likely that the emergency will be short-lived and normality will be restored quickly.

Scenario B: people are displaced and stay in host communities

During military conflict, and after some natural disasters such as extensive flooding, entire communities may be forced to flee their homes and home area. In this situation, it is much better if displaced populations are absorbed into a local host community, possibly with family members or people who share historical, religious or other ties. Local authorities and humanitarian agencies should consider providing assistance to the entire population according to need, since both resident and displaced people are affected by the disaster. Security considerations, the long term effects on the environment and the possibilities of sharing shelter facilities such as clinics, schools and shops all militate in favour of an integrated approach to assistance. Such assistance can have a lasting positive effect on the host communities even after the displaced people have returned home.

However, registration, distribution of materials and provision of medical assistance to dispersed populations present considerable difficulties. Security problems can be difficult to monitor and respond to. In situations where the displaced population greatly exceeds the host population, the local infrastructure will be severely strained and, if humanitarian agencies do not move quickly enough to support the hosts, their resentment at being overwhelmed can undermine longer term objectives.

Scenario C: people are displaced and stay in clusters

The temporary settlement for refugees or displaced populations is the least preferred scenario, and may arise as a result of political problems, or because the number of displaced people is too large for the host population to absorb. There may be immediate security problems, or the displaced people may fear persecution and violence from elements within their own group or the host community. Self-settled camps generally need similar infrastructural support to planned camps, but additional problems arising from poor site location, imposition on previous land-users, high density occupation and lack of infrastructure will need to be dealt with.

Often in these situations the site has been selected, usually around a water point, by the local authorities, the displaced people themselves or by the first assistance agency to arrive. It may be necessary to choose more permanent and suitable sites, leaving the old one as a transit camp, or abandoning it altogether. Ideally, camps should be planned and the infrastructure installed before people settle, but this rarely happens. If there are no alternative sites the initial site may have to be re-organised to achieve the minimum standards.

If attention is not given to their situation, the host community is likely to suffer from the strain on the local economy and the environment. Increased health hazards, perceived and real, may become an issue. For their part, the displaced people are likely to become dependent on external assistance.

This chapter first addresses the standards needed for the provision of shelter, clothing and household items, which are common to all three scenarios. It then addresses standards for site selection and planning, which are relevant to the third scenario.

2 The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in shelter and site programmes

The aims of shelter and site programmes, as well as those of the other sectors, flow from a wider goal which is the cornerstone of humanitarian practices. This goal is to alleviate human suffering brought about by calamity or conflict through protecting life with dignity in ways that support durable recovery.

Translating this goal into practice requires a clear commitment by agencies to humanitarian principles and to the implementation of minimum standards. The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards together provide the policy and organisational framework to enable this to happen and to ensure systems of accountability.

The Humanitarian Charter reaffirms the importance of fundamental humanitarian principles and the rights of disaster affected communities to humanitarian assistance. Through the Charter, signatory agencies commit themselves to defined minimum standards for the provision of humanitarian services. The standards for shelter and site planning (this chapter), water supply and sanitation (chapter 2), nutrition (chapter 3), food aid (chapter 4) and health services (chapter 6) build on the principles laid out in the Humanitarian Charter and demonstrate how the rights of people affected by disasters should be realised in practice.

The standards set out in this chapter describe what people should have as a minimum for their safety, health and dignity. Agencies should strive to do better wherever possible.

3 Using the standards

The standards apply to any situation where people's normal means for support of life with dignity have failed whether as a result of a natural or human-made disaster in any country, on any continent. They provide a description of what people have a right to expect from humanitarian assistance. The standards do not focus on disaster preparedness, mitigation or rehabilitation, though these are considered where relevant.

The intention is to provide a tool to help create the conditions for

effective interventions and for the achievement of the minimum standards. The standards have been made as specific as possible, but they remain widely applicable to different emergency situations within current operational and policy frameworks.

4 Assumptions

To achieve the minimum standards in a wide variety of emergency contexts, it is assumed that:

- Agencies are driven by humanitarian principles and are committed to best organisational practices as a means to achieving their wider goal.
- There is a shared commitment among all those involved in humanitarian assistance to achieve the minimum standards, and to coordinate their response.
- The agency has acquired sufficient financial, human and material resources to meet the standards.
- There is access to the affected population.
- All other sectors are meeting their standards (as described in other chapters).

5 Structure of this chapter

After this introduction the chapter is divided into the following sections:

1. Analysis
2. Housing (Family Shelter)
3. Clothing
4. Household Items
5. Site Selection
6. Human Resource Capacity and Training

This reflects the division of activities and responsibilities that

commonly occurs in emergency situations. Section 6 applies to all work and deals with issues related to the human capacity required to implement effective shelter and site programmes.

Each of the sections includes the following components:

- **The standards:** these specify the minimum acceptable levels to be attained in each area.
- **Key indicators:** these are ‘signals’ that show whether the standard has been attained. They provide a way of measuring and communicating both the impact, or result, of programmes as well as the process, or methods, used. The indicators may be qualitative or quantitative.
- **Guidance notes and critical issues:** these explain why each standard is important and may include: specific points to consider when applying the standard in different situations; guidance on tackling practical difficulties; advice on priority issues.

Critical issues relate to the standard or indicators, and describe dilemmas, controversies or gaps in current knowledge. Filling these gaps will help improve the minimum standards for shelter and site planning in the future.

A select bibliography is provided in Appendix 1.

6 Links with other sectors

Reference to other sectors’ technical standards is made where relevant. The purpose of this is to highlight how work in one sector is closely linked to work in other sectors, and that progress in one is dependent on progress in other areas.