

Protecting the right to adequate housing during and after violent conflict

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Being displaced due to violent conflict means losing one's **home**. With the deliberate destruction of homes, the impact is the loss of the protection against the elements, and against other threats to health, including mental health, safety and well-being; the (further) compromising of basic needs; being cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools and other community facilities and social networks; being separated from loved ones, the (drastic or incremental) loss or compromise of privacy, of the expression of cultural identity and the loss of the sense of belonging.

We firmly acknowledge the importance of immediate emergency shelter; and advocate for its provision as lifesaving. We must also recognise that a tent, a space in a collective center or a one-off month of rental support is insufficient beyond the first days or the initial weeks of displacement. We believe in an incremental improvement towards enjoying the right to adequate housing. The shared commitment should be providing or contributing with a housing solution that incrementally meets the full adequate housing definition, within a healthy environment, as part of a community with increased capacity to cope. The housing solution should be inclusive in its service provision, nurture a sense of protection and belonging, and developed through a process that encourages beneficiaries to engage in the aesthetic and functional improvements of the dwelling.

Whilst all aspects of adequate housing are interrelated, it is important to be explicit about each aspect, confirming that humanitarian assistance takes into consideration the habitability (adapting to the local housing typologies, in rural or urban contexts), accessibility (for marginalized groups), location, security of tenure and so on.

In addition to budget constraints, there are challenges to contest laws, policies and/or practices that have a discriminatory effect on the enjoyment of the right to housing even though international human rights treaties recognize the right to adequate housing for refugees, internally displaced people during displacement and upon return.

Adequate housing should represent what we aspire for, yet its seven dimensions are considered a luxury for what people affected by conflict and deserve or pose a risk destabilizing the host community. Fear and xenophobia continue one of the largest barriers to protecting the right to adequate housing of refugees.

Having access to adequate housing does not change the desire for a war to be over, does not change the desire to go back **home**, back to the place of origin. Establishing collaborative bonds with host communities does not necessarily change people's desire to return or eliminate the migration dreams that particularly youth might have, but these might be pursued in a relative safer way and not out despair.

Through direct hits, due to lack on maintenance, over-crowding, or being used for other functions, the housing stock inevitably and drastically deteriorates during armed conflict. The household composition and accommodation arrangements also change. Stable households often become female-headed or single-headed households in displacement whilst youth and men are mobilized to fight. Further, whilst younger generations are likely to leave their place of origin, people with mobility impairments are unable or unwilling to flee their homes and communities. The destruction of homes and infrastructure impacts therefore particularly older adults as well as people with disabilities who are further vulnerable, cut-off from services and disconnected from support networks.

The correlation around overcrowding, homelessness and sexual violence are consistently raised across areas affected by conflict. Given the acute concerns around inadequate housing and further exposure to harm are prevalent, we must make a stronger stand that protecting the right to adequate housing mitigates gender-based violence.

We must also recognise the intrinsic connection between the loss of housing and mental health. Mental health and psychosocial problems can arise when people are isolated from their own family or community group; are forced to live surrounded by people they do not know; are *not* able to rebuild, pay for rent or secure their own shelter; and where there is a shrinking access to scarce resources such as space or water. People that were forced to flee or have lost their homes by conflict are currently suffering from these and other circumstances. In addition to witnessing and/or experiencing traumatic events during armed conflict, "a person's mental health and psychosocial well-being is affected as much, or even more, by their living conditions as it is by their experiences of crisis and disaster."¹ When protecting the right to adequate housing during and after conflict, we promote good mental health and psychosocial well-being through the services we provide, and also through how we provide these services. The participation of people affected by violent conflict – by having a saying on decisions that will have an impact in their housing conditions - reduces the sense of helplessness, honours their inherent dignity and it is an integral part of the humanitarian assistance we provide.

¹ Webb, S. and Weinstein Sheffield, E. (2021). [Mindful Sheltering](#), Oxford Brookes University & CARE.

The limited shelter assistance people affected by conflict receives often falls short of meeting the criteria defining adequate housing also in terms of the incapacity to withstand changing weather patterns, putting the security of displaced people at risk². Until adequate housing is secured, people will not be able to cope under extreme weather conditions. Displaced populations face increasingly harsh conditions, particularly those displaced without adequate shelter, and those “housebound” in protracted crisis (most often women and people with disabilities, of people that feel targeted or marginalized).

It is important to define how does disaster risk reduction and “building back better” look in each specific context (at the housing unit and settlement level). This includes the mapping of the environmental considerations that will be given to the construction systems, sourcing and lifespan of materials employed for reconstruction as well as the energy efficiency improvements during rehabilitation and new construction. In some contexts, the risk of gentrification will need to be mitigated. Reconstruction might be an opportunity to improve the housing stock that was substandard or in disrepair, but measures should be in place without “displacing” previous residents. Protecting the right to adequate housing includes have a place to go back to *someone’s community*.

The insufficient housing supply and direct economic push to prevent people to access, retain or recover housing are not the only challenges to protect the right to adequate housing after conflict. Additional accompaniment activities, such as protection services needs to be offered to people that were already marginalized before the conflict (minority groups, indigenous groups, non-nationals, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and others).

Whilst we have guidance for housing and property restitution, the policy and procedural recommendations are not consistently actioned and it is important to also acknowledge the housing status of those who have customary land or property ownership, live in rental accommodation, particularly through the informal shelter market, and all the more those who faced housing insecurity or homelessness before armed conflict.

Humans are extremely resilient, but we should protect the right to adequate housing across all stages of displacement, based on minimum humanitarian standards and what is needed to recover with dignity, not based on what people can endure.

² <https://soundingthesiren.com/findings/>