

IMPACT CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HUMANITARIAN DEMINING IN Colombia

Examples of the activities FSD carried out in 2020 to support the most vulnerable population in Bogotá (Colombia).

All graphics courtesy of the authors.



By Salomé Valencia Aguirre, Angela De Santis, Ph.D., and Sebastián Tovar Jaramillo
[Swiss Foundation for Mine Action]

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mine action sector globally. In this article, the authors look at how the pandemic has affected Colombia, specifically concentrating on how the pandemic has affected humanitarian demining (HD)-related activities. To do so, the Swiss Foundation for Demining (FSD) compared key HD indicators from 2019 to 2020 in order to evaluate the performance of HD operations in Colombia, and carried out an assessment among HD organizations (HDOs) operating in-country through the Quick Impact Survey on *COVID-19 Impact on Humanitarian Operations*. Moreover, the authors provide an example of community service activities and projects implemented by organizations during the pandemic. The results showed that between 2019 and 2020, there was a 20 percent decrease in the reported number of total square meters cleared in Colombia, as well as a reduction in the number of non-technical survey (NTS) tasks and clearance operations, explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) beneficiaries, and activities completed. Despite numerous lockdowns, the number of victims unfortunately increased by 45 percent (from 114 to 166 victims). Regarding fieldwork, all organizations reported a temporary suspension of operations (from two to six months in total), with clearance activities being the most affected. However, the great majority of organizations have re-directed a portion of funds to provide emergency humanitarian aid (food, hygiene kits, etc.) to the most vulnerable communities affected by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as all subsequent measures to control it, suddenly transformed the living dynamics of most citizens, impacting the socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural spheres. In Colombia, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 6 March 2020. A week later, the government announced a national state of emergency, dedicating economic resources to help manage the crisis. On 20 March, the national mandatory lock-down began, which lasted several months. In fact, Colombia had one of the longest mandatory isolation periods globally. As of April 2021, 2,774,464 cases had been confirmed in Colombia, and 71,351 people had died from the disease.¹

Although it is too early to assess the magnitude of impacts caused by the containment measures, the alarming increase in unemployment impoverished millions of households.² The crisis has unequally affected different regions of the country due to pre-existing social and economic gaps. Another worrying fact is the increase in human rights violations, with one of the most affected regions being Cauca, a Department with massive anti-personnel (AP) mine contamination—which ranks first, in comparison with other Departments, and represents almost a third of the country’s

AP-mine victims. Furthermore, the prolonged confinement has exponentially³ increased femicides and other types of gender-based violence, which has disproportionately affected indigenous, afro-descendant, and peasant women, among others.

Regarding the mine action sector, several authors have identified specific effects,^{4,5} such as the suspension of programs, repatriation of international staff, temporary closure of worksites, travel restrictions imposed on staff, and limitations in victim assistance (VA) and EORE activities. Moreover, official data provided by the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (OACP)⁶ was used to analyze the results of HD operations, victim assistance (VA), and EORE. Accordingly, with funds from The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), FSD conducted a survey with accredited HDOs to assess other impacts where questions from the Quick Impact Survey on *COVID-19 Impact on Humanitarian Operations*⁷ were used as a guide to prepare a specific questionnaire adjusted to the context of HD activities in Colombia. Seven accredited organizations replied to the survey: five civilian HDOs⁸ in addition to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and FSD.

Impact on Indicators Related to Humanitarian Demining, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education, and Victim Assistance (2019 vs. 2020)

INDICATOR	2019	2020
Cumulative cleared square meters	1,625,006	1,293,304
Explosive ordnance items destroyed	474	203
EORE beneficiaries	199,305	54,878
Victims	114	166

Table 1. Comparison of indicators between 2019 and 2020.

As shown in Table 1, based on IMSMA data from the OACP,⁹ there was a 20 percent decrease in the reported number of total square meters cleared in Colombia in 2020 compared to 2019. This reduction was not so dramatic, given that military demining operators were not required to suspend operations during the most critical months of the pandemic. Hence, military operators carried out 88 percent of clearance operations (1,138,832 sq m). Although this ratio of military- to civilian-conducted clearance is normal in Colombia, civilian organizations cleared 30 percent of the total number of square meters in 2019 versus 12 percent in 2020. In regard to destroyed mines/explosive remnants of war (ERW) items, 57 percent less were destroyed in 2020 than in 2019. In terms of operations, 86 non-technical survey (NTS) tasks and 213 clearance operations were completed in 2019, compared to 15 and 183 in 2020. Regarding EORE activities, Table 1 shows the reduction in the number of beneficiaries and activities between

2019 and 2020. However, in 2020, EORE was prioritized in the most AP-mine-affected municipalities to try to maximize the impact of the reduced number of activities carried out.

Despite numerous lockdowns, the number of victims unfortunately increased by 45 percent, rising from 114 to 166 victims. Moreover, there was a higher proportion of afro-descendant (2019: 0, 2020: 19) and indigenous (2019: 1, 2020: 20) victims (20 percent in 2020 versus 1.7 percent out of the 2019 total). Nariño was the most affected region in both periods (2019: 38, 2020: 62) and faced a dramatic social crisis due to the murder of social leaders, threats to the civilian population, and clashes between illegal groups. Following the start of the pandemic, AP-mine-contaminated areas, which already had access limitations, were blocked until further notice due to security issues and government restrictions resulting from the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, some existing challenges have increased: food insecurity, reduced access to education, health services, vaccinations, etc. Similarly, the uncertainty faced by people with disabilities caused by AP mines, who struggle to access health care services (prosthetics and rehabilitation), will be further exacerbated due to the current health system collapse. Ultimately, it is likely that productive use of released land will be delayed, and the difficulties in undertaking productive projects will be greater, causing further instability for survivors.

Perception of HDOs

In regards to the impact caused by the pandemic, the measures imposed by the national and/or local authorities have impacted humanitarian operations at various levels. Seven civilian organizations, five of whom carried out demining operations, completed the Quick Impact Survey on *COVID-19 Impact on Humanitarian Operations*, and the most relevant findings follow.

Impact on Demining Operations

The data considered for this section corresponds only to information provided by HDOs.

MEASURE	IMPACT
Movement restriction – closure of national borders	Suspension of operations (temporary) - Suspension of technical assistance in the field
Movement restriction – closure of international borders	Repatriation of international staff
Mandatory isolation – curfew	Prohibition of on-site meetings and workshops - Reduction of EORE activities - Telework
Import – export restrictions	Reduction on the availability of supplies

Table 2. Measures and impacts.

All HDOs surveyed reported a meaningful impact on demining operations among the five pillars of mine action (demining, EORE, VA, advocacy, and stockpile destruction).

Regarding fieldwork, all organizations reported a temporary suspension of operations (from two to six months in total). When inquiring about the causes of these suspensions or limitations against the normal conduct of activities, in addition to the suspension of operations from March to June 2020 imposed by the national government, organizations reported other external causes related to the pandemic and security issues: COVID cases in the allocated areas; road blockages by communities to prevent access; lack of supplies and suppliers; presence of illegal armed groups; adapting operation sites to face the pandemic; limited ground transportation; and lack of knowledge regarding risk prevention.

All these organizations adjusted their NTS, EORE, or community-liaison data-collection activities due to potential contagion risks for their staff. In addition, three out of five organizations that carried out demining operations reported that communication with their beneficiaries was severely affected, and all reported a medium impact regarding communication with local authorities.

When inquiring specifically about the degree of impact produced by some measures (Table 2), six out of seven organizations claimed that the impact due to the limitation of imported supplies was low, whereas the impact on traveling within the country was high for five organizations and medium for the remaining two. Some of the most frequent changes in organizational dynamics were the limitations on mobilizing staff and

the implementation of telework. One organization reported the repatriation of international staff, although none suspended employment contracts. These measures were applied to national and international staff—except repatriation—in six organizations out of seven.

Organizations conducted specific activities that had different degrees of impact: three organizations experienced medium impact, two high, and two low. None of the organizations reported any impact on communications with donors, and only two organizations claimed to have some

degree of impairment in the communication with other civilian organizations. Transportation suffered high and medium impacts for six of the organizations. Moreover, the reallocation of funds and cost reduction due to a decrease in funding did not represent a significant impact, five organizations reported it as low and two as medium.

More specifically, when the organizations were asked about the percentage of general economic impacts of the pandemic on the projects in relation to the initial budget, six organizations reported an impact between zero to 20 percent, and only one reported an impact between 20 to 40 percent. Four organizations allocated some activities focused on COVID-19-related actions such as providing supplies and other products to local communities. Lastly, six organizations implemented capacity-building activities with their staff during the suspension of operations.

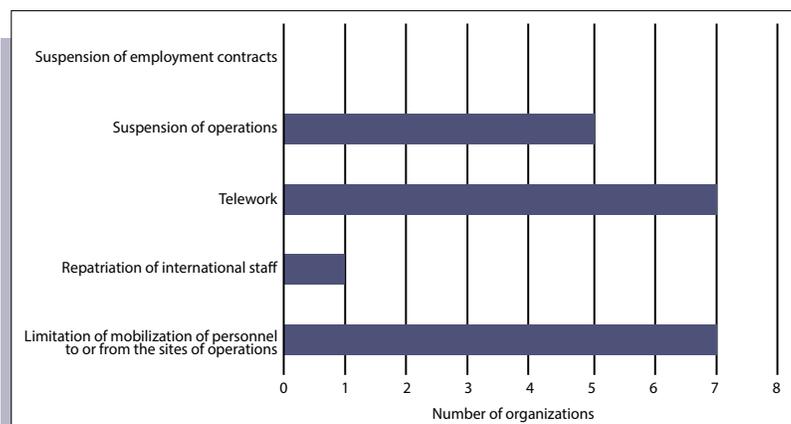


Figure 1. Measures taken by HDOs.

Successful Experiences Implemented During the Crisis

One of the greatest challenges imposed by the pandemic was the inability to carry out on-site activities. In this regard, several organizations reported the use of virtual media. Some of the organizations used this tool to train their field staff, and one organization included human rights and gender training for all staff. Another organization resumed

EORE activities through the design of social media campaigns, radio messages, and virtual workshops.

One organization discussed its strategy to reduce the contagion risk, and another one reported “zero contagion” within its operational teams and during its retraining sessions as a result of strict compliance

with its biosafety protocols. One organization established work periods, which were increased from three to five weeks to avoid recurring entry and exit movements from and into the sectors or municipalities. Likewise, tests were carried out for the access of staff after break periods. Ultimately, one organization carried out a project to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on the community. FSD, in partnership with the local NGO Fundación Sembradores de Luz y Recolectores de Esperanza (<https://sereza.org/>)—led and composed by victims of the conflict with experience in assisting vulnerable communities—provided assistance in Bogotá, Colombia, by distributing hot meals, hygiene kits, face masks, etc., to indigenous internally displaced children, the homeless, Venezuelan refugees, elderly people, and families with no sources of income from May to December 2020.

Conclusions

Because of the conditions caused by the pandemic in Colombia, mine action activities have suffered setbacks in comparison with preceding years. The most affected component has been the humanitarian demining sector's clearance activities. The increase in the number of mine victims, who reside in violence-affected areas of the country, is concerning, especially as it is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations. Even though EORE activities have been allocated to these strongly affected areas, and innovative campaigns have been carried out through virtual media, the technological gap does not allow equitable access. Finally, there are two aspects that may hinder the projections made by the Colombian government to meet Colombia's obligation under Article 5 of the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* to remove all AP mines by 2025: the decrease of key operational indicators in 2020, and the uncertainty of the duration of the pandemic and a full return to full activities. ©

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as all subsequent measures to control it, suddenly transformed the living dynamics of most citizens, impacting the socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural spheres.

BIOGRAPHIES

Salomé Valencia Aguirre, M.D. M.P.H.

Technical Adviser on Data Analysis
Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD)



Salomé Valencia Aguirre currently works at the Swiss Foundation for Demining (FSD) as a Technical Adviser on data analysis. Aguirre has experience in research carried out in the field of evidence-based decision making in different areas. She has been working in the field of humanitarian demining,

supporting the national authority in monitoring indicators to improve operational efficiency as well as the systematic and rigorous use of information.

Angela De Santis, Ph.D.

Country Director for Colombia
Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD)



Angela De Santis, Ph.D., has over fifteen years of professional experience, including in the fields of crisis management and humanitarian aid. Due to her work as Adviser and Regional Focal Point at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHHD), and humanitarian demining

consultant and program manager for mine action programs, she has extensive experience working with mine action programs in Africa and Latin America, with special focus on Colombia. She holds a doctorate in Remote Sensing, GIS, and Topography, an international master's degree in the Management of NGOs, International Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid; and a Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. She has experience in several areas of mine action including victim assistance, post-natural disaster environments, gender, conflicts in Latin America, and capacity-building.

Sebastián Tovar Jaramillo

Translator and Interpreter
Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD)



Sebastián Tovar Jaramillo is a modern language professional specializing in commercial translation and holds a master's degree in political science and international relations. He has worked in the mine action sector in Colombia for more than four years as a supporting member of the team of

technical advisers in FSD. As a fundamental part of his job, Jaramillo has strengthened his knowledge through seminars, meetings, and field visits in regard to technical subjects, including the use of manual, mine detection dog, and mechanical assets in demining; EOD activities, and environmental management in mine action. In November 2019, Jaramillo was involved in an initial mine risk education training coordinated by the Danish Demining Group (DDG) and led by OACP - Descontamina Colombia. He also has been involved in the construction of national mine action standards since 2017.

ENDNOTES

Impact Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic on Humanitarian Demining in Colombia

By Salomé Valencia Aguirre, Angela De Santis, Ph.D., and Sebastián Tovar Jaramillo [Swiss Foundation for Mine Action]

1. Johns Hopkins University, “COVID-19 Map - Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center Coronavirus,” day accessed 28 April, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3wzV9Jx>.
2. Urrea-Ríos, Ivan Leonardo and Piraján, Jackeline, “Impacto de la pandemia covid-19 sobre la economía colombiana. Una pandemia temporal con efectos permanentes (Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Colombian Economy. A Temporary Pandemic with Permanent Effects),” SSRN, 20 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/34mZ93X>.
3. ONUMJERES COLOMBIA, “Dimensiones de Género en la crisis del COVID-19 en Colombia: Impactos e implicaciones son diferentes para mujeres y hombres,” <https://bit.ly/2TIP8Sz>.
4. Bindseil, Wolfgang and Mansfield, Ian (2020) “Mine Action in the Time of COVID-19: A Donor’s Perspective,” *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction* 24, no. 2 (December 2020): 9–11, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol24/iss2/4>.
5. *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fkPNw6>.
6. Tablero de Desminado Humanitario - OFICINA DEL ALTO COMISIONADO PARA LA PAZ - DESCONTAMINA COLOMBIA, Información de operaciones monitoreadas y aprobadas por el CEM con corte 2007 a 31 enero 2021, <https://bit.ly/2RNaw9c>.
7. ACAPS, COVID-19 Impact on humanitarian operations, April 2020.
8. Three international organizations (The HALO Trust, Humanity & Inclusion, Danish Demining Group), plus two national organizations.
9. Descontamina Colombia, <https://bit.ly/3vwwaHq>.