From Demining to Mine Action

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MINE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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Mine Action in the United Nations

The aftermath of the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 marks the start of the United Nations' involvement in mine action. In the early 1990s, programmes were started in Mozambique, Cambodia and Angola, and in 1996 in Bosnia. Today, the United Nations supports mine action in 35 countries. During the past 15 years, the United Nations has learned many lessons in mine action—some the hard way.

The terrible carnage caused by landmines in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Mozambique and Angola prompted civil-society organizations to take on the problem as an advocacy issue. New non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial companies sprang up to help confront it. The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention was negotiated under the leadership of sympathetic governments like Austria, Belgium, Canada and Norway and adopted in 1997, becoming known as the Ottawa Convention.

Also in 1997, the U.N. Secretary-General created the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) as part of a wider reform of the Secretariat by merging two small existing units in DPKO and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

UNMAS was mandated to be the focal point within the U.N. system and to work with agencies, funds, programmes and other Secretariat departments to put together coherent policies and practices, and to sketch out a workable division of labour among the different U.N. partners. Eleven different U.N. entities recognized that landmines affected their operations in some way and agreed to come together to rationalize and coordinate their activities in the Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action (IACG-MA).

Among those U.N. partners, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) played key roles. The UNDP became the lead agency for providing technical support to government mine action programmes. UNICEF took the leading role in what was then called mine awareness (now mine risk education), while UNMAS provided coordination support in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, in addition to its role as global focal point. These functions, along with those of the other U.N. entities, were outlined in detail in a policy document,[1] which was adopted by the IACG-MA and endorsed by the General Assembly in 1998.

Standards, Information Management and Coordination

One of the first and most important tasks that UNMAS took on was coordinating the production of internationally recognized standards for mine action to provide guidance for programmes and organizations to follow when conducting mine action operations. In addition, with huge amounts of information becoming available from all the field programmes, the requirement for a management system to store and process the information became a priority. Both these requirements were addressed with the help of the newly formed Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, together with many experienced personnel from affected countries, NGOs and commercial companies, and the development of the International Mine Action Standards. Today, we have integrated an information system into the programme, known as the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA), which is used in most of the mine action programmes around the world. As mine action programmes were being set up and implemented in various post-conflict environments, the impact that mines had on peoples and communities increasingly became a determining factor in prioritizing activities.

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Lessons Learned

Mine action has learned many of the same lessons as other sectors in the context of humanitarian and development assistance. The U.N. mine action team has sought to recognize and integrate these lessons into its operational, planning and policy guidelines. Some of the key lessons are listed below.

Lesson 1: Capacity- and institution-building efforts must consider sustainability and government commitment from the outset.

One of the early programmes, located in Cambodia, was established through the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia in 1992. While good donor support allowed for a large institution to be set up, the absence of early government commitment limited the sustainability and effectiveness of the programme. In Croatia, on the other hand, a light organisational structure was designed early-on during the United Nations Protection Force mission. Then, with the strong commitment of the government, the programme was easily absorbed within the national budget. Today, the Croatia Mine Action Centre is almost entirely self-financed.

Lesson 2: Peacekeeping and/or humanitarian interventions require maximum decentralization of operations and field-level oversight.

The U.N. experience in attaining operational flexibility and dexterity in peacekeeping and humanitarian contexts has been mixed. In Kosovo, the Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC)—integrated within the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo—was able to manage numerous implementers and projects simultaneously because it focused primarily on providing operational coordination, including task allocation, information management and quality assurance monitoring. The MACC decentralized its coordination function to senior partners amongst operators on the local level. The MACC also contracted core assets, such as mechanical systems and mine detection dog teams that could be utilized by all operators in order to speed up clearance activities. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, mine action activities conducted by non-governmental operators were primarily funded through grants issued through the Afghanistan Emergency Trust Fund (1990–2002) and the Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Action (VTF) managed by U.N. headquarters. Since 2002, a number of bilateral donors have contracted the same Afghan NGOs under a variety of arrangements for reconstruction-related mine clearance and other tasks. As the government assumes greater control over management of the programme, it will be important to ensure that prioritization and decision-making are effectively decentralized.

The lessons from previous deployments are now being integrated into the United Nations' mine action programme in Sudan, where commercial operators are being contracted for key tasks requiring flexibility and immediate response

alongside NGO partners funded bilaterally as well as through the VTF.

Lesson 3: U.N. mine action must function within an inter-agency policy and strategic framework.

The U.N. policy Mine Action and Effective Coordination has contributed to a greater synergy among the various actors in the U.N. system in mine action. The policy document was revised in early 2005 to integrate lessons learned and provide more guidance to U.N. staff in the field and at headquarters on common U.N. positions and individual functions. It also outlines the relationship between the U.N. country team and the New York-based IACG-MA. While the U.N. policy defines working relationships, the U.N. Mine Action Strategy 2001–2005 sets out the goals and objectives that the United Nations has set for itself. It offers benchmarks against which the United Nations measures its progress and reports to the General Assembly.

Lesson 4: The United Nations must be able to respond rapidly in emergency situations.

In 2003, the IACG-MA endorsed the Framework for Rapid Response, which established a mechanism that allows the deployment of two simultaneous coordination teams within 14 days of an emergency situation. UNMAS secured a reserve fund of close to $1 million (U.S.), which it can access immediately to recruit and deploy the teams. The Framework for Rapid Response was activated in Iraq in 2003, and its effectiveness was evaluated in 2004. The Framework has been further strengthened, principally in the areas of threat monitoring, victim surveillance and stakeholder consultation.

Lesson 5: Recognising the role of gender.

In 2004, UNMAS undertook a gender study, which has resulted in a set of gender guidelines for mine action. These guidelines are currently being field-tested. The systematic integration of gender considerations in mine action planning, operations and evaluations will ensure that the specific needs of all segments of affected communities are always considered.

Future Plans

Looking ahead, UNMAS hopes to improve upon its strategies and programs in the near future to maximize its success in mine action. Some of these improvements include those listed below.

Analyzing the problem, measuring its impact and planning to address it. The Landmine Impact Survey provides a remarkable tool for assessing the impact of mine contamination on affected communities; however, in most countries, it still provides only a snapshot. Recent work in Bosnia, for example, has shown how it can be used to obtain maximum benefit from limited mine clearance capacities, but this requires that the data be easily updated and manipulated. The IMSMA database in which mine action programmes store their data is now being re-engineered. The new IMSMA should offer government and U.N. programme managers the possibility to use their baseline data much more flexibly to describe the problem accurately, measure the reduction in impact as clearance operations proceed, and refine their plans for future work.

Engaging countries outside the AP Mine Ban Convention, broadening the focus from AP mines to include all mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). In several of the most seriously affected countries, clearance operations and mine risk education have reduced the number of new victims of AP mines to the point where ERW and AV mines pose greater risk. The adoption of Protocol V to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) in 2002 is a major step forward. States need to ratify it as quickly as possible so that it comes into force. Once that happens, states party could develop a forum parallel to that of the AP Mine Ban Convention Intersessional Programme, in which experience of dealing with ERW could be shared and new ideas and techniques explored. Since the CCW brings together many of the major countries still outside the AP Mine Ban Convention, this forum could produce valuable synergies for confronting the mine and ERW problem in a holistic way.

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Stopping mine use in the few countries where it persists. It is an indication of the extraordinary progress achieved in eight years that AP mines are now being used in so few countries. That suggests that a concerted effort could eliminate use entirely. Major focus would be on Colombia, Burma (Myanmar) and Chechnya (Russian Federation). Hopefully, India and Pakistan's improving relationship could see a joint commitment to no further use of AP mines in the future as well.

Mine action as a confidence-building and peace-building tool, and in demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR). There are now several examples in which mine action has been used as a confidence-building measure in divided countries. Recent experiences in the buffer zone in Cyprus, in southern Lebanon and in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan have shown what mine action can achieve. Such programmes also attract funding that might not normally be available for mine action. In Afghanistan, several hundred former combatants have taken part in mine action projects as part of the national DDR programme, many of them clearing mines around their own communities. This undertaking has many obvious benefits and has also been funded from resources not otherwise available for mine action. The above examples are two of the ways in which mine action can be integrated into post-conflict recovery programmes.

Recording the inexorable progress towards a safe environment. Finally, all those who have supported the extraordinary success of mine action and the anti-landmine campaign need regular proof that their efforts have achieved results. Statistics about dangerous areas, area cleared and numbers of victims are notoriously difficult to compile accurately, but improvement of tools at our disposal has continuously increased and UNMAS should be able to present a clearer statistical picture than what currently exists.

Conclusion

Despite regular warnings that public interest and government funding for mine action would quickly diminish after parties signed the Ottawa Convention and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines received the Nobel Peace Prize, the opposite is the case. Public interest remains high, as witnessed by the extraordinary success of the Adopt-A-Minefield campaign and other public/private initiatives, and funding for mine action continues to grow, as governments of mine-affected countries (as well as donors) recognize the importance of mine action as a precondition for sustainable post-conflict recovery.

Less than eight years after the signing of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in Ottawa, it is possible to imagine the day when AP mines will be a thing of the past—a tragic footnote in military history and in the memories of families torn apart. It is in our power to bring that day forward, by keeping unrelenting pressure on those who have not yet accepted the Convention while mobilizing maximum resources for the work of clearance, stockpile destruction, risk education and support to victims. ❖

See "References and Endnotes" on page 105

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