A Harvest of Hope: Roots of Peace Celebrates 10 Years

Heidi Kuhn

Roots of Peace

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Geneva Diary: Report from the GICHD

The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining provides operational assistance to mine action programmes and operators, creates and disseminates knowledge, works to improve quality management and standards and provides support to instruments of international law.

by Ian Mansfield [ Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining ]

Land Release Workshop
On 20 and 21 June 2007, a workshop focusing on the topic of “Land Release” was held at the GICHD and attended by experts from all sectors of the mine-action community—national, United Nations, nongovernmental organisations and commercial.

The workshop drew on the diverse experience of the attendees to develop a clearer perspective of the issues related to land release policies. This relates to land that had previously been thought to be suspect, but upon further investigation, can be released without full clearance. Government officials and practitioners who have already developed and implemented clear methodologies for use in their countries, as well as those with political, operational and implementation experience, shared their knowledge with the workshop participants. The subject was discussed in the context of risk management and its applicability to these processes.

The consensus was clear that more efforts need to be made to speed up and legitimize processes and provide a more effective environment in which to undertake clearance. A handbook documenting best practices was released in late 2007, and the GICHD will continue to work in these areas to provide further guidelines.

New “Guides” Published
In April 2007 the GICHD published its revised and updated Guide to Mine Action and ERW. Building on previous editions, this latest version includes references to explosive remnants of war and also includes new chapters on development approaches to mine action planning, as well as evaluation. The Guide was released in Arabic at the Eighth Meeting of States Parties in Jordan in November 2007, and the French and Spanish editions will be available in early 2008.

The GICHD also released the Guide to Cluster Munitions in November 2007. This new booklet explains in plain language the types and characteristics of cluster munitions, their implication for clearance programmes and the needs of victims. It also addresses the current, ongoing efforts in international law to ban or restrict the use of cluster weapons.

Linking Mine Action to Development
In June 2007, the GICHD co-organised a two-day workshop in Cambodia, in cooperation with AusAid and the United Nations Development Programme, bringing together around 40 mine action and development practitioners from the region. A similar workshop was held in Yemen in November. The aims of the meetings were to:

- Deepen understanding of the rationale for and benefits of linking mine action with development cooperation
- Share experiences and lessons learnt from relevant programmes and projects in the region
- Discuss what is needed to strengthen those linkages further and to examine the feasibility and opportunities for replication and expanding the projects
- Identify the main obstacles for successful cooperation and linkages in the past
- Identify what needs to be changed, improved or done differently in the future, and how

The discussions and presentations at the workshops emphasised the need for having decisions on evidence and the importance of demonstrating and advocating for greater linkages between mine action and development to key target audiences. A couple of specific regional issues were also identified. Full details of the Linking Mine Action and Development project can be found on the GICHD Web site at www.gichd.org.

See Endnotes, page 112

Kuhn: A Harvest of Hope: Roots of Peace Celebrates 10 Years

Roots of Peace focuses on clearing mined farmland areas and specializes in rebuilding these areas for farmers. To aid this process, the organisation promotes the growing of sustainable and high-value crops. This article describes some of the organization’s successful efforts in Afghanistan and argues the effectiveness of its approach for future mine-action efforts.

by Heidi Kuhn [ Roots of Peace ]
The concept of restoring vineyards to war-torn lands was expanded to the soils of Afghanistan where fresh grapes and raisins yielded alternative livelihoods for farmers. Roots of Peace has removed landmines and restored vineyards that once provided the “rootstock” for the famous Thompson seedless grapes that American children enjoy in their school lunches.

Roots of Peace in Afghanistan

During our visit to Afghanistan in October 2006, the Roots of Peace driver picked up our team at 4 a.m. to escort us to the Shomali Plain north of Kabul—the former frontline between Soviet and Taliban forces. Today the area is filled with vineyards, a direct result of six years of work by Roots of Peace.

The Shomali Plain once had some of the richest agricultural land in Afghanistan, producing over 40 varieties of grapes that were Afghanistan’s primary export to India and Pakistan. Most of these vineyards were lost during the 30 years of conflict and subsequent drought, because landmines prevented farmers from returning to their land. The Soviets left behind vast areas of abandoned farmland which were lost during the 30 years of conflict and subsequent drought, because landmines prevented farmers from returning to their land. The Soviets left behind vast areas of abandoned farmland which were lost during the 30 years of conflict and subsequent drought, because landmines prevented farmers from returning to their land.

As the sun began to rise amidst Koh Baba mountain range, the gourmets were illuminated in golden light. I was warmed by both the sun and the knowledge that Roots of Peace has helped transform this region. A harvest of hope has been realized, as grateful Afghan farmers greeted us in the village of Shakeradar, thanking us for our support. Since our fundraising efforts began in 2001, Roots of Peace has funded demining activities that have removed over 100,000 landmines and pieces of unexploded ordnance from over 80 vineyards, several villages, water wells and irrigation canals. As soon as a house or patch of land was cleared, farmers and their families eagerly moved back in, greatly relieved to finally leave the refugee camps to reclaim their homes and restore their livelihoods.

When Roots of Peace began working with grape farmers in the Shomali Valley in 2004, the majority of farmers were growing grapes that were ideal for sun-dried raisins—a good business 30 years ago. But during the years of civil conflict, the world changed. Afghan products lost their position in the world market and Afghan farmers had few options and little opportunity to retrain. Roots of Peace’s solution to increase farmers’ incomes was to shift farmers from low-value raisins to high-value table grapes. One practice introduced to farmers was to create a portion of their crop to grape rather than brown raisins or by grafted Tajik or Moldova varieties onto their existing Kishmish vines and selling the resulting fruit as fresh grapes rather than raisins. We left the village of Shakeradar and continued on our journey through the Shomali Plain. The elders of the Qala Rey village were patiently awaiting our arrival and proudly gave us a tour of their newly established nursery, created with the assistance of Roots of Peace. Rows of grafted table grape vines, kishmish khan, light grapes, desserts, pomegranates, and various plant varieties were a living library of the once thriving Afghan Garden of Central Asia. Cuttings from these varietals were now being sold to neighboring farmers, allowing alternative agricultural livelihoods to thrive. This is the future for Afghanistan.

Roots of Peace Program Model

Demine: Clear landmines and unexploded ordnance from agricultural lands and access roads.

PLANT: Assist small landholder farmers to move from low-value, perennial crops in varieties demanded by the local, regional, and export markets. This includes technical training, nursery systems, post-harvest processing and association support.

REBUILD: Develop all aspects of the farmer-to-market value chain by establishing links to processing and markets, and meeting international quality and phytosanitary standards.

Following our tour of the nursery, the village elder—an 80-year-old man with weathered skin, a white beard and turban—sailed us beneath the shade of the trees and proudly presented a hand-carved wooden eagle as a symbol of gratitude along with the Bayram farmer honoring Roots of Peace for restoring their agricultural dreams. My traveling companion, Taifee, was stunned by the number of men lining the streets waiting to catch the colorfully decorated buses taking them to distant locations for jobs to earning a good living. He was inspired by the number of men lining the streets waiting to catch the colorfully decorated buses taking them to distant locations for jobs to earning a good living.

Heidi Kuhn, Founder and CEO of Roots of Peace, began the organization in 1997. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, she focused on political economics of industrial societies. Kuhn has been recognized by numerous awards including the Humphrey Award for Public Service, the World University Award in Political Economics and Social Entrepreneurship, the National Jefferson Award for Public Service, the World University Award in Political Economics and Social Entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

Afghanistan’s recent history has left it one of the poorest countries in the world. Agricultural development will play a long way to improve Afghan lives, and Roots of Peace is proud to help Afghanistan achieve its potential—one farmer at a time—to return hope to a country in transition.

References

72 Notes from the field | Journal of Mine Action | spring 2008 | 11.2 | 73

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