An Alternative Perspective on Landmines and Vulnerable Populations

Shelby Weitzel
College of the Holy Cross

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MAIC, the Catalyst

JMU’s MAIC is especially proud of the role it has played in facilitating partnerships and highlighting capabilities and contributions. Often, as in Bangkok or Miami, the MAIC has conducted conferences dedicated to bringing together various groups in a region who we felt could learn from each other. We try to spot these opportunities whenever we can and do our best to bring diverse groups closer together for integration and coordination. Such a meeting occurred in Tampa, Fla., in 2000, when militaries from 27 countries working on landmine clearance came together to share ideas and commonalities. It has also happened in every Senior Managers Course we have taught.

In Summary

As I sit here and allow the sights and sensations of the past 10 years to drift by, I realize two things: that in spite of my efforts to do so, I cannot possibly recall more than a few of JMU’s achievements. Most of them are not measurable—ah yes, the final obstacle to gauging effectiveness of our programs “can only be measured by the smiles on the faces” of a reclaimed people. Secondly, our (all of us involved in mine action) efforts are indeed performing one action, one person, one event at a time, making the “whole” quite indiscernible from the component parts. Mine action is a little like looking at an American quilt. You can admire the details that go into its making, but when you step back to look at the whole, the component parts are lost in the overall beauty.

It is our hope that over the past decade we at the JMU MAIC have helped stitch this wonderful quilt together and that our contributions, as subjective as they may be, have helped give it shape, beauty and function.

Dennis Barlow, Director of the JMU MAIC since 1997, is a retired U.S. Army Colonel who previously was the Director of Humanitarian Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the first leader of the Humanitarian Demining Task Force for the Pentagon. He has coordinated civil-military actions with NGOs and the United Nations in Panama, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kurdistan and Haiti.

An Alternative Perspective on Landmines and Vulnerable Populations

By offering a different view on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines’ dominant message concerning mine action, this article presents an argument for possible alternatives. The author brings up such points as a lack of discussion and an acceptance of facts without proper checking of research. In addition, suggestions of constructive use of landmines in the defense of vulnerable populations are made to refute the idea of a necessary worldwide ban.

by Shelby Weitzel [College of the Holy Cross]

People living in areas infested with landmines are quite aware of the impact these mines have on their well-being. For those of us living in “the developed world,” public awareness of the impact of landmines is due largely to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. From this campaign we have learned of the physical, psychological, economic and environmental damage caused by landmines left over from past conflicts. We have also learned of ways in which, contrary to the dictates of responsible use, landmines are used to terrorize civilian populations. That the most vulnerable populations in the world sustain much of this damage makes this senseless violence particularly heinous.

From what we have heard, we might easily infer that landmines are inherently problematic. However, focusing solely on these harms gives the false impression that only bad, unfortunate consequences result from landmine use. Furthermore, these arguments fail to consider that bad, perhaps worse, consequences can result from a failure to
Stigmatization of the production and use of landmines exacerbates the vulnerability of at least three possible explanations for this, have also have been and continue to be constructive.

As long as explanation Nos. 2 and 3 remain viable, we should be cynical of No. 1. I will focus on explanation No. 2.

The strategy of ban proponents is fairly clear. According to Canadian Deputy Permanent Representative Ambassador to the United Nations Gilbert Laurin, “Measuring the landmine survivors—most of them civilians and almost all of them children—is the best way to dispel forever the myth of ‘responsible use’ of landmines. It is the most powerful way of convincing all states that an outright ban on this weapon is the only feasible way forward.”

The landmine survivors are not there merely to attract attention, although that is a necessary first step. Their plight is to be taken as a moral argument that refutes any claims that landmines can be regulated or designed to prevent such incidents from happening in the future.

Most of us will never meet a landmine survivor, so we see no direct photos and are presented with disturbing details of their suffering. Without the photos, many people could not begin to comprehend what is at stake for a landmine victim; the images jar us from our complacency. One scholar describes this as “priming” the audience.

Problems with the strategy emerge after the audience has been printed. The audience has not merely acquired new facts with which to make more informed judgments. Emotional reactions to the photos include shock, disgust and anger. Fortunately, these reactions urge us to help. Unfortunately, because the photos and stories are shown in the context of supporting the ICBL, the ICBL has commandeered allegiance to the victims by linking the argument to the audience.

The implication is that if one believes that landmines might serve useful purposes in present and future contexts, then one must not be taking seriously enough the trauma inflicted on children resulting from landmines in conflicts. Believing this, many people are reticent to express skepticism.

The lack of discussion also allows under-substantiated, if not outright indefensible, claims to go unchallenged. Cited figures exaggerate the number of mines deployed, the likely costs of demining and the expected number of civilian and deminer injuries. Other claims are technically correct but function as distortions because they are taken out of context. As Kenneth Rutherford, Co-founder of Landmine Survivors Network, explains, “Many of the statistics generated by NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] are biased and, more significantly, regurgitated by the media and policymakers without proper fact-checking and research. Some of the over-inflated figures have become so widely used that original sources and methodological data-collection techniques are unknown.

In summary, “some landmine figures are repeated so often that they are now regarded as fact.” There are good reasons to question the accuracy of these “facts.” If we don’t know how they were gathered, then we can’t be sure if they are unmitigated extrapolations from data we don’t know who conducted the research; then we can’t be sure that the research design and interpretation of the data are unbiased. Concern for landmine victims is laudable, but not if ignorance or abuses the truth to the greatest possible extent.

Lastly, the lack of balance in the debate has allowed the blurring of distinct issues. The ICBL reports on “the problem” as if there were only one. If there is only one problem, then we need only one solution—terrorism.

The real picture has been distorted. We can begin to clear away the hyperbole by recognizing that the strategy of using photos to promote an anti-landmine agenda is a red herring. No one involved in landmine issues is “against” the vulnerable populations that are being victimized. Major military personnel in past campaigns to protect civilian populations, affected by the use of landmines in conflicts, are the victims, not the engineers who design “smart mines” with self-destruct or self-deactivating mechanisms. Proponents of the ICBL simply do not promote an exclusive claim to concern for the civilian victims of mines.

The unwillingness to question arguments put forth against present landmine use furthers the myth that one can easily go on. When someone in a position of authority claims that landmine survivors will “dispel forever the myth of responsible use,” we ought to argue that landmines have “fact served to protect vulnerable populations.”
Protecting vulnerable human populations. The ICBL has done a great service in raising awareness about the damage caused by landmines. Much of their case rests on the fact that mines do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. As we know, the damage extends beyond the physical injuries themselves. The social stigma and the added economic burden that a loss of a productive person creates for victims and their families are additional harms.

Further harm results not from actual detonations, but from the belief that landmines are present in the area. The threat of mines blocks access to vital resources such as land, water, housing, public buildings, infrastructure and transport. Avoiding injury requires curtailing or refraining from securing or entering the affected area. To make matters worse, mined roads prevent the transport of goods once collected or grown, thereby precariously in- come and trade.

However, while landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group contained within a confined territory, so too can they be used to protect a group within a circumscribed territory by keeping danger- ous persons out. Landmines were originally intended for purposes of defense, the fact that some now use them on the offense does not mean that landmines cease to play this defensive role.

Protecting vulnerable populations from armed forces. Whether or not one believes a line between combatants and noncombatants can or should be maintained, the fact is many aggressive parties are willing to force noncombatants into their conflicts. Whether the noncombatants are “innocent” or are implicated by association and by pro- viding indirect support to combatants, they require defense. To the extent landmines help to provide that defense, they protect children and farmers, etc., those people who tend to be the focal point of the humanitar- ian campaign to ban landmines.

If we take the moral argument against all landmine use seriously, then we have to conclude that it is wrong to use mines to defend those populations. If we join sup- porters of the ICBL in stigmatizing land- mine use, we must also stigmatize people who want to defend these populations. We would have to stigmatize people who are glad mines are used to defend them from rape and murder. We would have to stigmat- ize families of soldiers who are glad that their spouses and children have one more means of ensuring that they come home.

Since for the moment the choice to use mines is morally equivalent. Even so, what we war- rants is education, not vilification. But there are many cases where the choice to use mines was not mistaken; the choice to use mines saved lives. For instance, it was thick belts of landmines that protected thousands of resi- dents in Sarajevo from meeting the same fate as Serbostrians. Perhaps next to the photos of people who were injured by landmines, we should add the photos of women and girls who were not raped, and fathers and sons who were not removed in the night.

Self-defense of vulnerable popula- tions. Although proponents of the ICBL often work in or come from countries af- flicted by landmines, the framework that they have developed does not seem to take into account all that it should. There is something wrong with the strategy to the extent that it includes vilifying those who try to protect parties who do not wish to be included in conflicts. But perhaps an even more troubling problem pertains to cases of landmine use, which the general public tends not to hear about. The way one learns of these cases is by speaking to people in the field: defenders and the people who live there. Consider the following example:

Cambodians have endured a longstand- ing problem with bandits. Kidnappings asso- ciated with the Khmer Rouge received attention but are now dismissed as a thing of the past. At least some of the deminers who were working in Cambodia in the 1990s know that at times it was the villagers who were laying mines to protect themselves from attack and theft by dispersed Khmer Rouge and other bandits.10 Travel Web sites assure us that it is now safe to travel to Cambodia. Perhaps for tourists, it is. Let us return to the case of Sarajevo. Deminers are currently assayed by maps showing where combatting armies deployed mines. However, their mission is considera- bly more difficult because not all mines were deployed by military forces. According to Dino Bulbulidas of the University of Western Australia, “There are mines that were not mined by the military but rather by civilians themselves. One example is that of houses and gardens, more or less isolated, [that] were mined by their owners for protection out of fear of being attacked. The minefields of Sarajevo, in reality, are many more than those marked on the maps.”11 These were civilians using mines to protect themselves while United Nations peacekeep- ers watched as everything these citizens held dear was being destroyed.

Conclusion. To demonize landmines per se is to de- monize not only the guerrillas and the op- positive regimes that are effectively judged by their aims and methods anyway. These are people who use mines for their own defense in the longstanding absence of ade- quate protection from the state, the military and even the United Nations. To pretend that landmines do not serve these purposes is to obfuscate the conditions of the vulner- able populations who are compelled to use them to defend themselves when no one else will.

Although people who oppose all land- mine use have not caused the acute prob- lems faced by vulnerable communities, I would suggest that the shifting of debate and the willful overlooking of such cases implic- its dangerous. The actual number of deaths and injuries has likely been higher but goes unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the

by John Lundberg [ RONCO Consulting Corporation ]

Sudan presents a variety of problems for mine- action operations. Control of the country, which was achieved in 1999 after a 21-year conflict with both the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), with government forces claiming the majority of the north and both sides maintaining some control in the south. Both the government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army used landmines throughout the civil war and as a result, landmines now pose a serious threat to civilians. For example, the United Nations reports that in 2004, landmines were responsible for more than 15 deaths and 30 injuries. The actual number of deaths and injuries has likely been higher but goes unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the

Tackling the mine crisis algae

A Firm Foothold: RONCO Operations in Sudan

Over the past four years, RONCO has established a continuing presence in Sudan, following the Nuba Mountains ceasefire, with the deployment of quick-response teams to conduct emergency mine-clearance tasks. Currently, RONCO is creating and sustaining an independent mine-clearance, survey and disposal capacity in southern Sudan on behalf of the United Nations. In addition to the threat of extensively mined roads and infrastructure, RONCO had to overcome a number of obstacles; including inclement weather, disease and an increasing security threat due to rebel activity.

Sudan’s austere and hostile conditions do not dissuade those to RONCO experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq, but as RONCO has discovered in those two countries, the long-term impact of the work far outweighs its challenges.