# 10.0 Tents or tarpaulins?

After disasters there is often a high demand for tents from affected people, media and local politicians. Increasingly the humanitarian community supplies large quantities of tarpaulins instead of family tents. Whether considering camps, dispersed shelter needs or urban situations it is important to consider the practicalities and lessons from previous responses before choosing to use family tents or other options.

Before selecting either family tents or tarpaulins, **consider first if people can rent or find alternative accommodation, or if they can easily buy what they need from the local markets**. If so, cash programming and support to host families is likely to be a more effective intervention (although sometimes host families require additional space, which can be provided by shelter materials).

## When tents, when tarpaulins?

Tents should only be used when there is a good justification for their use. As shown overleaf, family tents are considerably more expensive, bulky and heavy than shelter kits with tarpaulins. Their procurement is typically much more difficult. **For the same price emergency shelter kits can provide shelter for 5 to 15 times more households than family tents**, depending largely on transportation costs.

Whether family tents or tarpaulins are chosen, it’s important to consider the accompanying programming needed to achieve the desired outcomes of providing adequate and safe shelter. Information must be provided about how to appropriately use the items provided, and support provided to the more vulnerable to put up tents or shelters. Shelters should be arranged in a way that provides sufficient space and safety, which may require site planning. Water supply, gender-separated toilets and adequate drainage should be in place. Access to necessary services (such as maternal health services) should be possible. **Neither family tents nor shelter kits are a complete solution, or gender-sensitive, by themselves.**

#### Key considerations

* **Space:** Tents require a defined amount of space to set up. If that space is not available, tents are not suitable. Tarpaulins can be used to make shelters in smaller spaces. While this may not meet space standards (e.g. SPHERE), it is often the only option. In many urban areas sufficient space for tents is not available, although tents may be suitable in some urban or peri-urban situations.
* **Framing materials:** When framing materials can be locally found (e.g. wooden poles or salvaged bricks) an emergency shelter kit can be used to build a tent-like shelter or a more durable shelter for a fraction of the cost of providing a tent. If framing materials cannot be found, it is often still preferable to use shelter kits and provide cheap framing materials from local markets.
* **Flexibility:** Tarpaulins can also be used to make emergency repairs to damaged houses and can be used for a variety of other purposes. Tarpaulins are more likely to be useful in recovery as well as in the emergency. It is cheaper and easier to patch and repair makeshift shelters made with tarpaulins; it can be very difficult to repair damage to tents. It is also harder to upgrade tents gradually than it is makeshift shelters. It is very rarely feasible to recover tents once distributed; it should not be assumed they can be taken back from recipients.
* **Speed:** It is likely to be quicker to procure and distribute tarpaulins, but tents are quicker to erect.
* **Temperature, climate & weather:** In cold climates it can be easier to prepare a tent for winter (‘winterise’ the tent) than more makeshift shelters, but only if you have the right type of tent. Tents are typically highly water-proof as soon as they are installed, while make-shift shelters require more care to ensure they are water-proof.
* **Politics:** Use of tents can have significant political connotations. It is important to understand this, as some governments may require or prohibit the use of tents.
* **Beneficiary choice:** Tents may often be preferred by affected people. People should be given the information to make informed choices, and their preferences taken into account.

## Logistics & procurement

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Family tents | Tarpaulins | Emergency Shelter kits |
| Description | A variety of designs of frames with fabric coverings of different materials, 18m2 covered space | Woven plastic sheets of high density polyethylene (see CARE specification) | 2 tarpaulins, rope and optional fixings and tool kit |
| Cost | Typically $300-500 | Typically $15-25 | Full kit typically $50-70 |
| Weight | 55kg | 4.2kg | Full kit 20kg |
| Volume | 0.28m3 | 0.0112m3 | Full kit 0.06m3 |
| Expected life span | 1 year | 2 years | 2 years |

#### Key considerations

* **Transport costs:** Transport costs may be significantly higher than the costs of the items you are transporting. This is especially the case with heavy or bulky items.
* **Distribution:** It must be understood how the items will be distributed, and how the ‘last mile’ transportation will be done. If people have to carry items from a distribution, weight and volume is critical.

#### Procurement

CARE has a framework agreement for international procurement of tarpaulins, from Reltex, [www.reltex.net](http://www.reltex.net). There is a standard CARE specification for tarpaulins (see this specification for Reltex contact details). Large quantities can typically be supplied in days. Most tarpaulins available do not meet required specifications and won’t be durable enough; considerable care is needed if tarpaulins are procured from other suppliers. Contact the CARE Emergency shelter team for support if procuring tarpaulins.

CARE also has a framework agreement for procurement of tents, from multiple suppliers. **Delivery of large numbers of standard specification tents can take many weeks**. Before procuring tents, contact the CARE Emergency Shelter Team and CARE USA procurement team for support.

## Related documents

* [CARE standard specification for tarpaulins/plastic sheeting](http://minerva.care.ca/livelink1/livelink.exe?func=ll&objaction=overview&objid=4404596)
* CARE Emergency Shelter Guidance Note 4.0: Household Non-Food Items
* CARE Emergency Shelter Guidance Note 5.0: Shelter & Household NFI Distributions