

# Refugee settlements and sustainable planning

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**We need to develop refugee settlement planning processes that not only facilitate long-term planning but also allow for incremental upgrading. The case of M'Bera in Mauritania illustrates this.**

It is estimated that the average lifespan of a refugee camp is 17 years, with such settlements developing gradually and usually organically from an emergency camp into what is fundamentally a new town. With this reality in mind, what role do host governments and the humanitarian community have in the initial camp planning process? How can long-term planning issues be incorporated? How can sustainable planning approaches be utilised? How can settlements be managed so that the physical and social environment is enhanced over the long term?

Most camps are swiftly constructed as a response to rapid displacement, and in many cases are planned incrementally, and even retrospectively, in attempts to impose order on a chaotic, ad hoc camp layout. Even when the initial spatial planning incorporates water and sanitation, shelter, drainage, access roads and physical locations for provision of health, education and other services, it is difficult to take into account the whole lifespan of the camp during the design phase; political resistance, funding limitations and lack of agreement on duration are key factors that prevent longer-term planning.

The political context is a key determinant of the adequacy of a refugee settlement. The attitude of host communities, security concerns and the willingness of a host government to meet their obligations have a direct impact on the viability and adequacy of refugee settlements. In many cases the displaced population is relegated to the poorest land, far from host communities, isolated from services and possessing few natural resources. This limits the reality of integration with existing services, and places a longer-term burden on donors to fund settlements that

have little chance of being viable without continuous programmatic support.

The factors for a refugee settlement to thrive, rather than merely to exist, are rarely explicit and easily determined, nor are they stable, but a resilient refugee community will invest in a settlement if enabling factors such as their legal status, security of tenure and economic opportunity exist. If political assurances are possible and resources exist for the gradual development of a camp into a sustainable settlement, coordination of long-term investments from humanitarian and development actors could enable the strategic planning of a community, emulating conventional urban planning approaches as much as possible. Spatial planning approaches where a refugee settlement is seen as a 'node' – connected to the physical, social and economic life of adjacent territories – rather than as an 'island' is a helpful concept both in short-term planning and in strategically organising subsequent interventions.

## The case of M'Bera in Mauritania

Around 46,000 people who have fled conflict and insecurity in northern Mali since 2012 live in M'Bera camp in south-east Mauritania, with around 100 people per week still arriving. The shelter approach taken in the camp was initially to provide tents and simple shelter kits consisting of plastic sheeting and fixings. Beginning in 2015, the entire camp has been upgraded using a system of canvas and timber frame construction. This has allowed refugee families an improved shelter that can be put together in ways that emulate the traditional nomadic shelter in materials and size, and which is adaptable from day to night, and able to be easily extended, modified, repaired and rearranged as the needs of refugee families evolve.



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An example of vernacular architecture – local mud-brick buildings – that would be used as a prototype for upgrading M’Bera camp.

As the longer-term needs of M’Bera become clearer, the potential for spatial rearrangement is critical; the increasing formalisation of the settlement will inevitably require some movement of shelters, roads and infrastructure, and re-thinking of the relationship of some critical elements. In this sense, the current shelter design and the overall settlement have the capacity to undergo a rearrangement more suitable to longer-term needs. This material and spatial flexibility also requires a strategic shift from a humanitarian approach to a phased developmental approach. The refugees have indicated that even if a reasonable degree of peace and stability could be achieved in Mali in the near future, a number of them would not return but would remain in M’Bera. In any case, the consensus is that the security situation in Mali will remain unchanged in the medium term and refugees have a realistic understanding that they will remain in M’Bera for several years to come.

The vernacular architecture utilises local materials to make a rectilinear,

mud-brick construction with a flat roof and small openings – suited to the climate – that can be readily erected using local knowledge available to both refugee and host communities. Ample opportunity exists for participation in design and construction and as such this is a suitable housing type for a longer-term plan that includes the spatial reorganisation of the settlement.

Around 2,000 people remain from an earlier refugee crisis of the early 1990s in what is known as M’Bera 2 village, adjacent to the current M’Bera camp. The ongoing presence of this refugee community supports the assumption that a core group from M’Bera will also remain and that a long-term settlement upgrade is viable. Some fundamental spatial planning questions therefore arise. Is it feasible to upgrade part of the existing settlement to cater for those who remain? Will this action also encourage others to remain? Would it be better to concentrate efforts in M’Bera 2 in order to benefit the existing long-term displaced and those of the current refugee

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population who intend to stay? Such critical considerations have long-term implications for the viability of the settlement and the well-being of the refugee population.

The aspirations of the refugee community and the host community need to be jointly taken into consideration for any long-term solution. Refugees are currently well-integrated socially (inter-marriage occurs and there are kinship linkages) and economically (with shared commercial activities and livestock trade). Joint planning processes between refugees, host community and government need to be established early in the development plan so that social cohesion

and resource management are central to planning decisions, with inclusion of the settlement into district and regional funding and governance structures. This is critical in a context where, for example, livestock numbers, vegetation management and water resources are potential flash-points. Effective consultation and engagement that connect policy, process and spatial planning with the long-term needs of the settlement will need to be developed early on in order to ensure a sustainable process and outcome.

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