

Report on Consultations Regarding the Possible Relocation of Prefabricated Shelters for IDP Returnees



Shelter/NFI Sector - August 2025

1. Introduction

For years, humanitarian agencies have provided dignified shelters to internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northwest Syria. These shelters vary by construction: some are solid concrete block structures; others are prefabricated (“sandwich panel”) units; and many are hybrid models that combine the two. Alongside agency-built stock, a large number of IDPs have independently constructed shelters, predominantly using concrete blocks.

As of end-2024, northwest Syria hosts ~2 million IDPs across 1,500+ camps and informal settlements. More than 700,000 people still lived in tents that provide inadequate protection from harsh winters, with insufficient heating and poor flood resistance. Overall, ~60% of IDPs reside in dignified shelters, while ~40% remain in emergency shelters.

Within the dignified-shelter category, only 15%—~38,000 units across 185 camps—have been provided by humanitarian organizations. Of these 38,000 units:

- 24% (9,120 units) are prefabricated shelters;
- 18% (6,840 units) are Refugee Housing Units (RHUs).

RHUs typically last ~3 years, making relocation to areas of origin of limited value. Prefabricated shelters, by contrast, cost ~US\$4,000 per unit and, with proper maintenance, can last up to 10 years, making them a more viable relocation option. Even so, any transfer to return areas must be carefully appraised for logistics, travel distance, cost-effectiveness, and durability.

Amid a recent uptick in returns in northwest Syria, the Shelter/NFI Sector conducted multi-stakeholder consultations to assess the feasibility, benefits, and risks of relocating prefabricated shelters with IDPs back to their areas of origin. The consultations aimed to:

- Assess community perspectives on prefab relocation;
- Identify technical, financial, legal, and social barriers;
- Clarify the role of local authorities in supporting and regulating the process;
- Capture the experiences of families who have already relocated units; and
- Consider donor positions and overall strategic alignment.

The overarching objective is to determine whether prefab relocation can form a viable component of dignified return support, and how it compares with alternatives such as shelter repair and rehabilitation.

2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach captured views from displaced and returnee populations, local authorities, and donors:

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** 5 FGDs with IDPs living in prefabs across four camps (35 participants: 29 male, 6 female).
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):**
 - 4 KIIs with camp/community leaders.
 - 4 KIIs with local authorities, municipalities, and technical departments.
- **Household Survey:** 17 families that had already relocated prefabs (Idleb, Dana, Deir Hassan, Tilaada).
- **Donor Consultation:** bilateral consultation.
- **Partner Coverage:** Fieldwork conducted by HiHFAD, Insan Charity, and IYD.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Perspectives of IDPs Living in Prefabs (FGDs)

Location and Number of FGDs

Location	# of FGDs
Deir Hassan - Darhashan	2
Tilaada	1
Haranbush	2
Total	5

Camps Covered

- Lastom Wahdakom / لستم وحدكم (male group)
- Al Wdhehee / الوضيحي (male group)
- Al-Kawthar Shelter Center / الكوثر (male group)
- Harbnush / حربنوش (male and female groups)

Organizations

- **Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HiHFAD):** Three FGDs in Lastom Wahdakom, Al Wdhehee, and Al-Kawthar Shelter Center.
- **Insan Charity Organization (ICO):** Two FGDs in Harbnush.

Thematic Findings

1. General Conditions & Satisfaction

- Prefabs are considered better than tents but still inadequate as a long-term solution.
- Men highlighted overcrowding, lack of privacy, and limited space for children.
- Women stressed difficulties with household chores, food storage and preparation, and the lack of privacy for adolescent girls.
- Many described the units as “prison-like” due to their confined and uncomfortable living environment.

2. Access to Basic Services

- **Water & Sanitation:** Water supply is irregular, often low-pressure, and insufficient for hygiene needs.
- **Electricity:** Frequent power outages disrupt daily routines, limiting lighting, appliance use, and device charging.
- **Healthcare:** On-site clinics are inadequate, understaffed, and lack essential medicines or specialized care.
- **Education:** Schools are overcrowded, under-resourced, and parents fear long-term negative impacts on children’s learning.

3. Economic & Livelihood Challenges

- **Unemployment:** Persistent lack of job opportunities inside and outside camps leads to frustration and loss of dignity.
- **Financial Strain:** Families remain heavily dependent on humanitarian aid, struggling to cover even basic expenses.
- **Women’s Contributions:** Women pursue small-scale or informal income-generating activities (e.g., handicrafts), but face barriers in marketing and selling their products.

4. Social & Psychological Well-being

- **Social Isolation:** Community ties are weakening, leaving families with fewer support networks.
- **Psychological Distress:** Adults reported anxiety, depression, and hopelessness; parents described the burden of being unable to adequately protect or provide for their children. Children’s trauma and emotional strain were also repeatedly highlighted.

5. Future Hopes

- Families consistently expressed a strong desire to return to their original communities once safe.
- They called for permanent, dignified housing solutions paired with livelihood opportunities to rebuild stable, self-reliant lives.

3.2 Camp Managers & Community Leaders (KILs)

- **Ownership:** Prefabs are generally treated as privately owned by residents, supported by documentation such as delivery records and camp-issued housing certificates.

- **Feasibility:** Relocation is technically possible, but the high costs of transportation and skilled labor shortages are the main obstacles.
- **Administrative Barriers:** Moving prefabs requires permits and approvals from local authorities and camp management; while usually obtainable, the process can delay relocations.
- **Social Cohesion Risks:** Relocation disrupts community networks, leaving gaps in social support systems for those remaining in camps.
- **Mitigation Measures:** To reduce tensions, managers emphasized the importance of:
 - Transparent selection criteria;
 - Equal support for families who stay and those who leave;
 - Regular dialogue with residents;
 - Prioritization of vulnerable groups (widows, orphans, people with disabilities, elderly, female-headed households).

KII Coverage

Location	# of KIIs
Deir Hassan - Darhashan	2
Tilaada	1
Haranbush	1
Total	4

Camps: Lastom Wahdakom, Al Wdhehee, Al-Kawthar Shelter Center, Harbnush

Organizations: HiHFAD (3 KIIs), ICO (1 KII)

3.2 Camp Managers & Community Leaders (KIIs)

Location and Number of KIIs

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Deir Hassan - Darhashan	2
Tilaada	1
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Total	4

Camps Covered: Lastom Wahdakom, Al Wdhehee, Al-Kawthar Shelter Center, Harbnush

Organizations: HiHFAD (3 KIIs), ICO (1 KII)

Thematic Findings

1. Ownership and Impact of Relocation

- Prefabs are considered privately owned by residents, supported by delivery schedules, housing certificates, and ownership contracts.
- When handled carefully, dismantling and reassembly generally preserve functionality. However, short-term disruptions (e.g., schooling, healthcare access) and administrative delays are common.

2. Logistical and Financial Barriers

- **High Costs:** Transportation and reassembly are prohibitively expensive for many households, particularly the most vulnerable.
- **Skilled Labor Shortage:** Limited availability of experienced technicians or blacksmiths, especially in remote areas.
- **Road and Safety Issues:** Narrow or unpaved roads complicate transport; some respondents raised safety concerns for relocation teams.
- **Permits:** Approvals are typically required from local authorities and camp management; while not always a major obstacle, they can slow the process.

3. Social Cohesion Risks and Mitigation

- Relocation weakens community ties, disrupting friendships and kinship networks, and can create a “social vacuum.” Elderly people and children are particularly affected.
- Suggested mitigation measures include:
 - Transparent and fair selection criteria.
 - Equal support for families who remain and those who relocate.
 - Regular community dialogue to manage expectations and prevent tension.
 - Support to remaining families, including pathways for eventual return and livelihood assistance.

4. Selection Criteria for Relocation

- Priority should go to:
 - Households headed by widows or women.
 - Orphans, people with disabilities, and the elderly.
 - Families facing financial hardship.
 - Families currently living in unsafe or severely damaged shelters.
 - Households with the willingness and readiness to relocate.

5. Required Approvals and Documentation

- Key approvals often involve the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, the Directorate of Development for Humanitarian Affairs, and the Camp Management Authority.
- Essential documentation includes ownership contracts, camp-certified housing certificates, local registration records, and beneficiary lists to safeguard rights and reduce disputes.

3.3 Local Authorities, Municipalities & Technical Departments (KIIs)

Location and Number of KIIs

Location	# of KIIs
Deir Hassan - Darhashan	2
Tilaada	1
Haranbush	1
Total	4

KIIs Conducted With:

- Mukhtar (Local Authority)
- Two Municipal Representatives
- One Technical Department Observer

Organizations:

- **Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HiHFAD):** Three KIIs
- **Insan Charity Organization (ICO):** One KII

Thematic Findings

1. Regulatory Framework

- **Mukhtar / Technical Department:** No formal regulations; relocation handled informally by families.
- **Municipality 1:** Regulations and permits exist to ensure sites are suitable for housing.
- **Municipality 2:** No structured support or official system; process largely unsupported.

2. Ownership of Prefabs

- **Mukhtar / Municipality 2:** Ownership passes to families once units are reassembled, especially on their own land.
- **Municipality 1:** Ownership is complex—depends on prior agreements, donor transfers, local laws, and land tenure.
- **Technical Department:** Residency is acknowledged, but ownership status post-relocation is not formally defined.

3. Urban Planning & Reconstruction

- **All Respondents:** Prefabs are seen as temporary shelters.
- **Municipality 1:** Can support recovery as rapid or transitional housing, adaptable within resettlement plans.
- **Municipality 2:** Provide a “decent life” while permanent homes are rebuilt.
- **Mukhtar & Technical Department:** Stop-gap solution beside destroyed homes until reconstruction advances.

4. Infrastructure Requirements

- **Consensus:** Infrastructure is essential but often absent.
- Needs include potable water, sewage, electricity, rainwater drainage, roads, stable land, and concrete flooring.
- Mukhtar highlighted that networks exist but are largely “out of order.”

5. Permits & Approvals

- **Mukhtar:** No permits required.
- **Municipality 1:** Permits from local council/municipality and landowners; can take 1 week to 1 month.
- **Municipality 2:** Approvals from camp management and Directorate of Development for Humanitarian Affairs.
- **Technical Department:** Requires “development clearance.”

6. Role of Authorities in Supporting Relocation

- **Municipality 1:** Can provide land, engineering advice, infrastructure checks, legal facilitation, and logistical support.
- **Technical Department:** Potential to accelerate infrastructure rehabilitation and offer loans to vulnerable families.
- **Mukhtar:** Limited to “technical support.”
- **Municipality 2:** Reported no institutional support—families relocate independently.

7. Concerns about Large-Scale Relocation

- **Mukhtar:** Ensuring infrastructure readiness.
- **Municipality 1:** Risks include infrastructure overload, informal settlements, ownership disputes, and resource strain.
- **Municipality 2:** No major concerns raised.
- **Technical Department:** Risks include loss of prefab quality during transport, inappropriate sale of units, and issues where units are treated as public property.

Key Themes and Analysis

- **Regulatory Disparities:** Views range from informal, ad-hoc approaches (Mukhtar/Technical Department) to structured systems (Municipality 1), showing inconsistency across jurisdictions.
- **Infrastructure as a Bottleneck:** All interviews emphasized weak or absent infrastructure as the main barrier to sustainable relocation.
- **Ownership Ambiguities:** While some actors see ownership transferring to families, others highlight donor involvement and legal complexities that could spark disputes.
- **Need for Coordinated Support:** Divergent accounts—ranging from no institutional support to detailed assistance packages—indicate the absence of a unified, coordinated process.

- **Risks of Unregulated Relocation:** Concerns about informal settlements, infrastructure strain, and misuse or sale of prefabs highlight the importance of a controlled, transparent approach.

3.4 Returnee Families (Household Survey)

Locations

The survey was conducted in Idleb Governorate, specifically in Harim and Idleb districts.

Sub-District	Community	# of Surveys
Dana	Deir Hassan	6
Dana	Tilaada	4
Ma'arrat An Nu'man	Hamediyeh	7
Total		17

Figure 1: Number of surveys by community

Communities/Camps Reported

- Al Wdhehee / 5
- Lastom Wahdakom / 1
- Salim-Tilaada / 1
- Al-Kawthar Shelter Center / 3
- Hamediyeh/ 7

Organizations

- **Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HiHFAD):** 10 surveys
- **Insan Charity Organization (ICO):** 7 surveys

Summary of Qualitative Responses

1. Motivations for Relocation

- Strong desire to return to family land and original communities after years of displacement.
- Homes often destroyed or uninhabitable, making prefabs a necessary temporary option.
- Dissatisfaction with camp life (overcrowding, poor services).
- Economic factors: avoiding land rent fees, seeking livelihood opportunities.
- Improved security or liberation of areas cited by some families.

2. Decision-Making Process

- Largely a family decision, with encouragement from relatives, friends, and sometimes camp authorities.
- Strong psychological drive to return home noted across responses.

3. Relocation Process

- **Dismantling:** Carried out by hired workers or specialized technicians/blacksmiths; occasionally with family assistance.
- **Transport:** Units moved via rented vehicles (trucks, taxis).
- **Reassembly:** Typically done by blacksmiths/technicians; families often prepared sites with leveling and concrete flooring.

4. Challenges Faced

- **Financial Cost:** Disassembly, transport, and reassembly cost between \$15-200; prohibitive for vulnerable families.
- **Technical Issues:** Damage to prefab components during dismantling/transport led to rainwater leakage, poor insulation, and structural weaknesses.
- **Skilled Labor Shortage:** Difficulties in finding qualified workers worsened technical flaws.
- **Permits:** Generally straightforward, requiring clearance from local authorities or proof of ownership.

5. Living Conditions After Relocation

- **Positive Aspects:** Safer and more private than tents; allowed families to live near relatives and community.
- **Limitations:** Units remain inadequate as long-term housing—hot in summer, cold in winter, prone to damage.
- **Mixed satisfaction:** some valued being back in their homeland despite shelter flaws, others found conditions worse than expected due to technical problems.

6. Livelihoods & Services

- **Improvements:** Proximity to markets, schools, and health services; some resumed agriculture and livestock activities. Observations indicate that some beneficiaries of prefabricated shelters have returned to their original homes and repurposed the units as kiosks for selling espresso and coffee along main roads to generate income.
- **Challenges:** Persistent lack of jobs and basic services in return areas; wages lower than pre-displacement levels.
- **Consensus:** Being back in home communities was positive, but service gaps created new vulnerabilities.

7. Advice for Future Relocations

- **For Families:** Prepare sites in advance with proper infrastructure (water, electricity, sewage). Use skilled technicians for dismantling and reassembly to avoid damage. Wait until livelihoods and services are more stable before moving.
- **For Organizations:** Provide financial support and technical assistance; supply skilled workers, proper vehicles, and initial food/relief assistance to ease transition.

3.5 Donor Perspective

- **Strategic Position:** Relocation of prefabricated shelters is not part of the donor’s current or planned strategy.
 - **Concerns Raised:**
 - **Cost efficiency:** Relocation costs are considered high compared to the short remaining lifespan of prefabs (5-10 years).
 - **Community acceptance:** Limited acceptance of prefabs and RHUs in host and return areas.
 - **Ownership ambiguity:** Unclear legal status of units between beneficiaries, local councils, and donors.
 - **Infrastructure limitations:** Services such as water, sewage, and electricity cannot be transferred to new sites, undermining sustainability.
 - **Equity risks:** Relocating units for some families but not others could create expectations, protection concerns, and reputational risks.
 - **Guidance Provided:**
 - Relocation should only be considered as a last resort, in exceptional, case-specific situations.
 - Any proposal must demonstrate clear cost-benefit efficiency and align with vulnerability-based targeting, not simply return status.
 - Preference is to reallocate existing prefab units in-situ to vulnerable families, rather than relocating them with returnees.
 - **Overall Position:** Donors remain cautious and unsupportive of large-scale prefab relocation. The approach is seen as financially unsustainable and socially problematic. Small-scale, case-by-case relocations may be considered if strongly justified, but strategic priority lies in shelter repair, rehabilitation, and durable housing solutions.
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4. Cross-Cutting Findings

- **Ownership disputes:** Persist between families, donors, and authorities due to unclear transfer/registration pathways.
 - **Cost & technical barriers:** Transport and skilled labor requirements limit scalability and sustainability.
 - **Social impacts:** Relocation can fragment communities and create perceptions of unfairness; psychosocial stress is common.
 - **Infrastructure gaps:** Absent/degraded services undermine the long-term viability of relocated units.
 - **Family aspirations:** Households consistently prefer permanent solutions and repair of original homes over relocating prefabs.
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5. Recommendations

5.1 Strategic Direction

- **Prioritise Shelter Repair & Rehabilitation** over prefab relocation:
 - Repair vandalised, damaged, or burned houses in areas of origin.
 - Support safe, voluntary, dignified returns that leverage existing infrastructure.
- **Respect family choice:** Families may relocate prefabs independently, but collective sector resources should focus on durable solutions.

5.2 Programmatic Adjustments

- Provide financial and technical support for vulnerable families attempting self-relocation.
- Establish clear, transparent relocation criteria to mitigate inequity.
- Strengthen community dialogue and continue support to families who remain to avoid social fractures.
- Engage municipalities to clarify ownership, permits, and integration with local planning and land-use.
- Document lessons from pilot relocations to guide any exceptional, case-by-case applications.

5.3 Donor Engagement

- Align with donor guidance.
 - Advocate investment in shelter repair, rehabilitation, and community-based recovery as more cost-effective and sustainable.
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6. Conclusion

The consultations confirm that while prefab relocation is technically feasible, it is financially costly, socially disruptive, and strategically unsustainable. IDPs and returnees regard prefabs as temporary stop-gap solutions. Local authorities and donors underscore that repairing and rehabilitating permanent housing is the most effective pathway to dignified, durable returns.

Accordingly, the Shelter/NFI Sector should:

- Support **shelter repair and rehabilitation** as the core intervention.
- Allow **voluntary** prefab relocation with targeted assistance where appropriate.
- Direct resources toward **durable housing solutions** that reinforce social cohesion, enable recovery, and build resilience.

The Shelter/NFI Sector extends its sincere appreciation to Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HiHFAD), Insan Charity Organization (ICO), and IYD for their valuable support and participation in the consultations. Their contributions were instrumental in ensuring the comprehensiveness and quality of the findings presented in this report.

