

When ‘temporary’ lasts too long

Erin Mooney

Though intended as temporary places of shelter, collective centres often become a place where IDPs or refugees stay for years, even decades.

Commonly characterised as “overcrowded”, “congested”, “dilapidated”, “deplorable”, “degraded”, even “extremely sub-standard”, collective centres can hardly be considered a “home”. Typically, collective centres are found in buildings that were never intended for habitation, or at least not for long-term or family accommodation. They thus tend to lack the living space as well as water, sanitation, electrical systems and cooking facilities for the number of residents and their length of stay.

Because collective centres are intended to provide only temporary shelter, maintenance tends to be kept to a minimum, with at best ad hoc repairs. Meanwhile, conditions become more crowded as families grow, leading to additional strains on common infrastructure. In short, not only were the buildings usually defective when the IDPs or refugees first moved in but conditions only further deteriorate in the years that follow.

Conceptual issues

No official definition of ‘collective centre’ exists, although common usage of the term carries a connotation distinct from camps. Rather than being defined, the term is usually followed by explanatory examples of the types of buildings these occupy. The Glossary prepared by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster describes how: “IDPs may decide to shelter in transit facilities located in pre-existing

structures, such as community centres, town halls, gymnasiums, hotels, warehouses, disused factories, and unfinished buildings.”¹ Along the same lines, but more closely approaching a definition, the CCCM Cluster’s Typology of Camps describes collective centres as: “a type of settlement [...] where displaced persons find accommodation in pre-existing public buildings and community facilities, for example, in schools, barracks, community centres, town halls, gymnasiums, hotels, warehouses, disused factories, and unfinished buildings. Often, mass shelter is intended as temporary or transit accommodation.”²

Referring to collective centres as “a catch-all category of a variety of structures”, a 2004 World Bank study on protracted displacement developed a useful typology:

- buildings not originally intended for human habitation, including abandoned factories, unfinished buildings, military bases, and public buildings such as clinics, schools and administration buildings
- makeshift accommodation such as railway cars, abandoned transport containers, and other structures never meant to hold people
- buildings and facilities originally intended for seasonal or short-term occupation, such as hotels, spas and summer camps or seasonal herder accommodation
- camp-like settings, which may be initiated as tented camps and eventually consolidated into makeshift housing or established from the



Refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina in a sports centre in Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia.

beginning as more weatherised housing, such as limestone-brick housing and prefabricated units.

This study also identified common characteristics:

- multiple displaced families living in the same structure or settlement
- residence in the settlement typically assigned by government authorities, donor agencies or both
- shelter almost always provided free of charge
- settlements usually set apart from the local populations, creating varying degrees of isolation.³

In any of the existing descriptions, how many residents it takes to constitute 'collective' living is not specified. The CCCM Cluster guidance simply notes that collective centres provide accommodation to "a group of displaced persons". In fact, residents can number in the tens of thousands, such as, for example, when some 30,000 IDPs in Liberia sheltered in the national football stadium in the summer of 2003 and an equal number of residents of New Orleans in the Superdome after Hurricane Katrina in September 2005.

Whether a particular collective centre came into being from spontaneous or organised settlement can have important consequences for its residents. Refugees and IDPs in collective centres lacking official recognition as such are at high risk of eviction. In Georgia, for example, only IDPs living in shelters officially recognised as collective centres by the authorities are eligible for the entitlements prescribed by national legislation such as free electricity and now, under a long overdue programme, for rehabilitation and privatisation of these spaces.

Generally, it is the pre-existing character of these buildings that makes them useful as emergency shelters. However, the term has also been used to describe purpose-built shelters for longer-term housing. For example, MSF built new 'collective centres' for IDPs from Chechnya in 2001 as an alternative to their sub-standard tented accommodation of several years.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 'collective centres' are either pre-existing structures which first were used during the war as temporary emergency shelter or shelters constructed after the war as alternative, albeit still temporary, accommodation to this war-time shelter. One example of this second type consists of several dozen adjoined houses, each comprising four individual family apartment units offering privacy and much improved living conditions. A number of residents interviewed in summer 2008 noted that they would stay in this housing permanently if only they could be given security of tenure; however, their continued stay is contingent upon their IDP status, which in turn requires, by law, a regularly expressed desire to return to their place of origin.

Comprehensive response needed

Definitional issues of course are hardly the main concern. Most important is that IDPs and refugees

in collective centres receive systematic attention and can access their rights, not only to adequate housing but also to a durable solution to their plight. Recent evaluations of the Cluster approach and of responses to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) underscore how 'non-camp' displaced populations, including those in collective centres, risk being overlooked.⁴

The CCCM Cluster is to be commended for interpreting its mandate beyond that suggested by its name to also cover "all types of collective accommodation for displaced persons regardless of the terminology used to describe such accommodation." However, addressing the situation of IDPs in collective centres is not the responsibility of the CCCM cluster alone. Indeed, in addition to the role of the national authorities, there arguably is a role for all of the different clusters established under the UN humanitarian reform approach.

First and foremost, given that collective centres specifically are used as – and their use recommended as limited to – temporary shelter, the Emergency Shelter Cluster clearly should play a role. Its mandate of ensuring that shelter responses in humanitarian emergencies are in line with existing policy guidelines, technical standards and human rights obligations would go a long way towards improving conditions in these shelters.

Water, sanitation and hygiene typically are among the most pressing problems in collective centres, especially when these exist in buildings never designed for even temporary habitation. The sub-standard living conditions in collective centres inevitably have serious health repercussions. A UNICEF study found that harmful health effects among IDP children living in the collective centres in Georgia included a high level of acute gastrointestinal diseases, scoliosis and neuroses.⁵ The congested conditions also increase the risk of mental stress and strains on psychosocial health. The WASH Cluster and the Health Cluster therefore also have critical contributions to make.

Attention to collective centres is also relevant for the Early Recovery Cluster, which aims to restore services, livelihoods and governance capacity. Collective centres located in pre-existing buildings had prior uses; freeing up these buildings to regain their original use can be critical to improving access to education and public services, stimulating economic development and livelihood opportunities and providing basic government infrastructure. At the same time, pressures to restore collective centres to their original use, especially when buildings are of commercial interest, heighten the risk of eviction for occupants. This process therefore must be carefully managed and closely monitored to ensure displaced occupants' rights are safeguarded.

In this connection, the Protection Cluster, mandated to ensure that protection is integrated into the work of all clusters, clearly has a critical role. In collective centres, the lack of security of tenure and of adequate property registration creates a tenuous existence where the risk of evictions is ever present. An important role therefore arises for the Protection Cluster expert group on land, housing and property rights.



IDP accommodation near Zugdidi, Georgia.

in collective centres or to access alternative durable housing solutions. While collective centres sometimes marginalise their residents vis-à-vis the local community, it is also true especially in protracted situations of displacement that collective centre residents may have developed their own community links and support mechanisms that they wish to maintain; they should be supported to be able to remain together wherever possible.

Conclusions

The approach to

collective centres and those accommodated in them should be comprehensive in a number of ways:

- programmatically, by devoting greater attention to addressing the situation of non-camp IDPs and refugees; ensuring that collective centres are covered in profiling exercises and assessments would be a critical first step.
- conceptually, by encompassing all types of shelters fitting the collective centre characteristics
- institutionally, bringing to bear the collective expertise of all the different sectors and clusters of the international humanitarian response and of government counterparts
- temporally, recognising the potential utility of collective centres as emergency shelter but also guarding against displaced populations being stuck in these accommodations, without proper maintenance and protection safeguards, for protracted periods
- through a multi-sectoral collaborative approach, in which protection of the IDP and refugee residents' rights is at the core.

Solutions

Protection for refugees and IDPs ultimately is about securing durable solutions. While collective centres often provide displaced populations with critical emergency shelter, they are unlikely to provide a durable and dignified housing solution; the poor living conditions and the associated vulnerabilities are only exacerbated over time. Fifteen years on, some 100,000 IDPs in Georgia are still living in the 'temporary' accommodation provided by 1,600 dilapidated collective centres, including one found in a run-down ward of a functioning hospital, where children play outside among used syringes and other medical refuse. In BiH, 14 years after the war, some 7,000 IDPs – mostly elderly, chronically physically or mentally ill, and otherwise highly vulnerable persons – continue to live in places which provided emergency shelter during the war.⁶ Although general guidance that alternative shelter should "be found quickly, if possible in no longer than one month"⁷ will be difficult to realise in most emergencies, more durable and dignified living conditions should be actively sought and secured for refugees and IDPs as soon as conditions permit.

Any alternative accommodation must meet adequate housing standards, and the refugee and IDP residents must have a right of stay, without risk of arbitrary eviction, until a permanent housing solution is found. In a government-led effort to close collective centres in Chechnya in 2007, IDPs were offered incentives including use of land or a grant for rental accommodation. However, IDMC reports that the compensation and assistance were seldom adequate.⁸

In other cases, it will be possible, even preferred by the displaced residents, to convert the collective centres into long-term accommodation, possibly as part of refugee and IDP residents opting for local integration as a durable solution. Such a process was launched in Georgia, in an important policy shift by the government in May 2009, to rehabilitate collective centres to adequate housing standards and allow IDPs to take ownership of their places

Erin Mooney (erindmooney@hotmail.com) is a consultant to UNHCR for the Global Protection Cluster and to USAID's FORECAST Project in Georgia. These remarks were written in her personal capacity.

1. <http://tiny.cc/CCCMGlossary>

2. <http://tiny.cc/CCCMtypology>

3. Steven B Holtzman & Taies Nezam, *Living in Limbo: Conflict-Induced Displacement in Europe and Central Asia* (World Bank, 2004)

4. <http://www.unhcr.org/46a4ae082.html> and <http://www.unhcr.org/48ea31062.html>

5. <http://tiny.cc/UnicefGeorgia>

6. See article by Mooney and Hussain, pp22-24.

7. Global Protection Cluster, *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, available at: <http://tiny.cc/IDPProtection>

8. IDMC, *Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2007* (2008), p86. See also article by Golda, pp55-56.