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## Handicap International 1995–2005: Learning How to Respond to the Needs of Mine-Affected Communities

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# Learning How to Respond to the Needs of Mine-Affected Communities

by Stan Brabant | Head, Policy Unit, Handicap International - Belgium |

**H**andicap International (HI) was born 23 years ago, in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. The organization was created in order to respond to the suffering caused by landmines and to provide support to people with disabilities in general. Ten years later, in 1992, HI was one of the founding members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL).

Simultaneously, the organization started developing mine action programs in the field.

HI members now work in about 60 countries, including 40 that are mine-affected. As an organization, it is active in various areas associated with all causes of disability, both traumatic (e.g., caused by landmines or road accidents) and infectious (e.g., caused by polio or leprosy). HI assists people with disabilities in developing countries and countries in a situation of crisis; therefore, it is not a typical mine action organization. Its main motivation in mine action is preventing the many causes of disability, so mine action only represents a small part of HI's activities. Solving the mine problem would actually allow HI to devote more resources to other important issues.

## HI Programs

The first HI mine action programs took place in the framework of the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC). HI quickly launched programs in other countries, such as Mozambique, Laos, Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A question HI keeps asking itself since then is whether these programs effectively respond to people's needs. A typical answer to that question is that any landmine or item of UXO cleared is going to save a life, but is that enough? What about the needs of mine-affected communities? In too many instances, clearance priorities were decided in national capitals, based on national plans, which too often focused on national-level issues, such as transport or infrastructure rehabilitation, with little consideration for the needs of the people living in remote mined areas.

In addition, in some of the mine risk education (MRE) programs, HI received thousands of requests for clearance and marking, channeled through MRE staff and volunteers. Responding



*With so many landmines in Cambodia, families like this one often live adjacent to minefields.*

to such requests required the development of mobile and multi-skilled teams that were more flexible than traditional clearance platoons. When the organization managed to provide such a response to people's requests, it discovered that it considerably strengthened its other activities, such as MRE, data collection and community-based rehabilitation. Since receiving requests, HI has been looking for ways to "stick" to the needs of mine-affected communities. In most cases, this maintenance has succeeded through a combination of MRE, data collection, marking and clearance. In some instances, such as in Cambodia, HI tried to go further and, together with CMAC, it developed a rather advanced approach that seeks to integrate a variety of responses including limited clearance (limited to areas defined by communities as absolutely key to their survival), village mapping, long-term marking (for example, concrete warning signs that are less likely to get stolen), UXO disposal, MRE and community liaison activities, land reallocation, and—prob-

bly the most important—a strong involvement of mine-affected communities at all stages of the process.

## HI Developments

Parallel to the development of its field-based mine action activities, HI developed its capacity to advocate on behalf of mine-affected communities, and its advocacy for a total ban on anti-personnel landmines started to become successful. In 1995, Belgium became the first country in history to ban anti-personnel mines. This achievement was a direct result of HI's advocacy work. It became obvious to the organization that there was a continuum between its work with mine-affected communities and the broader goal of a total ban on anti-personnel mines. Advocacy and field-work became complementary and reinforced each other. HI's work in the field gave it the data and the political will to advocate, while its advocacy work gave HI people in the field a strong sense

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Convention, as well as the new special law n.58/01 for mine action funding. INTERSOS MAU, the ItCBL and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs promoted the creation of a National Committee for Mine Action by gathering governmental and non-governmental actors involved in mine action.

### Training

In order to better prepare experts for the activities of mine clearance, INTERSOS has organised four courses for project managers and technical supervisors on principles and techniques of humanitarian mine clearance operations according to UNMAS standards.

The first course, held in 1997, was a residential course of two weeks aimed at integrating basic technical knowledge with the specific approach of humanitarian interventions and was formed by four modules: the humanitarian system, the context of operations, collaborations and relationships, and technical aspects. In February 2001, a second course was organised, with a theoretical part in Italy and practical training in the field, according to a programme defined on the basis of U.N. guidelines. The third course took place in May 2002 and trained about 20 people with previous technical experience for the specific context of humanitarian mine clearance operations. The

fourth course was organised in October 2004 and aimed to train project managers, technical supervisors and mine risk educators for humanitarian mine action activities according to the U.N. guidelines.

### Lessons Learned

After eight years of activity, INTERSOS has gained precious and valuable experience in the mine action sector. The following are some suggested considerations for future mine action activities:

1. Recent wars (in particular the Afghan and Iraqi ones) have confirmed that, in most cases, the real threat is represented by explosive remnants of war (ERW). We can say that 30 percent of the general danger is represented by mines, while 60 percent is by UXO and the last 10 percent by booby traps and others. The danger of CBUs is greater than that of AP mines, since they can explode at the slightest touch with terrible effects and they attract the interest of people selling explosives and metal.
2. If national economic resources are limited by the presence of UXO and mines, then it is necessary to clear them immediately, but a lot of time and economic resources are needed to do so; therefore, we think that in the next few years it will be necessary to prioritize available resources to conduct Technical Surveys,

which together with the LIS results can allow rapid interventions of area reduction and marking for future systematic clearance activities. In this way, large countries like Angola, Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan will get sufficient territorial resources to restart economic activities.

3. It is important for the international community to have available a rapid-reaction mechanism to better guarantee immediate interventions after conflict, in order to eradicate the dangerous ERW for the benefit of the local population and of all the people working in the field.
4. It is fundamental that all these activities are integrated with MRE activities for the at-risk population (people particularly at risk, such as workers—peasants, fishers and shepherds—who often directly face the threat of ERW). ♦

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that the mine problem could be solved, provided that civil society and governments worked together towards that goal. In some cases, its fieldwork generated strong civil-society initiatives in mine-affected countries, calling for a total ban on landmines. In Mozambique in 1994, for instance, HI collected 100,000 signatures to promote a ban on landmines together with associations of Mozambican veterans and people with disabilities. Also in Afghanistan in April 1996, together with landmine survivors, Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations, HI organized a major demonstration calling on the Taliban regime to stop using anti-personnel landmines. This demonstration was the first in 19 years in Kandahar; it took place while diplomats were meeting at a Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) session.

The continuum between advocacy and fieldwork took on a new dimension with the entry into force of the Ottawa Convention in March 1999. The emergence of an international norm banning the production, stockpiling, use and transfer of anti-personnel mines provided an extraordinary framework for HI's work, both in the field and at the international level. While

Article 6 of the Ottawa Convention generated resources for HI's field programs, HI could also start pressuring states to comply with the new norm. HI's involvement in the creation and governance of the *Landmine Monitor* system, together with a relentless effort to support universalization and implementation of the Ottawa Convention, even by non-signatories, was a source of major satisfaction for the organization.

### Resolutions

Combining international advocacy with mine action in the field can be tricky, though; for instance, what is HI to do when it learns that landmines are used (or even produced) in a country in which it is working? How should it cooperate with states that have not joined the Ottawa Convention, such as Laos, North Korea or the United States? What should HI do when a national legislation complying with Article 9 of the Ottawa Convention leads to a ban of clearance by villagers? How should HI promote Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention, while still concentrating its clearance efforts on priority areas?

So far, HI has sought to resolve these questions by looking back at the reason the organization was created: the provision of an appropriate

response to the needs of people with disabilities. Providing such response required pragmatism as well as a strong view of the organization's role and mandate. Questions still remain and are generally solved by dialogue, cooperation and careful listening to the needs of mine-affected communities.

Responding to the needs of people with disabilities is the reason HI was created 23 years ago. Responding to such needs in 2005 is more complicated than it was in 1995, because of the growing bureaucratization of mine action. During this 10-year period, though, HI has discovered that the mine and UXO problem can be solved, provided that the needs of mine-affected communities are the primary focus of the mine action community. ♦

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**Errata:** A country profile on Peru in issue 8.2 of the *Journal of Mine Action* (winter 2004) stated that the Organization of American States (OAS) reported 179 landmine casualties since 1995. The OAS did not collect this information. The Peruvian Anti-Personnel Mine Action Center confirms that there have been 302 recorded landmine casualties and 90 UXO injuries in Peru from 1992 to 2005. They also confirm the following: in 2001, two civilians were injured in a landmine incident at an electrical tower; in 2002 there were 12 people harmed in mine-related incidents and 19 people harmed in UXO-related accidents; and in 2003, 14 people were reportedly injured in mine-related incidents. The Peruvian army completed 28 demining objectives in Tumbes (19) and Piura (nine) along the northern border. From 2003 to 2004, the Peru National Police Force's Division of Countermine Security and the Naval Industrial Services were able to clear 43,000 mines around electrical towers.