

Guidance on including older people in emergency shelter programmes: *a summary*

The background

Shelter is a basic human right for people of all ages, but for older people, the sense of security and comfort that a home provides is particularly important. Losing their home in a disaster or conflict therefore has a profound psychological impact, particularly on the “oldest old” (people above 80 years).

Suitable housing for older people is crucial to ensure a dignified life. When managing a shelter programme, it is essential to identify and address the needs of vulnerable older people and engage them in decision-making, in order for age-appropriate decisions to be taken. Yet various studies have pointed to a lack of attention to older people in shelter programmes.¹

The commitments

The UN Principles for Older Persons (UN General Assembly resolution 46/91) calls for ensuring the independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older people. It specifically states that older people should have access to basic services including shelter.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirm the universal right to adequate housing. The UDHR also affirms the right to privacy (Article 12) and the right to security of person (Article 3). The 1951 Refugee Convention recognises refugees' rights to adequate housing.

The United Nations defines older people as those who are above 60 years of age. However, the definition should be adapted to local contexts. For example, in many developing countries, people aged 50 years are considered to be old.

“If invisibility, exclusion and powerlessness are common themes emerging from the experience of older people, then consultation, inclusion and empowerment through partnership have emerged as the primary indicators for best practice.”

Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice, HelpAge International, 1999, p.2

The UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) states that “adequate housing must, at a minimum, include elements of adequate services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural sensitivity”. Article 21 of CESCR states that disadvantaged groups, such as older people, should be guaranteed some degree of priority consideration and accessibility in shelter projects.

The Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response calls for participation and targeting of the most vulnerable groups, including older people. The 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing states that “in emergency situations, older persons are especially vulnerable and should be identified as such because they may be isolated from family and friends and less able to find food and shelter” (Objective 2).

The action points

These guidelines recommend five key action points for including older people in shelter programmes. These action points are not exhaustive but provide a framework for the different phases of a shelter programme: temporary, transitional and permanent. Not all the action points will be applicable to all these phases; however, each will be applicable to at least one phase.



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Key action points to address older people's need for shelter

Action point 1: Understand the needs and capacities of older people

- Sensitise and provide training to your team on the importance of collecting data on older people, disaggregated by sex and age.
- Make your assessment tools age-friendly by including questions on the needs and capacities of older people.
- Conduct focus group discussions and individual interviews with both older men and women in various age groups.
- Ensure that your assessments include the most vulnerable² older people.
- Identify what already works around accessibility, inclusion and participation of older people and what needs improving.

Action point 2: Ensure that older people participate and are represented

- Adapt your communication style to suit older people.
- Provide opportunities for older people to hold positions of responsibility and be represented on community-based committees.
- Increase opportunities for individual choice and problem-solving by involving older people and their families and communities in issues such as land rights and construction.
- Ensure that older people are engaged in complaints mechanisms and project monitoring procedures.

Action point 3: Target vulnerable older people

- Target older people, especially the most vulnerable, in the process of selecting those to receive shelter assistance and in all stages of a humanitarian response.
- Ensure that isolated or housebound older people are aware of the selection process and are able to participate in it.
- Assess, through discussion with older people and their families and community, the support systems that are available to them and how these have been affected by the emergency.
- Take steps to ensure that the community acknowledges the risks and vulnerabilities of older members and that the community is supported to address these.

Action point 4: Incorporate age-friendly features in both household and community shelters

- Adhere to national and international standards for durable and accessible shelter construction.
- Ensure a culturally acceptable and age-friendly layout and design.
- Incorporate features that allow older people to enter and exit their shelters easily.
- Ensure that the shelter is not too far from water sources, healthcare centres, cyclone shelters or community centres and other facilities; that older people do not feel isolated or unsafe; and that they can evacuate their shelter easily.
- Ensure that non-slip floors and handrails are installed as appropriate; and that shelters are weather-proofed and winterisation kits distributed in good time.
- Recognise that people become less mobile with age: provide access to water sources and raised beds, adequate lighting and ventilation; and opportunities to adapt the shelter to meet future needs, including home-based livelihood activities.

Action point 5: Promote coordination, cooperation and sharing

- Ensure that older people's issues and data are included on the agenda of shelter cluster meetings.
- Put in place a system of monitoring and evaluation among partners and local government, so that there is a continuous flow of feedback and direction on ageing issues, and disseminate good practice and lessons learned through relevant channels, including the shelter cluster.
- Coordinate and promote partnership with other clusters (Watsan, Health, Livelihood, Protection, Camp Coordination and Camp Management) to link older people to different services.
- Link your programmes to those addressing other vulnerable groups such as children, women and people with disabilities. There are overlaps between these groups – for example, many older people care for children or have disabilities.

The full guidelines can be obtained from www.helpage.org/resources/publications

1. HelpAge International, *A study of humanitarian financing for older people*, HelpAge International, London, 2010

2. Isolated older people, older people with health problems, older people aged 80 and above and skipped generation households (households where the middle generation is absent). This point is further discussed under *Action point 3*

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