
BUREAU FOR DEMOCRACY, CONFLICT, AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE (DCHA)
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DESCRIPTION OF HUMANITARIAN SHELTER AND SETTLEMENTS SECTOR ACTIVITIES

When natural disasters or complex emergencies result in housing damage or destruction and population displacement, people typically desire to return rapidly to their communities to rebuild or repair their homes. Unfortunately, this return to normalcy cannot be achieved immediately and often takes months, if not years, particularly when people are displaced far from their communities. In the interim, humanitarian shelter and settlements (S&S) assistance can provide immediate relief while also contributing to recovery, thereby fulfilling USAID/OFDA's mandate of saving lives, alleviating human suffering, and reducing the social and economic impact of humanitarian emergencies.

The objective of humanitarian S&S assistance is to ensure access to safe and appropriate living spaces in neighborhoods where affected households can resume critical social and livelihoods activities. S&S assistance facilitates a process of sheltering and associated neighborhood and community interventions—including provision of health and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services and disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities—that focus on immediately reducing economic, social, and physical vulnerabilities of disaster-affected households while simultaneously laying the foundation for longer-term recovery. Humanitarian shelter S&S assistance addresses the health, livelihood, privacy, security, and WASH needs of affected populations in a comprehensive and integrated manner and may even evolve to meet permanent housing and community solutions.

There are two main types of humanitarian S&S assistance: the provision of emergency and transitional shelter activities. Emergency S&S assistance is intended to meet the immediate survival needs of households who have been displaced by disasters and is short-lived—typically less than six months. Transitional S&S assistance often complements emergency S&S assistance and is intended to address the short- to medium-term needs—up to three years—of disaster-affected households.

Humanitarian emergency and transitional S&S assistance interventions share three main characteristics:

- Consistency with internationally recognized guidelines such as the Sphere Project, including provision of minimally adequate space, whenever possible.¹
- Reduction of the social and economic impact of present and future disasters through integration of DRR measures into S&S activities.
- Reflection of the particular needs of affected households, especially those considered most vulnerable (e.g., elderly, handicapped, female-headed, orphan-headed, etc.) in S&S activities.

Humanitarian emergency S&S assistance may include the following²:

- **Emergency Shelter Kits.** The provision of inputs such as plastic sheeting, ropes, and tools, as well as dissemination of basic information needed to support the self-construction of temporary living spaces.
- **Emergency Shelter.** The provision of shelter materials and training, technical assistance, or both, as conditions warrant. Emergency shelter assistance may include customized shelters for vulnerable households.

¹ Minimum “covered living space” of 3.5 square meters per capita, and 45 square meters per capita in camp settings.

² The list encompasses the conventional range of humanitarian emergency S&S assistance, and is for illustrative purposes only, as USAID/OFDA does not always implement projects featuring the listed outputs.

- **Emergency Tents.** The provision of tents for emergency, short-term sheltering delivered in the aftermath of disasters.
- **Emergency Settlements (Camps).** The creation and management of emergency shelter in identified geographic areas, whether spontaneously or developed programmatically, including site improvements and support services where needed.
- **Collective Centers.** The provision of short-term relocation assistance and maintenance or upgrading of structures and facilities where multiple households are sheltered in large buildings—in most cases public buildings such as stadiums and schools—until they return to their homes or can be relocated safely to other locations.

Humanitarian transitional S&S assistance may include the following³:

- **Transitional Shelter.** The provision of inputs—sometimes including salvaged materials—construction, technical advice, and oversight needed to create shelter in compliance with the minimum Sphere Project metrics for living space, where conditions permit. This form of shelter assistance is also intended to re-engage disaster-affected households into the longer-term incremental housing development process that was disrupted by a disaster or crisis, thereby accelerating the transition to recovery and reconstruction.
- **Hosting Support.** The provision of assistance to host and displaced families to sustain hosting arrangements and reduce strains on relations and finances. Assistance could entail a range of activities, including creation of new shelter space, improvement of existing space, and livelihoods-based assistance.
- **House Repair.** Minor repair and improvement of existing, damaged housing to facilitate occupancy that is safe, secure, and private. This might include creation of “one dry/warm room” outputs.
- **Technical Assistance.** Training on improved construction techniques and humanitarian settlements planning to facilitate rapid recovery, and the creation of safer settlements.
- **Transfers.** The provision of cash-grants, vouchers, rental support, and in-kind materials to disaster-affected households to help them secure shelter in compliance with minimum Sphere Project guidelines for covered living space.
- **Transitional Settlements.** The improvement of existing neighborhoods, including informal settlements, to permit provision of shelter and basic services while reducing hazard risks and the need to relocate affected populations to new settlements. These area-based interventions can also serve as platforms for subsequent recovery and reconstruction.

Currently, humanitarian S&S assistance often overlooks linkages to longer-term needs, mainly because those needs are well beyond the mandates, protocols, expertise, and institutional memories of most humanitarian actors. Thus, humanitarian S&S assistance does not include, for example, the reconstruction of permanent housing, the development of new settlements, or efforts to resolve chronic market, policy, and institutional deficiencies related to the provision of housing and basic services, including housing finance. However, recent humanitarian interventions, most notably in Haiti and Pakistan, have highlighted a number of emerging issues that need to be more coherently addressed to appropriately link humanitarian S&S assistance to the recovery of disaster-affected populations, particularly in urban areas. This may include guidance, for example, on how to incrementally improve and expand transitional shelters to turn them into permanent housing, how settlements-based interventions can bridge the gap between relief and recovery efforts, and how a focus on DRR can inform settlements planning to create safer structures and spaces. USAID/OFDA will continue to engage the humanitarian community in addressing the need for improved S&S practice so that the long-standing gap between relief and recovery does not continue to undermine efforts to assist disaster-affected populations.

³ The list encompasses the conventional range of humanitarian transitional S&S assistance, and is for illustrative purposes only, as USAID/OFDA does not always implement projects featuring the listed outputs.