

MINE ACTION IN TIMES OF COVID-19: A DONOR'S PERSPECTIVE

By Wolfgang Bindseil and Ian Mansfield [Mine Action Support Group]



Screenshot from a UNICEF presentation given on COVID-19 during a video call with participants.
Image courtesy of the authors.

THE ROLE OF MINE ACTION DONORS

Since the beginning of humanitarian mine action (HMA) in the late 1980s, the sector has relied heavily on donor support. Financial assistance continues to be the most obvious form of support for national authorities and mine action operators. Donor support to HMA has mainly remained in the range of US\$450–500 million per year for the past decade, peaking at almost US\$700 million in 2017 as donors responded to the legacy of ISIS in the Middle East.¹ This has been a substantial commitment by any measure. The funding is provided through various channels, such as the Organization of American States and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, UN trust funds, ITF Enhancing Human Security, national authorities, or directly to (international) HMA nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). Donor funding covers the full range of HMA activities, including risk education, survey and clearance, stockpile destruction, victim assistance, advocacy, capacity building, and coordination.

Donors approach HMA in accordance with their own national strategies and priorities. A few donors view the landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) issue as purely humanitarian. Whereas some pursue it from a development perspective, others view activities through a stabilization and peace support angle or the promotion of international treaties as the most important factors. Several donors have published mine action strategies outlining their policies and priorities. These include the “Mine Action Strategy of the Swiss Confederation 2016–2022”² and the German “Federal Foreign Office Humanitarian Mine Action Strategy within the framework of Federal Government humanitarian assistance,”³ both of which were finalized with the support of GICHD. Other donors use their broader humanitarian, development, or peace-building strategies to guide their HMA work.

In 1998, a core group of interested donors established an informal body called the Mine Action Support Group (MASG). Since its creation, the MASG has been an active forum for HMA donors and key partners to meet and discuss common issues. The MASG allows for an exchange between the HMA programs of the world’s major donor

states about best practices and prioritization, coordination with UN agencies, and brings donors' attention to issues where support for HMA is particularly needed. The MASG now consists of thirty-three donors, along with invited external observers including the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), several international organizations, and academia. The MASG normally meets twice a year, once in the context of the Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers' Meeting (NDM) in February, usually held in Geneva, and again in New York City in October at the time of the United Nations First Committee Session. The Chair of the MASG rotates every two years, and Germany assumed the Chair in January 2020.

Over the years, donors have also influenced the HMA sector in more ways than by just providing money. For example, MASG members have called for the development of common sector-wide standards (e.g., International Mine Action Standards), hosted technical workshops and training activities, and actively participated in international and national level meetings. Donors, like Germany, strive to be true partners in the HMA process and are invested in the outcomes and impacts to be achieved by their funding and other support. Thus, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in late 2019, it not only impacted operators, international organizations, and national authorities, but also created new challenges for donors as well.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MINE ACTION

The global pandemic has greatly affected the HMA sector. In some countries, programs are suspended, international staff repatriated, and local lockdowns continue to affect national staff. While operators must cope with restrictions, donors' strategic goals and objectives have to be revised as well. Staff protection became a particularly important issue. Working with beneficiaries in risk education or victim assistance, for example, creates new risks. Travel restrictions pose problems and incur cost increases for implementation, supervision, and coordination.

After receiving advice from donors, operators, and UNMAS regarding the need for an exchange on the unique situation brought about by COVID-19, Germany, as Chair of the MASG, arranged a global video conference on 27 May 2020. Over thirty donors participated in the conference, along with representatives from UN agencies, the GICHD, and four major international NGOs. The aim of the video call was to share experiences and challenges caused by COVID-19, particularly regarding the global pandemic's impact on HMA donors, and to pursue best practices in dealing with the situation.

During the video call, NGOs outlined the effects of COVID-19 on their HMA field operations. These included the temporary closing of work sites, travel restrictions placed on staff, social distancing requirements affecting work procedures, and the need for additional personal protective equipment (PPE). NGOs requested that funding levels be sustained through 2020 and 2021, and that donors support increased flexibility with grants and project implementation if their activities are affected by COVID-19. The use of HMA resources, which were idled by pandemic-related program restrictions, to address the pandemic in impoverished countries was also raised. Most participants feared that the growing prevalence of COVID-19 in countries with HMA activities would dramatically increase the uncertainty of planning, thus

increasing financial risks for operators and donors. Appealing to those donors funding UNMAS programs with delayed or suspended activities to approve a flexible approach, UNMAS sought to retain minimum operating capacity that would allow programs to start back to work as soon as conditions allowed. Also wishing to retain both their contractors and the national staff who depend on their salaries in this uncertain time, UNMAS provided extensive, detailed information to several donors.

THE DONOR RESPONSE

For donors, the situation posed a dilemma, summed up by the representative of Finland, Ms. Anni Makelainen, in the following way:

It is difficult to find other projects (besides mine action) within our Ministry that are so heavily impacted by the restrictions of movement and face difficulties to re-orientate their projects, i.e., propose any alternative actions. Continuing to pay salaries while no results are produced is, of course, not an easy equation when it comes to our funding regulations. On the other hand, discontinuing funding and terminating the contracts of the local employees is not a very sustainable alternative either.

Several major donors—Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States—had already provided early guidance to their partner organizations. The representative of the United Kingdom said that they had advised partners of the following broad principles:

We ask that partners make decisions based on the proportionality principle, and with a view to ensuring the safety of their staff. Partners should consult closely with local and national health authorities to ensure that their decision-making is in line with wider guidance and is not adversely affecting the local response to COVID-19. While adhering to the principles of doing no harm and staff safety, we encourage our implementing partners to continue delivering planned demining operations where possible and appropriate. Ultimately our partners are responsible for implementing projects as planned, and it is for our partners to decide whether it is appropriate to continue delivering demining work.

The United Kingdom then advised partners that they would guarantee the salaries of their demining staff for up to three months, including under forced lockdown.

Stanley L. Brown, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Programs and Operations in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, addressed the question of using HMA resources for other COVID-19 related activities, such as combining mine risk education with COVID-19 awareness raising activities or using idle demining vehicles for logistics or the movement of medical supplies to hospitals:

Where our implementers are still working, we have advised that their focus should and must remain on demining operations. That said, where host governments are requesting the use of HMA-funded assets, and it can be done in a reasonable and minimally disruptive manner, we will consider it. For example, in some cases we have authorized risk education and community liaison teams to simultaneously deliver COVID-19 related messaging while they go about their normal day-to-day work. Likewise, where demining operations have been suspended and we are still paying salaries

for workers and maintenance costs for vehicles, it may make good sense to employ these otherwise idle assets—with the proviso that those assets immediately be returned to demining operations as soon as operations can resume.

During the MASG video call, some common points emerged among the donor countries:

- As of mid-2020, no MASG member had cut funding to national authorities or NGO operators.
- Donors stressed the need for regular and proactive communications between them and their partners through virtual or other channels. Moreover, if there is a need to change original project documents, the funded partner should take the initiative and suggest alternatives.
- Donors showed flexibility in their responses if project targets could not be met or if project objectives needed to be adapted. However, none of the donors provided a blanket waiver to funded partners.
- Extensions to projects on a no-cost basis would generally be viewed favorably.
- Despite donors' flexibility and desire to avoid having operators return unused funding, donors stressed that, ultimately, they were bound by their own national financial regulations and that these would take precedence if required. In case of prolonged restriction on project activities due to COVID-19, difficult decisions would be unavoidable in the future.

Stakeholders agreed that the exchange was useful, and that COVID-19 will remain on the agenda of MASG meetings for the coming year.

THE FUTURE

Between May and August 2020, most mine action programs were expected to restart all or some of their operations. However, not all field or donor programs could be completed as planned and some of the projects had to be postponed. This is also true for Germany, which currently adapts its contingency planning on a weekly basis. Additionally, the evolving pandemic raised new concerns. In several areas, the pandemic had not reached its peak. Additionally, the imminent threat of a second or third wave lingers. In August 2020, the World Health Organization reported that the global rate of COVID-19 infections was still increasing, and that the pandemic may well be underreported in war-torn and mine-affected countries.

Regarding the German experience, the pandemic has indeed continued to influence the course of mine action projects. One operator in Iraq developed a trial package to implement RE via remote methods. The package includes videos with risk education modules uploaded on the internet and a methodology to support the risk education session through phone calls and sharing on e-materials. Remote QA tools were also developed. Several operators reported additional safety measures including the establishment of COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) that set out stringent hygiene procedures, holding meetings in virtual mode, introducing digital signatures to facilitate administrative processes, etc. Fortunately, but not necessarily expected, no further operations have been discontinued.

Obviously, the pandemic will continue to affect the work of donors and the MASG. This will be felt not least in the organization of conferences, like the second regular MASG meeting, which was held virtually in October 2020). Here, like in other areas of HMA, we will continue to improve our ability to cope better with current and emerging challenges.

Finally, because of COVID-19, the world is dealing with significant socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and increased humanitarian needs in many regions, which likely will affect some donors' ability to provide new funding. Thus, HMA will face increased competition from other humanitarian initiatives. The pandemic will also therefore impact the ability of HMA to contribute to the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at least in the near term.

The authors hope that mine action donors remain committed to funding HMA as they have done for the past twenty years. In a broader context, a statement by the GICHD and the international NGOs summed up the current situation:

We understand that the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing about formidable new challenges both at the level of public health and economy resilience, nationally and globally. Against this background, it is our sincere hope that ways will be found for the mine action sector not to be left behind. We are convinced that mine action continues to play a key role towards our common goal of a world in which human suffering is prevented and mitigated, and no one is left behind. ©

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Wolfgang Bindseil

Chair of the Mine Action Support Group



Wolfgang Bindseil, Chair of the Mine Action Support Group since January 2020, is the Head of Division for Humanitarian Assistance (Regional Policy and Operation), including Humanitarian Mine Action, at the German Federal Foreign Office. On his previous post, Bindseil served as Minister-Counsellor at the German Embassy in Kyiv; former positions include Deputy Head of the Conventional Arms Control Division (2011–2015), Desk Officer for Russian Foreign and Security Policy (2009–2011), Desk Officer for Resource Planning (2006–2009), Press Secretary at the German Embassy in Moscow (2003–2006), and Political Secretary at the German Embassy in Cairo (1999–2003). He has a degree in electrotechnical engineering from Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule Aachen (1993) and in Economics from Universität Hagen (2000).

Ian Mansfield

Secretariat of the Mine Action Support Group



Ian Mansfield works as a mine action consultant and has been the secretariat of the MASG since 2011. Previously he was the Deputy Director of the GICHD and the team leader of the United Nations Development Programme Mine Action Team in New York. Earlier, he was the UN mine action program manager in Afghanistan, Laos, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2017, he published a memoir called *Stepping into a Minefield*.

COVID-19 illustration courtesy of the CDC.