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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND DONORS REGARDING SHELTER UNIT DESIGN IN ATMEH CAMP

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ABSTRACT

The disagreement between local authorities and donors regarding shelter technical conditions in Atmeh camp in North-west Syria leads to inadequate housing for internal displacement people (IDPs), resulting in a lack of possible sheltering interventions and obstructing the construction of shelter units. This study aims to suggest a solution for the main controversial points regarding the design conditions of the shelter unit between the donors and the local authorities of Atmeh camp by conducting a focus group discussion to analyze the conditions of donors and Atmeh camp's local authorities. Then, to suggest a shelter design to fulfill both parties' requirements. This study aims to come up with a modular shelter unit design that can be an acceptable solution to the local authorities and donors as well as to meet the sheltering standards to enhance the living conditions of IDPs in Atmeh camp.

Keywords: Conflict management, IDPs shelter, camps, Atmeh camp, shelter unit design.

INTRODUCTION

The right to adequate housing was first recognized with Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The principle: 'Everyone has the right to adequate housing' (UDHR, 1948) is applicable in all stages of the displacement cycle prior to, during, and after displacement, and is relevant to all people

of concern. While the tent modality provided vulnerable people with temporary shelter solutions, they can be at greater risk of harassment, assault, or exploitation if they live in shelters without proper walls and ceiling, or the possibility to lock the shelter doors. Displaced children, especially children with disabilities, are particularly exposed to protection risks due to the lack of appropriate shelter, including various forms of violence, abuse, or exploitation (UNHCR, 2006). Persons with disabilities need to receive specific attention, and shelter must be tailored to their specific needs.

According to UNHCR's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons are: 'persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence. In particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border' (UNOCHA, 2004). Due to the effects of the Syrian war and current circumstances inside Syria, people have been forced to leave their own houses and seek to find places that can adequately meet their basic needs including shelter, safety, security, food, water, clothing, and social life. Huge displacement waves increasingly occur to north-west Syria resulting in

formal/informal settlements. These waves need to be rapidly responded to and served by national/international humanitarian organizations, local organizations, UN agencies, Red cross and Red crescent movements, or any other humanitarian actor. These humanitarian aids are being provided with the involvement of the local authorities. On the other hand, the emergency response in all sectors becomes more complex and the provided services do not cover all needs.

NEEDS AND MOTIVATIONS

Only thirty-five percent of the IDPs displaced in December are living in adequate housing indicating higher levels of vulnerability and harder living conditions in North-west Syria (Hub, 2020). Sheltering policies, or lack thereof, as well as the shelter itself as a design and construction product all, express the power of those who govern more than the aspirations of those who inhabit (Al Asali, Wagemann and Ramage, 2019). Affected populations and hosting communities are mostly engaged in finding housing solutions through collaboration with United Nations Agencies, international and national non-profit organizations. However, these solutions function under the influence of local authorities that control the area where IDPs moved in. Therefore, basically this obstacles the adequate housing process in North-west Syria.

Humanitarian assistance has encountered limitations in moving around the country due to security risks, bureaucratic and administrative obstacles and barriers defined by warring groups (Mooney, 2014). The roles of humanitarian actors they should play on the ground in post-disaster stages, as well as defining the relationship they should have with local authorities in accelerating the interventions, selecting priorities, and

developing strategies are a matter of long debate (del Castillo, 2008). External aid and support are necessary to communities in post-war/conflict situations, but on the other hand, making aid dependencies is something that reflects negatively on people's productivity and discourages sustainability and resilience. The role that humanitarian actors play and the nature of their relationship with the local authorities and national actors, the participation of a huge number of NGO actors may create various logistical/operational challenges and response overlapping. Furthermore, the involvement of the international bodies in the affected communities causes several distortions, coordination problems, and sometimes, political conflicts. This can affect the affected population including the host communities and internally displaced people.

After almost ten years of conflict in Syria, the number of IDPs in North West Syria (NWS) continuously increases and 2.7 million IDPs live in NWS according to the statistics of HNAP (CCCM CLUSTER, 2020), including around 960,000 individual who has been displaced for a subsequent period since December 2019 or newly displaced. A few of those 960,000 new IDPs hardly managed to move with a tent or existing shelter items (SNFI Cluster/turkey, 2020). The shelter is the essential need of those IDPs and the provision of a massive number of new adequate shelters in a short period is the main challenge for the shelter-centered humanitarian actors.

In March 2020, Humanitarian Need Assessment Programme (HNAP) estimated that 44% of IDPs (1.2M) are living in emergency shelters (SNFI Cluster/turkey, 2020). Even though the SNFI Cluster and the CCCM Cluster consider camps as a last resort solution, shelter actors in the camps had to focus on the provision of shelters for new IDPs because of the limited availability of shelters in residential urban areas in NWS.

Some sites in urban areas are planned and constructed prior to the coming of people to live in. These sites are considered as planned camps. Whereas most urban sites are not planned where people move into the site, build their own shelters, without any planned layout beforehand. They are considered 'spontaneous' or 'informal settlements'. Sometimes, sites have some parts planned and then many people come afterward putting their own shelters around the existing planned core. Those are considered 'hybrid' camps. In this case, the IDPs mostly come to the planned camps and settled around the site, to be served by the humanitarian assistance and the services provided in the planned camps such as the water systems, electricity, shelter items, etc. Here are common types of sites:

1- Parks: they are attractive to IDPs as they can have some shading, environmental areas, local water supply, and are close to some shopping and commercial areas. In addition to being already divided into different sections/parts. On the other hand, this may result in environmental damage, problems in drainage systems, and security risks due to the lack of lighting at night.

2- Plazas (public squares): They're connected with a lot of commercial activities, markets, possible delivery of supplies, and close to electricity, drainage, and other infrastructures. However, the nature of the ground surfaces obstacles to the installment of shelters or latrines. In addition, planning a site in plazas might be a reason for social tension between the IDPs and local communities.

3- Hybrid: these sites are built in open areas surrounding large buildings such as schools, warehouses, commercial buildings, mosques, sports centers, and shopping centers. It might have plenty of food distribution, medical support, and other support by local and external NGOs/INGOs. They are also secure,

having protection from bad weather, as well as water supply and hygiene facilities. On the other hand, the land of the buildings is most probably owned privately where it can expose people to harm through being evicted.

Since 2013, these displacement waves have been taking place in different districts, sub-districts, and communities in NWS among varying proportions. AL-Dana district has been considered one of the common areas that IDPs choose to displace because of its suitable properties including the nature of the ground, weather factors, and on-going support for people in need coming from several donors. A hybrid informal camp named "Atmeh Camp" has been established in Atmeh sub-district in AL-Dana. This camp contains more than 225,000 beneficiaries (CCCM Cluster, 2020). According to an assessment has been conducted in Dec 2020, by one international humanitarian actor (Global Communities), in consultation with the SNFI cluster/Turkey Hub; 30,110 shelters exist in Atmeh Camp, 72% of HHs are staying in shelters of concrete blocks, while 26% are staying in tents, and 1,960 HHs are living in tents for more than two years. According to the SNFI Cluster, shelter actors must assist protracted IDPs that have already been living in camps or informal sites for several years.

According to the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, approximately two-thirds of the newly displaced people decided to move to hosting communities. Renting an apartment has become more difficult due to increasing prices because of the rising demand and the limited supply of apartments. In sub-districts such as AL-Dana, people must pay a couple of hundred US dollars to rent a small apartment often with inadequate conditions. Indeed, 9% of IDPs are living in substandard buildings, mainly unfinished.

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

According to the International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent (IFRC), the shelters can be categorized into four terms based on the permanency of location, life-span of the shelter unit, the length of stay & durability; “ Transitional Shelters, Temporary Shelters, Progressive Shelters & Core Shelters”(Albadra, Coley and Hart, 2018). The temporary & transitional shelters aim to be re-used or re-located, whereas the core & progressive ones are used to become permanent solutions for the vulnerable population. As a response to these numbers of IDPs and trying to provide shelters, international donors fund projects to construct and establish shelter units in order to serve the affected population in Atmeh camp. Those funds come with some requirements and red flags such as the unacceptance of establishing permanent camps or shelter units (progressive & core shelters), which can be formed through designing the shelter with concrete casted roofs, this might lead to long-term accommodation of IDPs without the desire of returning to their homelands. This also results in demographic changes as well as the possibility of tension between IDPs and hosting communities.

On the other hand, from the perspectives of the local authorities, who are the real decision-makers on the ground; as long as the internal displacements are commonly being increased with no possible indicators that can resolve the conflict in Syria. Thus, they claim for long-term shelter interventions, and they have specific conditions and outlines regarding the shelter unit design and technical specification, such as the area of shelter and the type of shelter’s roof. This aims to direct the shelter-centered humanitarian support to fund projects that contribute to permanent solutions for the IDPs.

This led to a conflict between the local authorities and donors regarding the technical conditions of shelter units. Thus, the conflict may negatively affect the IDPs not losing shelter assistance and creating inadequate housing in Atmeh camp.

DISCUSSION

Looking for alternative shelter solutions other than tents is a real need. Concrete block shelters can be considered as an adequate shelter, which is an efficient and accepted shelter solution by the community, since it gives more privacy and protection against the weather elements, and the long lifespan compared to the tents, which are more expensive as it requires replacement almost every season. The concrete block shelter solution is more efficient and accepted than the Refugee Housing Unit, the mud houses, and caravans.

Generally, the concrete block unit as a sheltering solution in post-disaster areas is considered a common solution and has been applied in many locations in north-west Syria. However, this solution includes constructing temporary shelter units, cement blocks for walls, and heavy plastic sheets with insulation for the ceiling, taking into consideration the available area per person in the tents to be increased proportionally. The local authorities advocate for changing the shelters’ roof materials to be made of casted concrete, which provides the IDPs with more security and protection from weather factors. In Atmeh, those advocacies have been refused by multiple donors since it crosses the redlines that the donors have already defined prior to any intervention, in relation to the type of concrete block shelter roof not to be providing permanence for those IDPs, and not to attract more from out of Atmeh Camp.

No one solution can solve the shelter problem and close the gap in the shelter

sector, but several solutions could complement to marginalize the problem and limit the negative impacts.

METHODOLOGY

In Atmeh camp, for the sake of solving the main controversial points, regarding the design conditions of the shelter unit between the donors and the local authorities, the following steps have been taken:

1. Conducting a Focus Group Discussion in a Bhorta camp to analyze the collected data in terms of the satisfaction of IDPs over the Concrete block shelter units, and their roof design preferences. Subsequently, this data will be provided to the donor to describe the reality of needs in NWS in this regard.

2. Preparing two designs including enlarging the shelter area and changing the roof materials of the concrete block shelter units, using more weather-resistant materials that provide greater safety for the IDPs

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The objective of this Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is to assess beneficiary perceptions and experiences in terms of safety, dignity, access to services, facilities, services design, protection, and participation at the end of (Block Housing Unit) project in Bhorta community. That aims to alleviate the hardship experienced by the internally displaced people (IDPs) in north-western Syria in the inadequate camps' environment.

To achieve the above objective, we developed an FGD survey based on a protection mainstreaming toolkit to monitor the level of satisfaction of males, females, and people with disabilities regarding living space, privacy, ventilation, safety, and the impact of a

project on the community, GBV risk mitigation, and Psychological Health.

Thirty-two (FGDs) were conducted (51% male, 49%female) with 113 IDPs in Bhorta camp (Bhorta community,a subdistrict of Akhtarintown , Azaz Region, Aleppo governorate) including 21 peer-to-peer sessions to explore their views, including eight FGDs with people with disability. The FGDs were held separately for female and male IDPs participants in two distinct population groups: adolescents (13-17 years old) and adults (18-59 years old) to obtain information on each category's specific needs.

The total number of participants in these sessions was 113 participants including 8 people with disabilities, 30 women, 25 female adolescents, 29 men, and 29 male adolescents.

Field data collection was conducted using paper forms. Additional precautions were put in place during data collection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect the safety of enumerators and respondents including social distancing measures and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by enumerators such as face masks and gloves and conducting remote surveys when applicable. The collected data was edited and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Upon asking the general information of any FGD or surveying tool, the most important questions asked / topic discussed within the Focus Group Discussion are summarized below:

- What type of shelter participants were living in before moving to the concrete block shelter unit?
- The living situation and difficulties participants were facing before moving to the concrete block shelter unit?
- How moving to block housing units improved participants' lives in terms of Privacy and Space?

- How moving to block housing units improved participants' lives in terms of Design and infrastructure?
- How moving to block housing units improved participants' lives in terms of safety and security?
- Are participants satisfied with the plastic sheet roof of their new shelters (block housing units)? Why?

The main findings from data generated by the focus group discussions are summarized below. The consultation brought about valuable information also in terms of current protection challenges and daily concerns of the participants in the FGD.

The average number of family members for each family in the assessed camp is between 6-8 members.

Key Findings

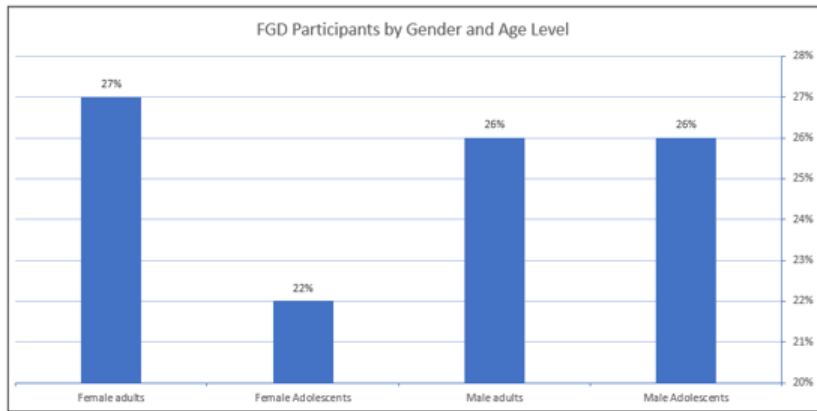


Figure 1 FGD participants by gender and age level

Accommodation type before moving to block housing units

Most participants reported that before moving to the block housing units they lived in tents (94%), while only (6%) lived in uninhabitable houses. The following chart illustrates the results:

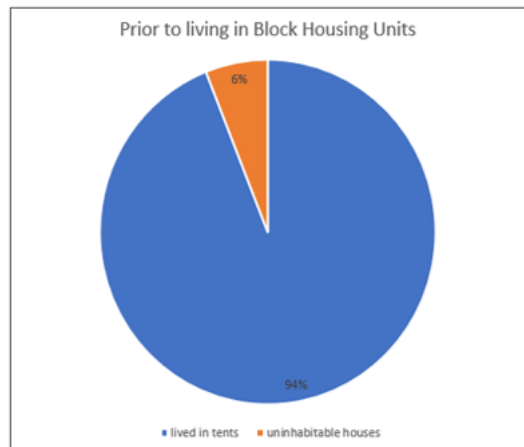


Figure 2 Accommodation type Before living block housing units

Living Situation

All participants reported how difficult their living situations were before moving to the block housing units, with no privacy, no protection from hard weather conditions, no access to wash facilities, no space for sleep or comfort, some of them even used the word prisoners in our tents. In order to assess effectively how moving to block housing units improved participants' lives, in terms of all aforementioned aspects, each point was discussed and analyzed.

1. Privacy and Space:

According to all participants (100%), before moving to the block housing units, they lived in tents and other torn housing, which provided no privacy especially for women and people with disabilities. Almost all participants highlighted how women and girls had no privacy in their tents, how small the tents were which provided no comfort especially in terms of sleeping areas. The lack of space and privacy was a vital issue for all participants. They were not comfortable in their own tents as they are exposed to people in the camp, which made them feel like prisoners in their own home. They could not even have privacy when talking to each other as tents were too close and tent fabric was thin and did not provide acoustic insulation. On the other hand, participants described how moving to the block housing units changed their lives in every aspect. The block housing units provided enough space for sleeping, it provided privacy as it had doors and windows, women and people with disabilities could change their clothes or even wear light clothes and get comfortable in their unit, which made a huge difference for them.

When asking adults about the changes they experienced in terms of privacy, they expressed how having doors and windows to the unit provided better privacy, and the internal space was better than tents, and the space between housing units is bigger,

which provide even higher level of privacy as sounds will not transfer easily between housing units.

When asking female adolescents about the improvement in privacy in the block housing units, they mentioned how they were never able to even take off their Hijab in tents, while now not only they can, but they can also get comfortable wearing what they want in the house especially during hot summer. In addition, being exposed to everyone in the camp deprived them of having an independent personality while living in the block units enabled them having their own personality. Moreover, female adults stressed how moving to block units provided privacy for husbands and wives and decreased domestic violence while the intimate relationship between couples was almost nonexistent when they lived in tents due to lack of privacy.

The most important change that was highlighted by all groups is having their own wash facility and toilet, this feature for the blocks housing unit changed everything in their opinion. People with disabilities said having a wash facility in their own block unit made their life easier as they struggled when using the public wash facilities in the camp, improving their personal hygiene and cleanliness.

2. Design and infrastructure

When asking participants about their opinion about the design of the block unit's, and what improvements they experienced in terms of access to wash facilities and hygiene. Female participants stressed four key differences including cooking, personal hygiene, laundry, and infrastructure. Where in their old settlement they had to walk for a long distance to reach wash facilities, besides, they were not comfortable there as they were exposed to the camp residents while doing laundry. While People With Disabilities(PWD) highlighted how their access to wash facilities and hygiene was improved under the new block design.

additionally, how it preserved their dignity and privacy, where they do not need to ask for people help in order to go to WASH facilities or take a shower and save them (petty feeling) look by other residents.

PWD noted that due to the nature of their previous settlement they could not even eat right or cook, as it is hard to preserve food, besides, they used to worry about asking people to bring them food, as they get bothered or troubled with their requests. Now things are different, the new block units have enabled them from cooking, eating right, and not bothering other people with their request for meals or food. The new block unit design provided better camp infrastructure, the newly paved roads have facilitated people with disability movement in the camp, from and to their housing unit. Nevertheless, other residents noted the same thing, while previous roads were bumpy and full of holes. One major change to PWD lives was the WASH facilities in their housing unit as they are made with PWD needs in mind, while the previous WASH facilities were not, and they were too far from their tents.

Ultimately, 100 % of participants shared that the roof design made from a plastic sheet exposed them to harm during heavy rainfall through the leakage from the roof and the need of changing the plastic sheet since it is torn off upon the heavy rainstorm.

Safety and Security

While all respondents stressed how the block housing units increased their safety and security, girls and PWD, in particular, experienced a huge change in terms of safety and security, especially that they do not need to go for long trips to reach WASH facilities, nor they live in open tents anymore. Having their own WASH facility included in their block made a huge difference in their safety instead of the shared ones that were used before.

Boys, Girls, and Women's safety increased as they now can stay up at night with no fear of being harassed or attacked since they live in a closed block that provides them with a sense of security and protection, not like the tents they used to live in.

Another point was highlighted by most male respondents (80%), before block units, the tents were in danger of catching fire because of wind, now it is safer as it will not be the case with block units. The same was flagged by women as they expressed how they feel safer cooking in a block unit as they do not fear tents catching fire from the cooking fire. Participants noted several rape incidents in their camp before moving to block units, due to lack of lighting, privacy, and the distant WASH facilities. While there were no rape incidents reported after moving to block units.

On the other hand, all participants (100%) shared that they would feel more secure if the roof would be made from Concrete or more resistant materials instead of plastic sheets.

Proposed Technical Design for the shelter unit that is approved by the donor

Prior to any sheltering intervention in a humanitarian context, bill of quantities, scope of work, and technical specification shall be provided to the donor that supports any relevant project/intervention. Below is the submitted technical specifications and design of the concrete block shelter unit, that have been approved by the donor who is funding a shelter project in Atmeh Camp – northwest Syria:

- Foundations: consist of crushed rock and mass concrete.
- Floor: consists of iron network molding with concrete after stacking and compaction.
- Walls: are made of half-filled concrete blocks for construction with a

length of 40 cm, a height of 20 cm, and a width of 15 cm for the target unit.

- Caliber: One bag of cement must make no more than fifty-five blocks.

- Doors: divided into two types with different dimensions:

- External doors: are made of iron doors with handle, locks, glass and all accessories.

Internal doors: for kitchen, rooms, and bathrooms are made of PVC material (polyvinyl chloride).

- Windows: will be made of PVC materials.

- Roof: The roof is made of an iron profile, plastic sheet, and waterproof tarpaulin sheet for insulation. The insulation is made of XPE/EPE foam with aluminum foiled.

- Finishing: All shelter units will have cladding inside with cement plaster works in addition to providing it with a terrazzo sink, squat toilet, faucet, stainless steel drain, and water tank.

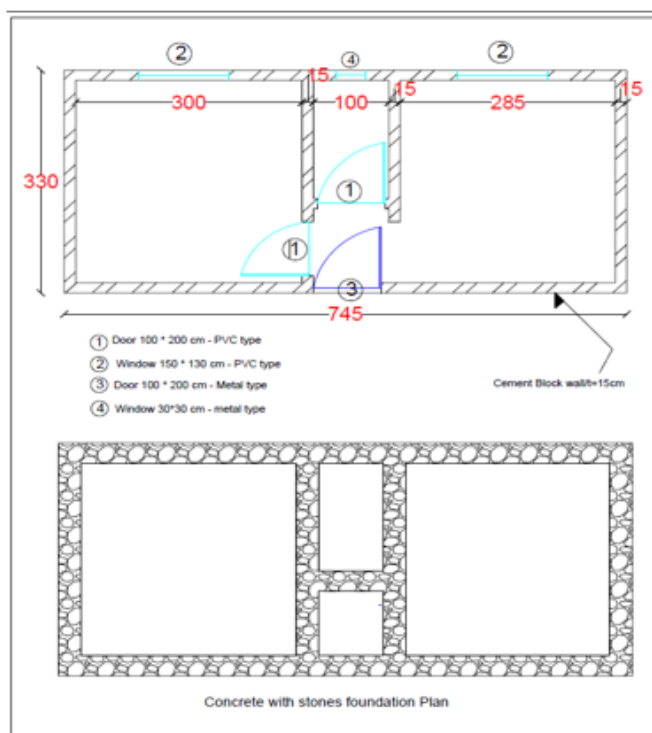


Figure 3 Shelter unit plan/donor recommendation

This design and technical specification ensure the temporality of shelter units in such a context, which meets the requirements and avoids the existence of breakthroughs among any emergency shelter intervention in Atmeh Camp.

However, these specifications have been rejected by the local authorities; insisting on enlarging the area of shelter units to be at least 40 m² rather than 25 m²

as has been proposed by the donor. In addition to rejecting the plastic roof for shelter units, They requested the change of the ceiling type of shelter unit to be made from Reinforced Concrete as it provides more sustainability against the weather conditions, and improves the living conditions of Atmeh camp population.

Suggested Shelter Designs to manage the the conflict

In order to manage this conflict, we came up with new designs with different materials for shelter roofs and technical specifications. Therefore, these designs will be provided to the donor with the outputs of FGD conducted.

As the reinforced concrete type of roof is not acceptable by the donor at all; and according to the local authorities conditions on the design and technical

1- Single Shelter Unit, area= 36 m2

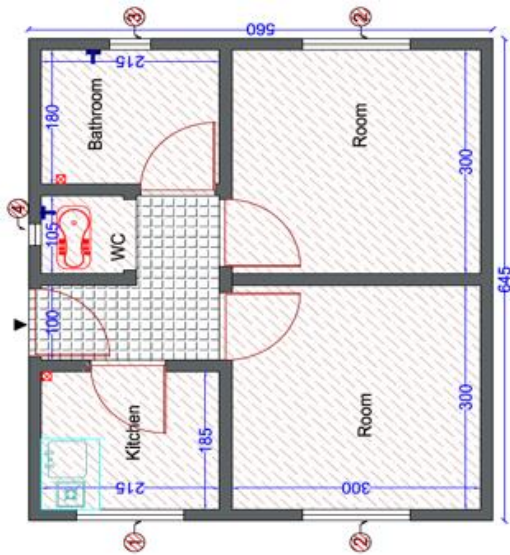


Figure4 - Single Shelter Unit

2 Double Shelter Unit, area= 71 m2

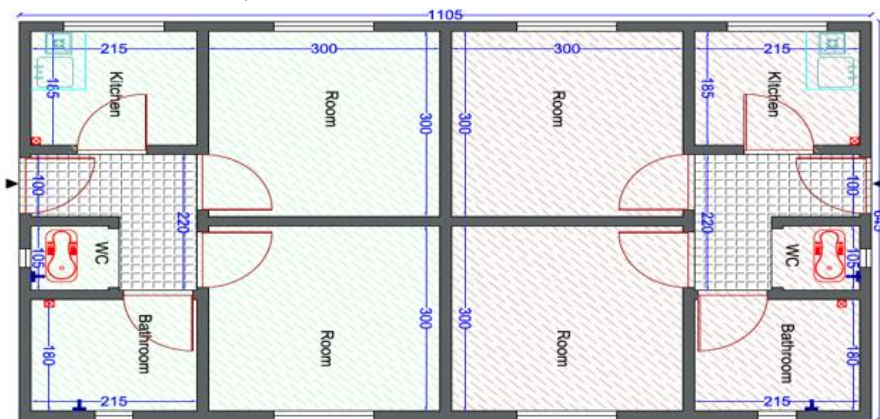




Figure 5 - Double Shelter Unit,

points, we suggested two options for the enlarged area of shelter design (Single Shelter Unit & Double Shelter Unit). To get approval from the local authorities, and donors with changing the ceiling material but not to be made from reinforced concrete, but from different materials shown in table.1. This may build a consensus view between both parties.

The suggested designs;

Table. 1 Types of roof sheets have been suggested to the local authorities:

#	Roof Type	Samples of Roof Sheets
1	Corrugbit Sheets	
2	Zinc Galvanized Corrugated Steel sheets	

CONCLUSION

The Focus Group Discussion responses highlight a significant improvement in beneficiaries' lives in terms of security, protection, privacy, and access to services after moving to concrete block shelter units. Participants' feedback indicates a high satisfaction rate with block unit approach of intervention suggested a possible solution for the main controversial points regarding the design conditions of the shelter unit between the donors and the local authorities of Atmeh camp.

This approach was launched by proposing a new modular design and technical specification that can meet both parties' (Local authorities & donor) requirements;

- Single Concrete Block Shelter Unit, 36 m² of shelter area, and the roof is

modality and the positive impact of moving to block units had on their lives, especially for women, girls, and people with disabilities. However, it is highly recommended to change the ceiling type from plastic sheet to concrete or a more resistant material.

Following the outputs of conducted FGD, this made of either Corrugbit Sheets or Zinc Galvanized Corrugated Steel Sheets.

- Double Concrete Block Shelter Unit, 71 m² of shelter area, and the roof is made of either Corrugbit Sheets or Zinc Galvanized Corrugated Steel Sheets.

These modular technical designs of concrete block shelter unit will be presented to both parties to get their approval. In this scenario, if we get the approvals, IDPs in Atmeh camp will be served rapidly with adequate shelter assistance, and many wide-range funds can be provided for different projects in many sectors. As a recommendation for

further studies, there is a need to find a tool/methodology that can keep the cooperation in-situ between the donors and the local authorities in north-west Syria IDPs' camps, for better humanitarian services.

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