FOA Sweden/UN Demining Workshop June 1994.
Image courtesy of the author.

MINE ACTION: The Early Years

By Ian Mansfield [Mine Action Consultant]

At the global level, the year 1997 was undoubtably the pinnacle of interest in mine action. This was the year that saw the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Jody Williams and the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines (ICBL), the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the opening of the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC) for signature in Ottawa, the establishment of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) as the UN focal point for mine action, the formation of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), the genesis of the Mine Action Support Group (MASG), and the first publication of this Journal. However, these events did not just happen overnight; there was a full decade of work and commitment leading up to these significant achievements. This article looks at the challenges and successes of the early days of humanitarian mine action (HMA), particularly in the areas of coordination, standardization, and information sharing.

The Early Days

After the two world wars and other smaller-scale conventional wars, it was generally accepted that when hostilities finished, the military would be responsible for the clearance of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). In guerrilla wars or irregular conflicts, the minefields were not marked and the landmines were not recorded, they were simply abandoned after the fighting ended.

Afghanistan. However, this situation changed dramatically after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s. There were millions of landmines in Afghanistan and, with millions of refugees in neighboring Pakistan and Iran expected to quickly return home, a humanitarian catastrophe was looming. In October 1988, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) launched a humanitarian appeal for funding to train and equip Afghan civilians to clear landmines. The response to the appeal was not great, with only Germany, Japan, and the United States pledging money. Other countries still viewed the issue as a "military" activity and instead offered military advisers to assist.

UNOCHA, under the leadership of Martin Barber, made the best of what was offered, and in 1989, seven countries provided teams of military engineers and bomb disposal experts. The contributing countries were Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The initial concept was to train large numbers of Afghan refugees in basic mine clearance techniques at camps near Peshawar and Quetta, and then when they went home to their towns and villages, they would clear mines—an early form of the "village demining" concept. However, it was quickly realized that mine clearance needed to be undertaken on a more organized and controlled basis, and that other activities like survey and risk education also needed to be undertaken. UNOCHA looked for civilian implementing partners but there were none, so the United Nations oversaw the creation of specialist Afghan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to undertake survey, clearance, and risk education tasks. A number of international organizations also were established at this time.

Cambodia. The next HMA program to be established was in 1992, when the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) peacekeeping mission oversaw elections in Cambodia. Included in their mission was a requirement to address the landmine problem, so UNTAC established a Mine Clearance and Training Unit (MCTU). Once the newly elected Cambodian government was formed, a Royal Decree[1] redefined the national mine action structure, which was now

Sam Sotha.
Image courtesy of Phnom Penh Post.

led by an inter-ministerial governing council. This body was chaired at a senior level by the then Minister for Information, Ieng Mouly. The coordination level body was called the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), and while it was civilian in nature, the initial stages of its setup relied on foreign military advisers from Canada, as well as Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, along with some civilian advisers from Handicap International (now Humanity and Inclusion) and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA). Soon after it was formed, and after some interim arrangements including Pan Sothy acting as the director for a time, the Cambodian government appointed the mercurial Sam Sotha as the Director-General of CMAC, who in effect became the first formally-appointed national mine action director in the world, and who oversaw the establishment of a completely nationally-owned mine action program.

It is interesting to note that the name CMAC was the first formal use of the term "mine action." The term was not precisely defined but was used to project a positive approach to dealing with landmines and reflect that the sector was now involved in more activities than just mine clearance. The other UN programs to begin in the early-1990s were in Angola and Mozambique. In both these cases, the mine action programs started as part of the peacekeeping missions: the United Nations Verification Mission to Angola (UNAVEM) and the United Nations Operations in Mozambique (ONUMOZ). Due to the mandates of both peacekeeping missions, it took some years before nationally-owned programs could evolve.

Kuwait. Another significant mine clearance activity also took place around the same time. At the end of the First Gulf War in February 1991, Kuwait was littered with landmines and other ERW. The government of Kuwait had money, so they divided the country into seven sectors and offered commercial contracts worth about US$100 million per sector. Within two years the country was cleared. While this was not regarded as a humanitarian mine clearance program, it did offer up some important lessons to the emerging humanitarian programs overseen or supported by the United Nations. The first was that mine clearance was not mission impossible, and that large areas of land or huge quantities of ordnance could be cleared—it just took time or money, and Kuwait had the money. Unfortunately, the commercial companies involved were not allowed to share information with each other, and valuable information on types of ordnance, clearance techniques, safety, costs, etc., was not readily available. Sadly, over eighty deaths were estimated to have occurred during these clearance efforts. Also, the Kuwait Government kept changing the clearance criteria and many organizations had to go over the same ground two or three times, until the government was satisfied that the ground was cleared. The experience of Kuwait highlighted the need for a precise elaboration of the desired end-state, good coordination, common operating and safety standards, and the importance of information sharing.

The sector grows quickly. By the end of the 1990's, the United Nations was assisting a growing number of countries with funding, technical support, training, and the provision of equipment. These included Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chad, Croatia, Jordan, Laos, Thailand, and Yemen, with many more mine-affected countries requesting UN support. The donor response was also growing rapidly and in 1999, for example, the United States provided US$79 million dollars to thirty-five countries for mine action.[2]

National Level Coordination

The first four HMA programs in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Mozambique were all supported by the United Nations. However, they began independently at the country level and were overseen by different parts of the United Nations. As a result, different organizational and coordination models emerged, with the two most different being in Afghanistan and Cambodia.

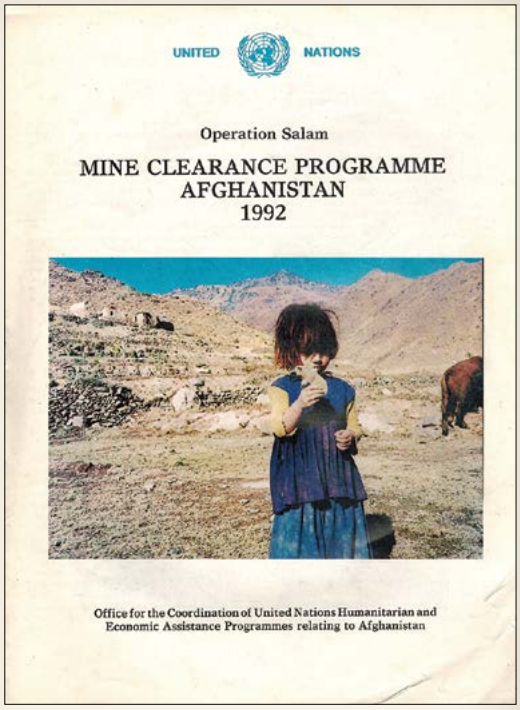
In Afghanistan, due to the absence of a recognized government from 1989 onwards, UNOCHA was responsible for policy decisions, liaison with neighboring countries and other international agencies, dealing with emerging Afghan authorities, resource mobilization, setting of priorities and standards, etc., effectively playing the role of what today we term the national authority. A separate office within UNOCHA oversaw the day-to-day tasking and operations of the implementing partners, undertaking quality management functions, collecting and storing data—the functions of a mine action center. The specialist Afghan and international NGOs were the operators, and they implemented tasks like risk education, survey, battle area clearance, and mine clearance. The first national level strategic plan for the Mine Clearance Programme – Afghanistan was issued in 1992, and this drew together all components of the program and listed the common goals and objectives to be achieved in that year.

In contrast, CMAC initially performed all functions and was established to be the government policy-advising agency and the operational coordinator. However, CMAC also had its own mine clearance teams, which they funded, tasked, and managed. Coordination by CMAC was reasonably effective in the early years, but as time went by, CMAC became focused on their own operations and funding needs. Because international NGOs like Mines Advisory Group (MAG), The HALO Trust (HALO), and NPA were also operating in-country, leading to competition for funding, confusion about roles, and some duplication of effort, a separate national authority and regulatory agency was later created to resolve the inherent conflict of interest at CMAC.

By the mid-1990s, as a lead actor, the United Nations saw that these different national coordination models had emerged with varying degrees of success. In response, the then Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) commissioned an ambitious four-country study in 1996. The study team was led by Bob Eaton, and the team undertook visits to Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Mozambique to look at

how the programs were organized and what coordination measures were used. The results of the study were published in four country booklets and one summary edition. The study noted the shift within the international community from viewing mine action primarily as a military problem to that of a humanitarian and development situation, with an emphasis on developing a strong national capacity. On coordination arrangements, the study found that "the Afghan institutional architecture, involving a strong central coordination and oversight mechanism, and autonomous but affiliated mine action NGOs, helps secure the viability, sustainability and accountability of the program, while maximizing flexibility, plurality of methodologies, and a keen sense of competitiveness and productivity."[4]

Unfortunately, the study was issued just as DHA was transferring its responsibility for mine action to the newly formed UNMAS and the study did not receive the recognition it deserved. However, the key findings from the study have become the accepted way that most national mine action programs are now organized: a central national authority deals with policy and regulatory issues, a mine action center is responsible for the day-to-day coordination of activities, and a range of mine action operators are responsible for undertaking a range of tasks.



The first national mine action plan for Afghanistan, 1992.
Image courtesy of the author.

Global Level Coordination

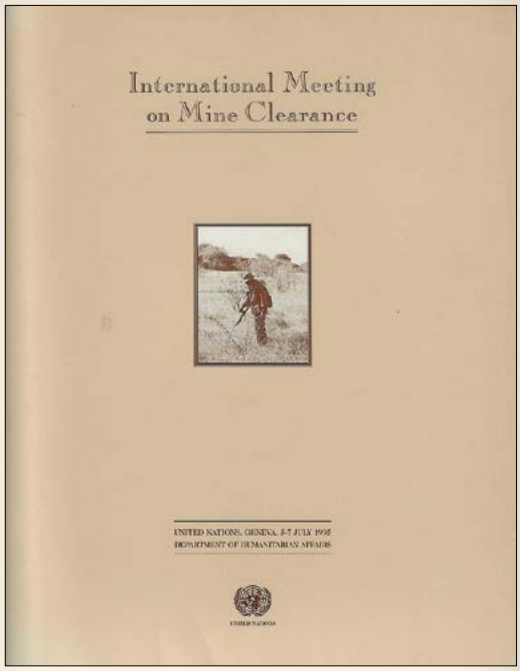
Whereas it took some years for an agreed model for national level coordination to evolve, global coordination is still a work in progress. Because of its involvement in setting up the early mine action programs, along with its global reach, the United Nations has played a key role in improving global coordination. In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly included in the agenda of its 48th session, for the first time, a separate item on "Assistance in mine clearance." Following an extensive discussion, the General Assembly asked the Secretary-General to prepare a compressive report on the problems caused by landmines and on the measures needed to strengthen UN efforts relating to mine clearance. The Secretary-General's report was presented to the 49th session of the General Assembly in 1994 and outlined the situation with regards to landmine contamination around the world and the measures needed to address the problem.[5] The resolution also welcomed the establishment of a United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund (UN VTF) for mine clearance and requested the Secretary-General to consider "convening an international meeting on mine clearance, to include a meeting of experts and a meeting of potential donors, in order to promote the work of the UN and international cooperation in this field."[6]

An international meeting was subsequently held in Geneva from 5–7 July, 1995. The meeting was attended by many member States, international organizations, national authorities, and NGOs, and was opened by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. For the first time, the international community could see the human face of the landmine tragedy through twelve-year-old amputee, Ms. Song Kosal, a Cambodian landmine survivor who spoke quietly but powerfully at the opening session. The meeting had a wide-ranging agenda including general statements and the announcement of contributions to the UN VTF, along with expert panels that discussed technical aspects of mine clearance.

At the operational or field level, different UN headquarters and agencies had varying degrees of responsibilities and commitment to mine action. In 1997, UNMAS was formed, located within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). As the focal point within the UN system for all mine action matters, UNMAS has coordinated the work of the fourteen involved UN funds, programs, and agencies. The first UN policy document was issued in 1998,[7] which clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of all UN actors. An Inter-Agency Coordination Group – Mine Action (IACG-MA) was established at the principals level and various other working-level committees were formed. The United Nations has also played a role in organizing international meetings, such as the annual meeting of National Mine Action Directors and UN Advisers (NDM-UN) that have served both as an information sharing platform as well as enhancing global coordination.

Although not a coordination mechanism per se, the mine action community has benefited from the focus provided by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). The civil society Campaign had its origins in October 1992 when six international NGOs formalized their anti-landmine efforts. The ICBL's work has helped draw attention to the global landmine issue by identifying priority countries,

providing factual data about the landmine crisis, and drawing donor support to the issue. One of the first major activities of the Campaign was the preparation by the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) of a major study published in 1995 called *After the Guns Fall Silent; The Enduring Legacy of Landmines* by Jody Williams and Shawn Roberts.[8] This ambitious project attempted to quantify landmine contamination in what was then being recognized as a growing problem. Even at this stage, the report was able to document landmine or ERW accidents in sixty-four countries. While it was difficult to draw a lot of conclusions from the report because all the data was collected differently, it was the inspiration for the Landmine Monitor report. Today, the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* is the accepted source of all landmine and ERW factual data. Of course, with the entry into force of the APMBC in 1999, the annual meetings of States Parties are now one of the most effective mechanisms for enhanced global coordination in the sector.



The first global UN mine action meeting, held in Geneva from 5-7 July, 1995.
Image courtesy of the author.

The mine action sector has been heavily dependent on support from aid donors. Over the years, significant amounts of donor money have been provided to national authorities, UN agencies, and NGOs. Donor coordination has been difficult, because all donors have their own set of priorities, based on historical links, geographical considerations, and domestic politics, all overlaid onto humanitarian or development needs. However, all donors agree that mine action covers the nexus of peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and development. In the late 1990s, donors again saw the need to promote a coordinated response to mine action. As an initiative of Norway, the Mine Action Support Group (MASG) was formed in New York in 1998. MASG "endeavors to coordinate the humanitarian mine action programs of the world's major donor states, harmonize the prioritization of their respective mine action programs, and increase donor support for mine action where it is most needed."[9] The MASG now meets twice per year, once in Geneva and once in New York.[10]

Standardization

As mentioned previously, the initial mine clearance programs evolved in isolation and originally received technical advice from foreign military advisers. As these programs were operating in isolation, the various military contingents adapted their own military training, procedures, techniques, and often equipment to meet the new requirement of humanitarian demining. This led to the adoption of different standards of work in each country. In addition, there were many animated discussions at the growing number of international meetings about the various techniques for manual demining, the utility of machines, along with heated debates about the use of dogs for mine detection. As a result and because they were unfamiliar with mine action, many donors said that they were receiving conflicting advice from partners seeking funding and often asked, "what is the way forward?" Donors encouraged the United Nations and others to devise an agreed set of standards for mine action operations.

This call was heeded in July 1996 when the United Nations, with support from the government of Denmark, arranged a meeting on the outskirts of Copenhagen to develop a set of international standards for mine action. After five days of discussion, a draft framework set of standard topics titled the "International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations" were developed. A smaller group of experts met in December 1996 in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to finalize the standards. Subsequently, a first edition of the standards was published by UNMAS in March 1997. These standards were later further developed by UNMAS and the GICHD to include other components of mine action and were renamed to become the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), with the first edition produced in October 2001.[11] Credit is due to Bill van Ree for the foresight to adopt an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) approach for the standards, and subsequently to Noel Mulliner and Alastair McAslan who managed the detailed drafting and preparation of the IMAS.

Information Sharing

International or national staff working in the four original country programs did not have the opportunity to meet with each other, to share information, or to travel and visit other programs. Each program developed its own structure, procedures, and techniques quite independently. The only cross pollination came from visits by people like Alister Craib or Phil Bean, who were engaged by donors to undertake evaluations of the various projects they were funding around the world. These visits were a great opportunity to hear what was happening in other countries,

share information, and to consider the applicability of new ideas. In response to the growing call for programs to meet and interact, the first international meeting for HMA programs was held in Vienna, Austria, in May 1993 and was organized by the Scheibel mine detector company. Representatives from the four UN programs attended (Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Mozambique), along with some commercial companies that had been involved in Kuwait. The meeting provided the first real opportunity for national and international staff from the various programs to discuss issues of common concern.

In June 1994, the Swedish National Defence Research Institute (FOA) organized a meeting in Stockholm, where attendees included a diverse range of people, including those who designed and made landmines, sellers of military equipment, UN officials, military officers, national representatives from mine-affected countries, and campaigners against landmines. Needless to say, there were many active and heated discussions among this group. One simple exchange highlighted the changing nature of mine action. During his presentation, an NGO deminer showed a photo of a landmine. An earnest young military officer jumped and said, "you cannot show that, it is classified information," to which the NGO deminer said "I dug this landmine up last week with my own bare hands, and I will show it to whomever I like." After the Stockholm meeting, numerous international meetings were held; however, they divided naturally into two categories: those held to promote the ban on landmines and others designed to allow field programs to share their experiences with other countries and operators.

In the pre-internet age, written publications were an important method of disseminating information. Many publications have come and gone, but some have endured. The UN launched a publication called *The Landmine* in 1997. This booklet was published quarterly and detailed the work of UN agencies in mine action, although the publication only lasted a few years. Since 1999, the United States has published *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, which outlines the conventional weapons destruction work funded by the United States. In 1997, the Mine Action Information Center (now the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery) first published the *Journal of Humanitarian Demining*. In 2016, the publication name changed to *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*, funded by the U.S. Department of State, to expand its scope to include the destruction of small arms and light weapons.

National coordination meeting, Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 1994. From left: Dave Edwards (technical advisor), Bill van Ree (technical advisor), Ian Mansfield (program manager), Ian Bullpitt (technical advisor).
Image courtesy of the author.

Looking Forward?

The evolution and success of mine action has been rapid and dramatic, not just because of the dire consequences of getting it wrong, but because at all stages the individuals and organizations that guided the sector did the best that they could at the time within the limitations of available technology and resources. Lessons learned with the benefit of hindsight, the application of emerging technology, and particularly the wider use of management information and communication systems, point to ways where improvements have and can continue to be made across the spectrum of the mine action pillars. Recalling the history and the lessons (sometimes painfully learned) should not be forgotten. Active researchers would do well to review the last twenty-five-years' worth of *Journal* articles, as they illustrate the evolution of mine action, the topics of concern in their day, and the successes in terms of best practice that could be shared. Moving forward, seeking improvements to efficiency and safety in challenging environments is not a choice; it must happen in concert with ongoing humanitarian, development, and peace-building needs if we are ever to succeed and rid the world of the impact of mines and many other ERW.

BIOGRAPHY

Ian Mansfield
Mine Action Consultant

Ian Mansfield works as a mine action consultant and has been the secretariat of the Mine Action Support Group since 2011. Previously he was the Deputy Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining 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, *Stepping into a Minefield*.

ENDNOTES

Mine Action: The Early Years
By Ian Mansfield [Mine Action Consultant]

1. Cambodia, The Development of Indigenous Mine Action Capacities, page 21, The Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1997.
2. *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, US Department of State, 1999. https://bit.ly/3z4FWkx.
3. The Development of Indigenous Mine Action Capacity, The Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1997.
4. Afghanistan – The Development of Indigenous Mine Action Capacity, page 41, The Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1997.
5. United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/49/215 Assistance in Mine Clearance of 23 December 1994.
6. Summary – UNGA Resolution A/RES/49/215 Assistance in Mine Clearance of 23 December 1994.
7. Mine Action and Effective Coordination; The United Nations Policy, UNMAS/1998/08/vers.1.6.
8. After the Guns Fall Silent; The Enduring Legacy of Landmines, Shawn Roberts and Jody Williams, VVAF, 1995.
9. "The Mine Action Support Group (MASG)." E-Mine, UN Mine Action. https://www.mineaction.org/en/mine-action-support-group-masg
10. Details of MASG meetings can be found on the website at: "MASG Meeting Notes," E-Mine, UN Mine Action. https://bit.ly/3z55DkT.
11. International Mine Action Standards, GICHD. https://www.mineactionstandards.org/