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The Role of the United Nations in Mine Action
An Interview with Ian Mansfield

Ian Mansfield of the United Nations Development Programme talks candidly about various mine action issues in the UN, how the UN organizes mine action, the role of host governments, donors, and the successes and challenges of coordinating integrated mine action activities with infrastructure development and capacity building.

by Margaret Busé, Editor

Ian Mansfield (IM): Mine action is relatively new for the United Nations; the whole process is only 10 years old. The first time the UN ever became involved with humanitarian demining was in 1988 in Afghanistan. Landmines were a big problem at the time the Soviets pulled out, and with 3 million refugees in Pakistan and 2 million in Iran, the UN recognized that this could lead to a great humanitarian tragedy once the refugees started to return. So, in October 1988, the UN launched an appeal for assistance to Afghanistan, and the appeal included an allowance for humanitarian demining. The UN also looked around for implementing partners, which is how we normally conduct projects, but there weren't any NGOs working in demining in Afghanistan at the time, so we decided to set up a local program. The first strategy of that was to train hundreds of Afghan men, to clear up their own villages, but that didn't work because for various reasons, and the refugees ended up not returning en masse anyway. Based on this early experience we had in Afghanistan, we realized that there was need for demining, as it was called then, to be done on a more controlled and organized basis.

Margaret Busé (MB): Where did you look for your technical capabilities for that project?

IM: In the early days, it was mostly military or ex-military personnel. Countries like the US, Canada, Australia—about seven countries in total, provided military experts to train the Afghans. After we realized though, that it could be done on a more structured basis, the UN oversaw the creation of a number of Afghan NGOs. This was very successful and today they now employ around 5000 people. One or two international demining organizations also get their start in Afghanistan around that time.

MB: What was your role?

IM: I was the UN Programme Manager for the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan from late 1991 until the end of 1995. Martin Barber (now the Chief of UNAMA) was also there at the time with the overall UN coordinating body.

MB: What was the next milestone for mine action?

IM: The next big event for the landmine issue was the Gulf War. The UN wasn’t involved in demining activities in Kuwait, but the war really brought landmines to the world’s attention. The way Kuwait dealt with the mines was interesting. They had lots of money, so they used commercial demining contracts worth about US$700 million. Within two or three years, the mines were cleared. That just goes to show that a landmine problem can be solved, if you’ve got the money and the resources; it’s not mission impossible. However — this situation obviously isn’t typical, because most of the countries that are mined are poor, so there have to be other ways to deal with the issue.

The next time the UN got involved in mine action was in Cambodia. After the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS) finished in 1993, the UNDP was asked to continue providing assistance. We helped to set up the Cambodian Mine Action Centre, which is now one of the largest national institutions. Since then, it’s just grown, Mozambique, Angola, Bosnia and so on, and even more countries since the Ottawa Treaty was signed, have all asked the UN for assistance with mine action.

That’s the headquarters, policy level. However, most of the UN mine action programs in the world are run by the UNDP on a day-to-day basis by agencies like UNMAS, UNDP, UNICEF and UNOPS.

MB: There are many UN agencies and departments with an interest in mine action. Who does what?

IM: In fact 11 Departments or Agencies of the UN have some responsibility, which just shows the breadth of the mine action issue. The UN is a very large organization, with 100,000 staff, public health, education, capacity building and so on. The primary department is Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) through a special office they established called the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS). That came about in September 1998, after a few years of specific responsibilities between DPKO and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). At that time, the Secretariat wanted to create a new policy unit that would do what in mine action in the UN, and DPKO became the focal point. OCHA will play a role, especially in the UN system, as they are the UN agency within the UN that deals with mine action issues. They also manage the Voluntary Trust Fund. Practically speaking, they also deal with emergency mine action missions and related responses usually linked to peacekeeping missions — they were the first ones out in places like Kosovo, Southern Lebanon, and the TsS between Ethiopia and Eritrea. They also organize assessment missions to countries. Colombia and Mississippi, for example, have both recently asked the UN for assistance, so UNMAS is putting together a team from the different agencies to assess what needs to be done. Another significant thing UNMAS has done is to develop (in conjunction with the GICHD) the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). UNICEF is responsible for ensuring that children are aware of, or mine risk reduction education as it is now called, and advocacy programmes. This seemed to lead on eventually from that, the Ottawa Treaty.

Other agencies like the World Health Organisation (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also get involved in mine action, as it relates to their various mandates. The WFP, for example, paid to have readjusted in Angola so they could deliver food and UNHCR has funded the clearance of houses in Bosnia so that refugees could return.

Finally, there’s UNDP — who I work for. We do capacity building in mine affected countries. At the moment, we’re helping 16 different countries with various types of programmes. The way it works is a little different to UNMAS. We don’t really run the show as such, but rather assist the government and the community to implement programmes. In Cambodia, for example, we established a department within the government there with funding, training and we also provide technical advisors. We try to do this in developing an overall mine action structure and capacity in the country — we don’t actually clear the mines from the ground outwards. UNOPS also looks at the socio-economic aspects of landmines. It’s important to know the benefits of spending money on mine action. If we clear this paddie field — will people start growing rice again and will that generate income and employment? We’ve done studies like that in Laos and Mozambique, for example.

MB: Is that type of study beneficial to donors?

IM: It is. In fact, studies like those have three objectives. One is to define the strategic mine action issues are having. The Landmine Impact Survey fairly well covers this area now. Second, we want to give managers the tools to let them set priorities. And finally, it gives us the chance to tell donors what we’re doing with their money. They’ll say, “We’ve given you a million dollars, what have you done?” We try to demonstrate that this has not gone to waste, but has alleviated many hectares, but more importantly this has led to so many jobs created, reduced transport costs, increases in income generated, etc.

MB: Do you carry out this work in-house?

IM: It depends on the situation. UNDP prefers to use what we call “national execution” where government ministry is responsible to oversee the UN project. We have this in about 5 of our country programmes. Otherwise, we tend to use the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS) to execute many of our projects. They’re basically a contracting agency within the UN, who specialize in international recruitment and project management services.

MB: Does UNOPS charge a fee for their services?

IM: They do. They’re not allowed to raise money directly, so they have to leverage the income by charging for their services. I always compare it to putting up a building, UNDP has the idea for a building and where it should go, we design it and arrange the money for it, then we need someone to build it for us, and that’s where UNOPS comes in. When we design a project in a country, we need technical advisors, specialized equipment procurement, service contracts, office equipment, all that sort of stuff — and UNOPS arranges all those sort of details.

MB: What are the criteria that the UN uses to prioritize mine action assistance to a country?

IM: The UN encourages all countries to sign the Ottawa Treaty, but they wouldn’t necessarily be excluded from receiving assistance if they hadn’t. In most cases, the humanitarian situation is an important criteria, and this is reflected in the UN policy. Sudan and Angola for example, haven’t ratified the treaty, but there was an obvious need to go in and...
help people, so projects were started. In both of these cases though, it's important to note that there were things that we wouldn't and wouldn't do. With the Afghan government admitting to still using mines for example, we wouldn't help the government, but we did help NGOs working there.

**MB: Mine action now covers a whole range of activities - clearance, stockpile management, education - how did you use the UN to get them from this integrated approach?**

**IM:** When Afghanistan started off, it was just clearance. We trained Afghans to clear mines, but first we had to find out where they were. So we set up an NGO to do surveys. Then, when refugees started to come back, we had to do something else. Of course there was always a need to assist mine victims. Also, when the Ottawa Treaty came along, stockpile destruction became an important part of the problem — you don't have to clear the mines if they don't ever get planted. So things really evolved according to the situation, and according to what we were seeing happening. It's probably fair to say though, that the concept of mine action has been around since the start, but the term was only formally defined in the 1998 UN policy on mine action.

**MB: What's happening in Afghan­istan at the moment?**

**IM:** Within the UN system, UNDP is responsible for leading the overall recovery effort there. In conjunction with the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, they call for project an out­line needs assessment and presented it to donors in Tokyo in January. It contained a section on mine action, which included that within 7 years and US$ 650 million, Afghan could be free from the impact of mines.

**MB: What is the implementation going to be?**

As I said before, UNOCHA has histor­i­cally been responsible for the oversight of the Mine Action Programme in Afghanistan (MAG). However, with the establish­ment of a new UN structure there, this may change, and UNMAS may take on a stronger role. The good things that the interim Government wanted was the UN to stay involved in mine action. UNDP will continue to give assis­tance with this in some areas, like funding, management training, rehabilitation of infrastructure and oversight of a Landmine Impact Survey (ILS).

**MB: How does the management training work?**

**IM:** We run a few different types of programmes, together with Cranfield University in the UK, we've set up some training courses for senior and middle managers of mine action programmes. In the first course, 14 senior managers from 14 different countries went to Cranfield. Since then we have conducted two more senior managers courses, and a number of middle managers courses. Everyone got on really well and at the end of this training, and we realised that this sort of in­teraction between nationals of mine af­fected countries was really valuable. So we decided to build on it and encourage this exchange of knowledge and ideas even more by setting up a staff exchange programme called MAX. For instance, Azerbaijan wants to begin a dog-detection programme; Afghanistan has the oldest dog programme; so why not send some­one from Afghanistan to Azerbaijan to spend some time teaching? Or for the new programme in Guinea-Bissau: why don't we send some Portuguese-speaking people from Mozambique there to dem­onstrate the database system? Basic­ally, this sort of thing is on the job training and about four exchanges are underway at present.

**MB: What about the Landmine Impact Surveys? Can you describe what happens there?**

**IM:** The surveys are very valuable tools for defining the socio-economic impact of landmines on communities. Informal market research in Afghanistan and Cambodia, for example, indicate that 50% of mine victims come from market gardening. The surveys are then conducted by local NGO's under the UN's guidance, and help then determine the impact of landmines in order to help the affected population. The surveys are generally conducted in villages and townships, and include questions about the socio-economic impact of landmines, such as the number of casualties, the amount of land lost, and the cost of rehabilitation. The results of the surveys are then used to inform the development of mine action programmes and to identify priorities for mine action. Additionally, the surveys provide valuable data for the UN to assess the effectiveness of its mine action programmes and to identify areas where further assistance is needed.
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MB: Does UNDP recommend the priority areas for mine action?

IM: Yes, through its country offices. UNDP has been encouraging governments to develop and implement mine action policies that are consistent with international standards and best practices. The focus is on clearing mine fields, providing assistance to affected communities, and facilitating reconstruction and development projects.

MB: How do you coordinate the activities of the different bodies involved?

IM: That's where an integrated, national policy is important. The government is the lead coordinator, with the support of UN agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Coordination is crucial to ensure that efforts are aligned and resources are maximized.

MB: What are some of the pros and cons of working with local NGOs?

IM: The big advantage is that they use local people, who are cheaper. They understand the local context and can often do the work more efficiently. On the other hand, NGOs may lack the technical expertise and funds necessary for some tasks.

MB: What would you say Kosovo is one of the biggest success stories in mine action?

IM: Without a doubt, the clearance of landmines in Kosovo was a remarkable achievement. It demonstrated that with the right approach and resources, even the most challenging environments can be cleared.

MB: By the sounds of it, for UNDP programmes to be successful, you need a stable government. Are elections part of the process of getting this stable government in place?

IM: That's one of UNDP's main roles. Security sector reform, governance issues, judicial reform, elections — anything with these types of things is what UNDP does all the time. By strengthening the government process in these ways, we believe that it will in turn lead to overall poverty reduction and human development.

MB: Some would say that capacity building is a myth — what do you think?

IM: It's definitely not. I am firmly in the camp that capacity building is necessary and successful, and you can particularly see this in countries like Mozambique and Cambodia. They're going to have a mine problem for years to come; the international community can come in and help to a certain point, but they will have a residual mine threat for a while yet, so we have to build capacity to help them deal with this. In other countries like Guinea-Bissau and Thailand, the mines aren't necessarily a huge problem, so it's harder to raise international interest — but it's still a problem. Using Guinea-Bissau as an example, we've only raised a couple of hundred thousand dollars for that programme, but with that money, we've provided an expert to help develop local skills and abilities. If we had US$5 million, we could fix the problem in 6 months — but we don't, so we have to come up with other ways. That's what capacity building is all about.

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National Mine Action Programs

MB: How do the UN agencies help to decide which areas are cleared first?

IM: They certainly help in the planning process due to their extensive local knowledge. The military are a good option for certain aspects of mine action, like clearance. They may not be good at mine awareness and education, but that doesn't mean that they should be excluded entirely. So UN policy was revised to allow for this in cases where there was overall civilian control of the national structure. It's important to note, though, that we won't pay the salaries of soldiers, but we may ask donors to buy the demining equipment, or pay for insurance.

Whatever work the military, and the NGOs for that matter, do, it needs to be coordinated. It's not much use clearing land that will not be used by anyone. Unfortunately, though, this still happens. In many cases as well, the government gets involved at this level too. At the provincial and district level in Laos, there are development subcommittees, and mine action representatives participate in these.

From our point of view, as long as we can assist NGOs by directing them to the areas that need a response, and as long as the work they do is up to a certain standard, and they report back on the work they do — fine. Of course NGOs are fairly independent, but this way of working seems to be effective. Kosovo, in particular, showed the benefits of a strong, central organization.

MB: With clearance priorities being determined by the government, or by UN assessment missions and surveys, where do community-based priorities fit in?

IM: The UN assessment missions are quite broad and answer questions like: what's the extent of the problem, which agency is best suited to handle it, that sort of thing. A landmine impact survey then gives you a closer look at which communities are worst affected within a country. It's still a national level understanding, though. When we work with NGOs to implement programmes on a local level, we're where the local communities come in and we expect the NGOs we're working with to take the priorities of communities into account when carrying out work.

MB: So the NGOs help to decide which areas are cleared first?

IM: They certainly help in the planning process to ensure that the work is done, take your pick... A donor can clearly see what the national priorities and activities are.

Some people feel that you need to wait for a full Landmine Impact Survey before you can even start. But that's not realistic. It means that they should be excluded entirely. So UN policy was revised to allow for this in cases where there was overall civilian control of the national structure. It's important to note, though, that we won't pay the salaries of soldiers, but we may ask donors to buy the demining equipment, or pay for insurance.

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MB: Would you say Kosovo is one of the biggest success stories in mine action?

IM: Definitely. A recent, independent evaluation acknowledged this, but also pointed out some advantages that that programme had. It was a small, contained area, there was lots of donor interest, and a strong, central UN coordination mechanism working under a UN Security Council Resolution. It's not always going to work this way, though. As I've said, UNDP has to be invited into a country and it then works to strengthen government capacity and ability. We definitely think this is the best way to work in most mine affected countries, but it can be difficult because of government ownership, and government priorities may differ from ours. It's an education process. What's important at times like this is the survey process, which allows us to say, in black and white, these are the worst affected communities. The government can't argue with that, it also leaves less room for corruption and misapplication of resources.

MB: So the Kosovo model would be hard to replicate?

IM: Not necessarily — the Afghan programme has been organized this way from the start. The UN is focusing on improving the coordination mechanism, and developing the NGOs to do the work. What is different in the countries that UNDP supports, is the need to work with governments, it often involves a much larger scale landmine threat spanning decades of conflict, and less of the media spotlight to assist the resource mobilization efforts.

MB: By the sounds of it, for UNDP programmes to be successful, you need a stable government. Are elections part of the process of getting this stable government in place?

IM: That's one of UNDP's main roles. Security sector reform, governance issues, judicial reform, elections — anything with these types of things is what UNDP does all the time. By strengthening the government process in these ways, we believe that it will in turn lead to overall poverty reduction and human development.