

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CAMP PHASE-OUT AND CLOSURE: A UNHCR PLAN OF ACTION

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this plan of action is to guide UNHCR in institutionalising and formulating environmental activities relating to camp phase-out and closure. It provides an operational framework in this regard for UNHCR and Camp Management Agency (CMA) staff, as well as guidance to government authorities and other implementing partners, in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Relief operations for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) often cause negative environmental impacts on natural resources such as land, forests and water bodies in hosting areas and surrounding landscapes. This is a concern for host governments and host communities because of the immediate and direct impacts on the livelihoods of host populations, many of which are often heavily reliant upon the natural resource base for their livelihoods. Damage caused to ecosystems on a wider scale can have long-term consequences.

Redressing the environmental impact of refugee and IDP operations has not traditionally been part of camp closure planning, though UNHCR's Environmental Policy acknowledges the need for this to happen. In recognition of the importance of mitigating the negative impacts of refugee and IDP camps and settlements, this plan of action highlights the role that UNHCR and its implementing partners need to play to insert environmental concerns and issues in camp closure and phase-out processes.

The plan of action outlines a number of core principles which should underpin operational activities in all field activities. In addition, a number of practical proposals are made to help translate such principles into action.

CORE PRINCIPLES

- Environmental degradation impacts directly on host communities as they are often heavily reliant upon natural resources for their livelihoods. Camp closure plans must therefore incorporate and support activities that assist livelihood sustainability in the host communities.
- UNHCR has an ethical duty to ensure that any negative impacts associated with the location and running of camps or settlements are minimised, and that significant environmental damage in and around a camp or settlement is redressed when a camp is being closed.
- Timely and effective restoration of a camp site is essential to maintain the willingness of the host country to provide asylum in future.
- Planning for camp phase-out and closure should begin as early as possible: this should not be a last minute endeavour.
- Early and continued consultation is essential between UNHCR, the CMA, the host government (central and local) and host communities. Refugees or IDPs should also be consulted on plans for phase-out and camp closure, and involved to the degree possible in advance clean-up and rehabilitation.

- All plans for closing a camp or settlement should incorporate environmental rehabilitation activities.

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

1. The environmental aspects of camp closure and phase-out should be incorporated into UNHCR's Country Operation Plans as well as future training events on camp planning and management.
2. Environmental conservation and management should continue to be systematically and continuously mainstreamed into all phases of camp management.
3. Environmental considerations should be recognised as a core issue by the Camp Co-ordination and Camp Management Cluster (or its equivalent).
4. UNHCR should develop a framework outlining the respective responsibilities of UNHCR, the government and CMAs during camp phase-out and closure. Such a framework could be embedded in a Camp Closure Plan.
5. The role of UNHCR with regard to environmental rehabilitation should be incorporated into UNHCR's *Environmental Guidelines* and future related training events.
6. UNHCR should ensure that a stable funding mechanism is created that supports environmental activities in refugee and IDP operations, including environmental rehabilitation during camp closure.
7. Rehabilitation is not meant to restore a site to its former condition as often this is not the requirement of a government or host community/communities. All efforts should, however, be made to ensure that all major environmental concerns are addressed and that the former camp area is cleaned up and that hazards have been removed.
8. UNHCR should engage specialist agencies to guide the environmental rehabilitation process, involving local community/communities from the outset.
9. Environmental rehabilitation and other restoration work done in a camp or settlement, including infrastructure repair, should conform with and support the national development plan for that region.
10. A training module should be created for camp phase-out and closure, with a view to ensuring capacity building among current and new UNHCR/CMA staff, and local government where relevant.
11. A final environmental audit should be completed on every camp or settlement that is closed, before responsibility is finally transferred back to the host government and community or communities.

For more information on environmental management in UNHCR's operations, please see <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/3b94c47b4.html>