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Marc Bonnet
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining

Helen Gray
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining

Giulia Matassa
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining

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DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL TRAINING CAPACITY: NON-TECHNICAL SURVEY TRAINING IN COLOMBIA

By Marc Bonnet, Helen Gray, and Giulia Matassa [GICHD]

In January of 2014, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) conducted its first non-technical survey (NTS) training course in Colombia with the objective of enabling participants to plan and conduct NTS. At the time, however, Colombia had the second highest number of landmine accidents in the world,¹ with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) producing explosive ordnance (EO) “mostly in the form of victim-activated improvised explosive devices.”² Descontamina,³ the National Mine Action Authority (NMAA), planned for fulfilling its *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC) commitments, and national dialogue was initiated on a *Plan de Choque*, “a plan of action” (i.e., *2014-2016 Humanitarian Demining Action Plan*) that would highlight the role of NTS in assessing the contamination of high-priority areas, which at the time were determined through analysis conducted by the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA).⁴

In its *2014-2016 Humanitarian Demining Action Plan*, the Colombian government presented⁵ NTS as the initial step in Colombia’s humanitarian demining efforts.⁶ Descontamina, also backed by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Colombia,⁷ argued that NTS as an initial “intervention” would not only inform technical survey (TS) and clearance but also bring clarity in determining the extent of the country’s mine contamination. The *2014-2016 Humanitarian Demining Action Plan* also called for national ownership through increased national investment of humanitarian demining activities, as well as cooperation as part of a collective project to strengthen national capacities.

In line with the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) Land Release 07.11, Colombia’s National Mine Action Standards (NMAA) had recently been updated.⁸ Moreover, a growing number of civilian organizations had been accredited and were beginning operations, while an increased number of requests for additional international support were being issued. With the increased need and demand for high quality land release, it became apparent that NTS required investment through training.

THE START OF THE NTS TRAINING PROJECT

At Descontamina’s request, GICHD initiated the NTS training project. The initial stages of the training project, between 2014 and 2016, aimed to lay the foundations for increased NTS knowledge, focusing on closing the gap between “what is done in NTS” and “what should be

done in NTS,” as stipulated by IMAS. The scope of the work was set by the assumptions and knowledge that

- Humanitarian demining activities in 2014 were largely carried out by the Humanitarian Demining Battalion⁹ (BIDES at the time, now BRDEH).
- Civilian organizations were being accredited and starting their operations, requiring training for newly-recruited staff.
- Over half of the clearance tasks were completed with no identified EO; thus improving NTS was identified as a priority.

Colombia’s expressed need for NTS training was reflected in the *2014-2016 Humanitarian Demining Action Plan*, specifically addressing the need to increase national capacity (understood as the capacity of the BRDEH¹⁰) and expand humanitarian demining operations by civilian organizations.¹¹

Having set the scope and aims of the NTS trainings, informed by national needs, and requests from Descontamina, the GICHD conducted five courses between January 2014 and December 2016. A Colombia-specific Spanish NTS package was developed and adapted from the annual GICHD Global NTS course package. The courses sought to engage mine action personnel to not only promote good practices but also create a space for the sharing of experience and transfer of knowledge. The curriculum for these initial Colombian NTS courses also introduced the train-the-trainer (TTT) component in order to sustain capacity over the long term.

THE NTS TRAINING PROJECT: DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE CAPACITY

By the end of 2016, Colombia entered a new political phase with the government signing a peace agreement¹² with the FARC-EP¹³ after five decades of internal conflict. Colombian humanitarian demining entities—sixteen civilian organizations¹⁴ and BRDEH—faced a unique opportunity both to reinstate discussions at the national level on how to address Colombia’s aspiration to build a group of national trainers and also to empower national NTS staff to positively contribute to the development of the Colombian humanitarian demining sector. This was led by Descontamina, which re-emphasized its commitment to “build a technical and organizational capacity in humanitarian demining to allow an adequate response and promote Land Release”¹⁵ in its 2016 Action Plan. Similarly, in its *2016-2021 Strategic Plan*, Descontamina acknowledged the need to apply “all reasonable

effort to identify, define and remove any contamination or suspicion of APM and UXO.”¹⁶

In answer to solicitations from Descontamina, a preliminary process was drawn up that would not only focus on increasing NTS national capacity but also build a group of national trainers that could lead future national NTS trainings. The development of a sustainable national capacity would allow “National actors [to] take control and command over project/programme activities and ... translate [policy] commitment[s] into effective actions”¹⁷ without long-term international and GICHD support.

To promote national ownership and sustainability, the GICHD invested time and effort to ensure course participation across organizations. By proactively enforcing quotas for all organizations, dialogue was ensured among national stakeholders on NTS good practices, requiring gender balance and diversity of experiences and backgrounds, and ensuring Descontamina’s involvement in the training itself. Moreover, pre-course tests were used to assess the understanding of NTS and set baselines to, as stipulated in IMAS 06:10 Management of training, “establish objectives for the training...design session plans; and decide on a method for evaluating and testing the training.”¹⁸ At the start of the course, trainers and trainees set objectives. These objectives were also used at the end of the course to promote “an after-project vision on how results [could] be sustained”¹⁹ and how impact could be measured. Underlining this was the principle that training did not end once the certificates were handed over but was part of building a “conversation” on good practices across the sector.

This renewed Colombian national capacity project began with the 2014–2016 courses as a means of supporting Colombia’s initial need for high-quality land release through effective survey, which truly started in October 2017 with GICHD organizing an NTS course that included all organization and operators. This course was the first to be co-led by a Colombian national trainer with extensive survey experience and promoted rapid learning; continual improvement; and the transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) required to carry out NTS. With twenty-six participants, including nine women and seventeen men, representing eleven national and international operators and organizations working in Colombia, the foundations were laid for a new cohort of mine action practitioners with the potential of implementing high-quality NTS.

To build on the 2017 NTS course, a NTS course with a TTT component was conducted in July 2018 in Villavicencio, Meta, Colombia. The course participants focused on building KSA to deliver a NTS course, by designing, developing, and preparing lesson plans and practical exercises. Of the eleven participants, five students from five different organizations, including the BRDEH, The HALO Trust, the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (CCCM), Humanity and Inclusion (HI), and Danish Demining Group (DDG), were selected as national trainers.

In an effort to qualify the national trainers, a Colombian external expert organization specializing in adult learning was hired to strengthen their abilities in transferring the TTT and KSA for NTS. It is worth noting that the TTT component builds on strengthening hard skills (technical knowledge) and soft skills (the ability to develop the

necessary verbal and non-verbal communication to effectively transmit knowledge that can generate high public recall).

In November 2018, the five national trainers, comprising one woman and four men, led the first fully nationally-led NTS course with the support of a GICHD advisor for internal monitoring. Descontamina’s NMAS advisor and the Colombian expert organization conducted external monitoring to assess the trainers’ ability to pass on knowledge. Twenty-two participants attended the course—seven women and fifteen men—all of whom successfully passed. In November 2019, the five national trainers independently conducted another NTS course with fifteen participants, comprising four women and eleven men, at the CCCM training grounds in Algeciras, Huila, Colombia, where GICHD involvement was limited to observing the final part of the training.

VALUE OF THE NTS TRAINING PROJECT AND NEXT STEPS

In Colombia, NTS courses have been opportunities to promote good practices and encourage the development of Colombia’s national capacity by gradually decreasing external support and increasing Colombian participation in the training process. Six years from the start of initial NTS courses in Colombia, a new generation of NTS surveyors emerged, collectively working to gather high-quality data for efficient and effective land release operations, and strengthening national capacities through the training of new personnel and retraining of existing personnel.

As many trainees become national trainers and trainers within their own organizations, their understanding of NTS increases and is reinforced. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the sum of the number of NTS conducted between 2014 and 2018 varied, and this can be attested to changes in the internal security situation affecting access to various Colombian departments, the implementation of activities, and the change in the number of accredited operators. Nevertheless, the steady decrease in the ratio of suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) registered during NTS is of particular interest as it reaches an all-time low of eight percent in 2018. The percentage of reported SHAs from NTS tasks could result from several factors: an improving NTS methodology due to a higher confidence in identifying evidence that would result in an SHA designation; or the cancellation of previously-reported SHAs, which may be the product of the collaborative NTS project that occurred over the past few years.

As a promoter of cooperation at the national level, the NTS training project has informally created a sense of cooperation in a sector that has at times worked in silos. In the most recent NTS course, many participants claimed that “the only difference between each one of us is the color of our uniform,” and regardless of organization, the purpose of each participant’s work is the same: to work toward a Colombia free from mines. Increased informal cooperation and dialogue between the trainers and trainees has translated to increased inter-organizational communication, which should also involve Descontamina, as the promoter, regulator, and coordinator of mine action activities within the country.

The five national trainers will require the utmost support from Descontamina. As an international center, the GICHD has invested

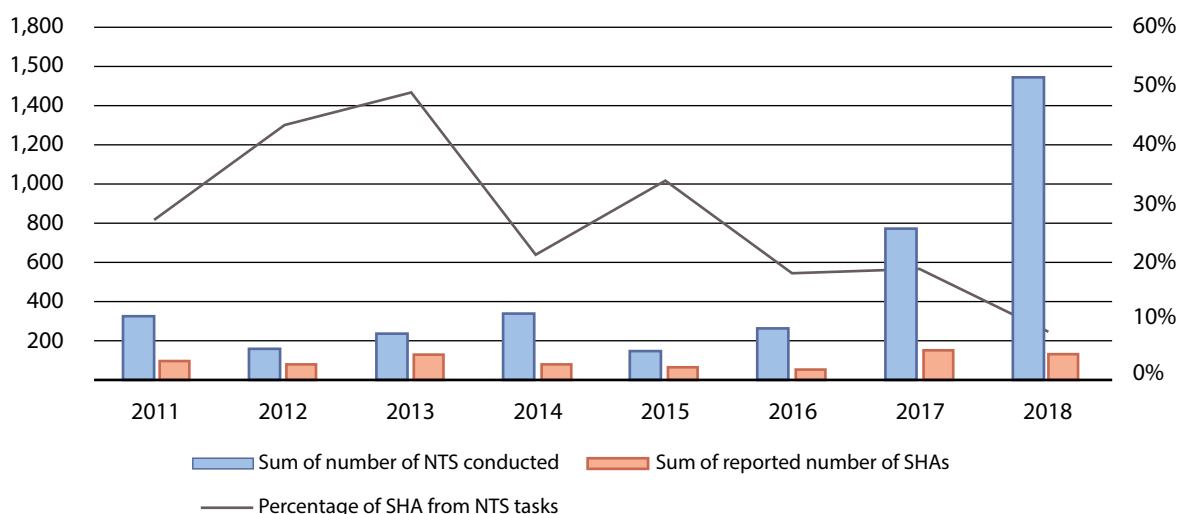


Figure 1. Overview of reported SHAs from NTS tasks from 2011 to 2018.²⁰
Figure courtesy of Descontamina and GICHD.

time and expertise in strengthening the individual capacity of the five national trainers and the seventy-five participants (twenty-five women and fifty men), who have been trained since 2017.

GICHD's role will now be to engage with Descontamina to first formalize the NTS national trainers' group by directly engaging in a dialogue with the trainers, and second, to promote them as a new set of national specialists and stakeholders who can contribute to national discussions on NTS. It is key to recognize national trainers at a national level and to develop a joint plan and timeline to define roles, responsibilities, and capacity needs in the handover of the NTS training project. These steps will help ensure that this investment remains long-standing, sustainable, and impactful for the Colombian mine action community. This would in parallel support Colombia's commitment in its *2016-2021 Strategic Plan* for "all reasonable effort to identify, define and remove any contamination or suspicion of APM and UXO."²¹

Having gained the experience of implementing such a project in Colombia over the past six years, it is GICHD's—and by extension the mine action community's—responsibility to promote such TTT projects in other countries and regions, so that national specialists emerge as training and national capacity is developed. This project is also relevant across other subject matters to promote good practices, address national needs, and ensure effective and efficient land release operations. ©

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Marc Bonnet
Head of Division, Operational Efficiency
GICHD



Marc Bonnet became the Head of the Operational Efficiency Division at the GICHD in 2015. Previously he was Program Manager at the United Nations Mine Action (UNMAS) office in Colombia and worked in India and South Asia as country director for international NGOs including Humanity and Inclusion and Norwegian People's Aid. Specializing in the management of humanitarian mine action programs, he also worked in Angola, Sri Lanka, and South Lebanon.

Helen Gray
GICHD Consultant



Helen Gray is an independent consultant to the GICHD, working on land release and survey training. Prior to this she was the GICHD Advisor on land release and operational efficiency and worked for The HALO Trust between 2004 and 2012, managing demining operations and surveys in Angola, Colombia, and Mozambique. She has a bachelor's degree in natural sciences from Durham University.

Giulia Matassa
Programme Officer, Operational Efficiency
GICHD



Giulia Matassa is the Programme Officer in the Operational Efficiency Division at the GICHD, working on capacity development, technology, and projects linked to the effective and efficient implementation of land release. Prior to joining GICHD, she worked for the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. She holds a bachelor's degree in politics with international relations from the University of York and a master's degree in conflict studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science.