

A missing element of 'camp management'

Damian Lilly

Collective centres are often overlooked as a settlement option for IDPs in displacement crises.

Camp management has developed as a key concern within the humanitarian community as part of the humanitarian reform agenda, alongside the more traditional sectors in emergencies. However, most of the tools and guidelines – including the Camp Management Toolkit, UNHCR Emergency Handbook and Sphere standards¹ – assume a traditional camp setting. Although reference is made to different kinds of settlement options, a differentiated approach to them is rarely offered. Collective centres



Some 500 Lebanese refugees fleeing violence sheltered in Al-Shariya High School, South Damascus, Syria.

are certainly 'camp-like' and share characteristics of camps. For the most part, the broad principles and approaches of management developed for camps are relevant and applicable to collective centres. However, there are many differences that are overlooked, requiring different approaches, strategies and standards.

Collective centres have been defined as "pre-existing buildings and structures used for the collective and communal settlement of displaced persons in the event of war and natural disasters" and can be of a many different kinds, such as schools, hotels, stadiums, military barracks and warehouses. Compared to camps, which are usually

supported by aid agencies, little is known about collective centres as a settlement option. Although they have been prevalent in a number of displacement crises, not only in the Balkans and the Caucasus from the 1990s where they were very common but also in other recent emergencies such as Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Iraq, they have not received significant attention by aid practitioners. For this reason, the Camp Coordination Camp Management (CCCM) Global Cluster² commissioned a study in 2007 to look at the scope of the collective centre phenomenon and propose best practice in terms of camp management.³

Scope and scale

It is impossible to say how many of the estimated 26 million IDPs worldwide reside in collective centres. In some contexts they represent a substantial proportion of IDP settlements. For example, in Georgia as many as 45% of the 250,000 IDPs in the country are in collective centres. In natural disasters, collective centres are often used as a temporary measure. The use of the Louisiana Superdome after Hurricane Katrina and typhoon evacuation shelters in Bangladesh are just two examples. Although probably a small but significant proportion of IDPs globally is settled in collective centres, they are sidelined as a settlement option because they do not fit the traditional camp model.

Whether a collective centre is in the public, private or civil society sector will have different kinds of implications for aid practitioners which should be factored into assessments, planning and responses. For example, use of public sector buildings may make the local authorities more active in their management but the local population will suffer from a disruption to the primary function of the building e.g. a school or hospital. In private sector collective centres, the owner may need to be compensated for the use of the building. Civil society collective centres may have religious or community leaders involved in camp management and therefore have closer links with the local population.

Temporary or prolonged settlement

There are no generic reasons why collective centres are used as a settlement option in some situations and not others. The CCCM study discusses a variety of factors that might lead to their use, including security, geography, culture and development. For example, buildings used as collective centres may be deemed safer for IDPs in the event of disasters. Cold climates make other shelter options, such as tents, less acceptable and collective centres more of a necessity. In many cultures tents are not considered appropriate and in middle-income countries IDPs may be unwilling to go into tented camps, choosing instead to be accommodated in available buildings.

Collective centres are usually portrayed as a short-term measure during mass displacement, often in urban

settings. The study dispels these assumptions, however, showing that they have been used in many different contexts and not only as a temporary settlement option. Ensuring they remain a temporary solution, however, is a key camp management priority as there are a number of negative consequences of IDPs residing in collective centres, which stem from the unsuitability of most of the buildings used and the close proximity in which IDPs are forced to live. Negative consequences include:

- social tensions and psychosocial concerns because of the lack of privacy and living space
- the high proportion of vulnerable groups including the elderly, mentally ill, single-headed households and separated children
- dependency syndrome and a lack of self-reliance among IDPs.

Camp management strategies

The CCCM cluster has developed a framework for camp management, detailing the key roles and responsibilities of the actors involved. The main concepts – camp administration, camp coordination and camp management – are all applicable to collective centres. The role of governments is usually more pronounced in collective centres as compared to camps.

CCCM roles and responsibilities

Camp administration refers to the functions of national governments and authorities in the oversight and supervision of camps. This includes site selection and camp closure and land, property and occupancy rights.

Camp coordination refers to the role of aid agencies who work in support of national government to help manage camps. The primary objective of camp coordination is to ensure the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, including adherence to agreed standards and guidelines, technical support, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation.

Camp management refers to activities within a single camp and includes the coordination of basic service delivery, establishment of governance structures, community participation and data collection.

National governments may register collective centres and assign representatives or officials to manage them. Unregistered, spontaneous collective centres often fall off the radar for assistance. It is rare that an international or national aid agency becomes a camp management agency for collective centres, although this often happens for camps. There is no ‘one size fits all’ model for the best management structure for collective centres, although IDP participation, a designated manager, contractual agreements with owners, and an active role for local authorities are all key elements for their successful management. The closure of collective centres and the eviction of IDPs from them should be resisted until property housing rights and durable solutions can be assured.

The fact that the majority of collective centres are pre-existing buildings, not usually meant for human habitation, presents most challenges for camp management practitioners. In planned camps proper living conditions can be more easily assured than in collective centres in which humanitarian standards are often not met. Careful consideration should be given to whether the building in question is suitable for mass accommodation or whether a better alternative exists.

The initial decision on the settlement option for IDPs has a significant and long-lasting impact on their well-being. Collective centres may be planned as a temporary measure but they may accommodate IDPs for months, if not years. IDPs, owners of buildings, community representatives and local officials should all play a role in deciding whether a building in question will be used. Only those buildings that are structurally safe and away from potential hazards should be selected, and buildings should be accessible in the event of an emergency. Collective centres will also have to rely on access to public services (health, water and education) in the local community. A legal agreement should be signed as soon as possible with the owner of the building, the local authorities and preferably the IDPs themselves to outline the rights and obligations of all parties

The approach towards profiling and registration of IDPs is broadly the same for collective centres as for other kinds of settlements. Assistance provided should respect humanitarian standards, although IDPs in fact frequently live in deplorable conditions in collective centres. The potential benefit of collective centres is that they have existing facilities for providing IDPs with basic services. However, up-grading these may be difficult and they can swiftly fall into disrepair. There are also unique challenges for collective centres through the different phases of operation (emergency preparedness, contingency planning, emergency, care and maintenance, durable solutions and exit strategy) which the study outlines in detail.

Conclusion

The bias towards camps as the default option in emergencies needs to be resisted and greater consideration given in displacement crises to other settlement options such as collective centres. As collective centres can only provide sub-optimal living conditions, however, they should remain a temporary measure until longer-term solutions can be found. If they become, by default, a long-term solution, efforts must be made to ensure that minimum humanitarian standards are met.

Damian Lilly (damianlilly@yahoo.co.uk) has worked for a number of UN agencies and NGOs in displacement contexts and as an independent consultant on humanitarian and conflict issues. This article is written in a personal capacity and does not represent the views of UNHCR or the CCCM Cluster.

1. See <http://www.nrc.no/camp>; <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCREmergHbk3rd>; <http://tinyurl.com/SphereHandbook>.

2. <http://tinyurl.com/HumRefCCCM>

3. This article is based on this study, which included desk research, interviews with Cluster members and case studies on Liberia, Serbia and Georgia.