

# Advocacy brief: Alternatives to Camps

## Key messages

- The establishment of planned camps is the prerogative of national authorities. The Cluster takes a comprehensive approach to displacement – always considers planned camps as a last resort, advocates to authorities for alternatives to planned camps and, if established, helps mitigate the negative effects.
- Planned camps should not be the default: alternatives must be feasible, rights-based, and funded
- Planned camps are one of many viable lifesaving emergency solutions to mass displacement, however, these camps must always be of a temporary nature, with clear transition plans from the outset
- Prior to camp establishment, alternatives must be sought. If camps are established, plans and roadmaps to exit durable solutions, regardless of the envisioned length of displacement, must be sought and funded.
- Stripping away the restrictions and impediments to rights often imposed in camp settings is a path toward durable solutions and exit
- The economic opportunities of alternatives to camps must be highlighted as well as the potentially long-term financial dependency that camps produce on humanitarian funding

## Problem statement

As an immediate, short-term, life-saving measure, planned camps can provide protection and enable access to services in the aftermath of a displacement crisis. In certain circumstances, planned camps can be a critical component of a displacement response, indeed camps can often be the only viable solution during the very early phases of a displacement crisis, and early alternatives could put lives in further danger. Yet when they become protracted, they are difficult to sustain, and by their design can restrict the rights and freedoms of displaced people.

It is widely recognized that, once established, planned camps frequently outlive their planned existence, causing significant negative impact. Sustained reliance on planned camps can create dependency on aid and the need for extensive investment. Alienation can cause social cohesion issues that may impact integration as a possible solution. In certain circumstances, planned camps can pose protection and health risks, and perpetuate trauma for people who have already been impacted by difficult circumstances. Integrated approaches promote interaction, reduce segregation, and build trust between displaced and host communities.

The Cluster shares the view that while planned camps can be an appropriate option for displaced communities, they should be established only as a last resort and for the

for the shortest possible time. One of the major risks of establishing planned camps, even for the protection of displaced communities, is it can be extremely difficult to find meaningful and achievable paths to solutions both due to restrictions on displaced people and funding to achieve sustainable exit. Blockages to exit and durable solutions are often complex, interweaving issues (such as restrictions on building types, movement, access to labour) and these must be identified, targeted and overcome.

Planned camps are commonly used in the emergency phase of displacement. The establishment of planned camps is the prerogative of national authorities, and the humanitarian community is often only in a position of advice or advocacy as to the use of camps, the siting/planning and the setup of how they are managed.

Once established, camps often remain in use far, far beyond an appropriate timeframe. Their emergency framing persists, despite often little clear indication or a total block on return, resettlement or integration and so the camps enter a protracted crisis after the initial crisis has subsided. Prolonged use of camp settings risks undermining self-reliance, increasing aid dependency and the need for extensive investment, and creating barriers to social cohesion with host communities, 'warehousing' displaced populations in camp settings. Conditions in camps are rarely conducive to meaningful durable solutions, leaving communities isolated from the host community, in restrictive, almost punitive conditions. Restrictions by government authorities on building or development of campgrounds, or from private landowners or through funding gaps by the international community maintain temporary 'bare bones' humanitarian conditions, conditions often worsening as fewer funds are made available over time.

Camps often strain local host community relationships and services. With huge numbers of newly arrived camp residents to an area, environmental degradation (such as deforestation for firewood, contamination of water sources) or service degradation (such as roads damaged by increased trucking). Host community needs, and inclusive planning may be slow to appear (or not appear at all), leaving communities sidelined, frustrated by a lack of inclusion in planning or service provision. This can sorely test displaced-host community relations, resulting in violence or stigmatisation of displaced populations.

Alternatives to camps are also more cost-effective. Long term operational costs, the costs of construction (often occurring repeatedly due to short term construction and material choices), the cost of duplicating infrastructure already found within host communities, costs such as road construction to camps spiral with little regard to longevity or sustainability.

The Cluster also recognizes the humanitarian imperative to support communities across all displacement settings. The Cluster will take a comprehensive approach – undertaking preparedness activities where appropriate, supporting camp-based populations where necessary, seeking alternatives to planned camps wherever possible, and expanding area-based site management to work with other displacement affected communities in accordance with the MSCM.

## CCCM - our added value and role

Positioning - what do we **uniquely** bring to the problem and potential solutions

The Cluster brings expertise, drawing from a long history of site management expertise that must be utilised throughout the lifecycle of a camp, including prior to its establishment. By coordinating services and supporting community-led participation and inclusion structures in displacement settings the cluster can highlight alternatives to camps, lead the exit process from camps and assist local and national authorities taking on the task of supporting displacement affected communities in an 'out-of-camp' setting. This experience is critical when scaling assistance beyond camps into urban and rural displacement contexts. CCCM's added value lies in:

- Supporting local authorities and national actors to manage displacement in a way that respects rights and fosters integration, highlighting the negative financial, social and health impacts that the use of camps can potentially create and showcasing alternatives.
- CCCM can assist governments and in-country UN coordination bodies in developing appropriate emergency preparedness and planning that supports alternatives to camps or early exit from camps.
- CCCM can assist in developing site lifecycles from the first day of establishment that clearly outline exit and alternatives in the short to medium term.
- Through site monitoring CCCM can highlight and advocate where camps begin to slide into protracted crises with worsening conditions.
- When exit plans are in place, CCCM can assist and/or lead in dignified, planned exit strategies that have meaningful community engagement and leadership.
- Continue to facilitate the inclusion of displaced persons in host communities, by fostering community engagement, building social cohesion, and supporting local infrastructure development, thereby reducing the need for sites.
- Promote area-based site management approaches that address the needs of all disaster-affected populations.
- Adapt the Cluster's site-based community engagement approaches to area-based site management.
- Focus on developing and implementing strategies tailored to self-settled or dispersed displacement settings. This may include initiatives to improve access to shelter, livelihoods, and essential services in urban areas, as well as addressing issues related to land and tenure and urban planning.
- Provide capacity strengthening and guidance to support partners to adopt community approaches that avoid pull factor to sites.
- Proactively engage with partners operating in non-camp settings (including HLP, Livelihoods, Protection and Shelter) to determine how to best collaborate.

## Alternative to Camps – what are they?

There is no single model for alternatives to camps, but a continuum of inclusive, context-specific settlement and assistance approaches. Alternatives to camps prioritize integration into national and local systems, avoid parallel service delivery, and rely on flexible assistance modalities—particularly cash-based assistance—to meet basic needs. Some examples of alternative to camps that can be pursued are:

- Urban and peri-urban hosting, where displaced communities access existing housing stock and municipal services where displaced people rent accommodation, stay with host families, or access other existing housing options within cities and towns, using municipal infrastructure and public services such as health, education, water, sanitation, and social protection systems.
- Rural hosting and community-based settlements, including negotiated land use/short term tenure arrangements where displaced people settle in or near rural communities. This is often through negotiated access to land, shared use arrangements, or short-term and renewable tenure agreements, supporting agricultural livelihoods and local economies while minimizing pressure on urban centres.
- Collective centres – can be used as short term solutions with effective and early transition plans such as schools, community buildings, or other public or private structures, used only as short-term, transitional solutions in emergencies. These require early planning for decongestion, protection risk mitigation, restoration of their original function, and transition to longer-term, community-based housing solutions.
- Area based approaches, supporting displacement affected communities within specified catchment areas (neighbourhoods, districts etc) which focus on defined geographic areas such as neighbourhoods, towns, or districts with high concentrations of displaced and host populations. These approaches combine cash assistance, service strengthening, infrastructure upgrades, and community-based protection and livelihoods support, benefiting both displaced and host communities.
- Densification and infill within existing settlements, such as using empty or under-used plots inside towns or neighbourhoods, adding safe extra floors to existing buildings, dividing large housing units, or rehabilitating abandoned or unused buildings, while ensuring safety standards are met and local services can support the increased population.
- Planned settlement extensions or anchoring to existing towns, where unavoidable, ensuring physical, social, and economic integration with nearby urban or rural settlements and shared use of services and infrastructure, rather than isolated or remote camps.

The relevance and appropriateness of each option depend on the specific displacement context, security conditions, housing availability, national policies to displacement and local capacity. Solutions from the Start programming is effective at determining these options<sup>1</sup>. In some contexts, particularly in active conflicts, camps can prove to be the only resort available to offer protection to displaced populations.

## **CCCM - our work with others**

The CCCM cluster has a unique position to assist in the transition from camps used in an emergency setting to meaningful, planned and funded alternatives to camps that support durable solutions. Alternatives to camps require multi-sectoral collaboration. CCCM works hand in hand with:

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<sup>1</sup> Please reach out to the Global SLSC Cluster to learn more about Solutions from the Start approaches or see the Solutions from the Start explainer document produced under the CCCM Cluster

- Local NGOs, civil society organisations and host communities
- Protection actors, to safeguard rights and address risks for displaced populations in host communities.
- Shelter and Settlements actors, to support housing solutions and community infrastructure.
- Early recovery and livelihoods actors, to link displaced populations to services and economic opportunities.
- Local authorities and development actors, to strengthen governance structures and reduce long-term reliance on humanitarian aid.

### Local and National Authorities

- Develop emergency planning and preparedness that emphasises emergency use of alternatives to camps in emergency. Contingency planning with clear, achievable alternatives to camps in an emergency are critical. Sharing lessons from other contexts on achievable planning.
- Where camps are used, develop planning from the earliest possible moment of alternatives, and exit routes into durable solutions.

## CCCM - link to wider advocacy

How are we fitting into the other advocacy messages, what are others saying?

Alternatives to camps are a priority within global humanitarian and development agendas, aligning with the Global Compact on Refugees, the New Urban Agenda, and localization efforts. Efforts to emphasize inclusion, resilience, and durable solutions are common throughout advocacy efforts. CCCM's advocacy complements these by highlighting the importance of coordinated, community-driven approaches in non-camp settings and finding alternatives to camps.

A key policy document is the 2014 policy paper on UNHCR's alternatives to camps. The UNHCR's "Policy on Alternatives to Camps" argues that camps should only be used as a last resort, and that wherever possible refugees should be supported to live integrated lives within host communities—with freedom of movement, access to work, services, and participation in society. The policy applies across all phases of displacement and emphasises that while camps can serve emergency and logistical functions, they often curtail refugees' rights, create dependency, distort local development, and pose protection risks. UNHCR committed to gradually phasing out camps, removing restrictions, promoting self-reliance, anchoring services within national systems, and working closely with governments, local communities, and development actors to make more sustainable and dignified solutions the norm.

NGOs have often led alternative to camps campaigns or press releases, including [MSF](#), [NRC](#) and [Refugee International](#). Academic institutions such as the [Refugee Studies Centre](#) similarly advocate on the topic.

Right

Impediment

Right to freedom of movement	Camps often impose restrictions on entering and leaving, confining displaced people to a set location. This limits the right to choose one's residence .y <u>UDHR Article 13</u> and <u>ICCPR Article 12</u>
Right to Work and Livelihoods	Camp administrations through their choice of location of camp sites far from markets or access to livelihoods or restrictions on the use of land undermines economic self-reliance, forcing long-term aid dependency ( <u>ICESCR Art. 6</u> ).
Right to Adequate Housing	Camps are rarely designed for dignity or long term sustainability; overcrowding, temporary shelters, and poor infrastructure violate the right to adequate housing and living conditions ( <u>ICESCR Art. 11</u> )
Right to Privacy, Family Life, and Security of Home	Overcrowded communal settings erode privacy and family unity. Security incidents, GBV, and weak law enforcement can compromise the right to personal security and family integrity (UDHR Art. 12, ICCPR Art. 17)
Right to Education	In protracted camp situations, access to quality, accredited education is often limited or segregated, impeding children's right to education ( <u>ICESCR Art. 13</u> , <u>CRC Art. 28</u> )
Right to Health	Overstretched or inadequate camp health services, plus unsafe water and sanitation, obstruct the right to the highest attainable standard of health ( <u>ICESCR Art. 12</u> )
Right to Participate in Public Life and Decision-Making	Camp residents often lack meaningful participation in governance structures that affect them, and are excluded from host country civic/political life (ICCPR Art. 25)
Right to Security of Person & Protection from Violence	Camps can concentrate vulnerable populations in unsafe, isolated environments, exposing them to exploitation, abuse, trafficking, or armed attacks. This can be due to the siting of the camp (in remote areas) or inadequate service provision (lack of lighting). ( <u>UDHR Art. 3</u> )
Right to Property / Restitution	Living in camps often means prolonged separation from homes and lands, impeding restitution and property rights ( <u>UDHR Art. 17</u> ).

## CCCM - our ask and recommendations

Short asks and recommendations to specific groups. What do we want to achieve from the messaging and from whom?

- To donors:

- We ask that the donor community support, fund and advocate for alternatives to planned camps from the very moment of their establishment, building on the momentum.
- Invest in programming and coordination mechanisms that extend CCCM expertise to area-based site management. We ask that the financial support to fund clear, achievable plans to exit camp settings is provided, breaking the cycle of long-term emergency funding sustaining camps that are meant to only be a temporary solution

- **To host governments:**

- Enable displaced populations to reside in communities with access to housing, livelihoods, and services, upholding freedom of movement. Governments are often under incredible pressure regarding displacement crises. Displacement can be an initially overwhelming emergency phase. Out of camp solutions are often politically very unpopular within host communities, as they appear to negatively affect the labour and housing market for the host communities. Governments hold a unique position in that they have ability often to dictate the options available for displaced populations and can lead on alternatives to planned camps.

- **To the humanitarian community:**

- Work together to promote alternatives to camps, to produce comprehensive, coordinated plans and exit strategies for existing camps.

- **To development actors:**

- Bridge humanitarian response with long-term urban planning and social protection systems that emphasis development for both displaced and host communities, with efforts that can bring economic and social advantages to all groups.