

Humanitarian Mine Action and Peacebuilding

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The peacebuilding impact of Humanitarian Mine Action is massive. Peacebuilding is first and foremost about preventing the reemergence of violent conflict. Its core activities are political, but any intervention in a conflict environment – mine action included - has peacebuilding impacts. Mine action may be particularly important in relation to peacebuilding: it depends on the negotiation of access by the parties to the conflict; it is addressing an instrument of war; and it is freeing up essential resources, which may also be disputed ones.

The peacebuilding impacts of mine action are rarely referred to as such. There is a real risk that some of the most important contributions of this sector remain largely unacknowledged. There is also a risk that opportunities for making a difference are lost, and even that mine action can at times contribute to exacerbate the conflict.

There is a need to explore these issues more systematically, and to strengthen knowledge within the sector, including among donors, field personnel and key stakeholders in affected areas.

The idea that mine action contributes to peacebuilding is not new. It was firmly established in the 1999 version of the *Bad Honnef Framework* for mine action.¹ Almost four years later, we still lack a more precise conception of the principles and mechanisms for which mine action may be an integral part of peacebuilding. When such a link is referred to, it is most often in very general terms: mine action is seen as part of the inventory of peacebuilding activities. The more difficult questions, about when and how mine action contributes to peacebuilding, and when it does not, have not been systematically explored.

This presentation aims to take stock of the current situation on mine action and peacebuilding, rather than to present firm conclusions. In the following, I will first be looking at donor policies, secondly at opportunities (for more a more active peacebuilding role of mine action), and thirdly I will address some of the possible challenges.

¹ The first version of the Bad Honnef Framework, from June 1997, while promoting similar ideals, was far less explicit on the link between mine action and peacebuilding.

Donor Policies

Taking the ten largest donors to mine action as a starting point, we reviewed both the mine action and the peacebuilding policy statements. In the policy statements for *peacebuilding* we find that mine action is:

- primarily emphasized as a security issue, with a focus on reducing fear, easing mobility, and on security sector reforms more broadly
- secondarily emphasized as a precondition for reconstruction and development
- only marginally linked to political aspects of peacebuilding, such as reconciliation, confidence-building, and conflict resolution

If we look at the available policy statements for *mine action* from the same donors, we find that the link to peacebuilding is:

- in the majority of cases, either non-existent or referred to only in passing
- in those cases where a link is made explicit, either simply referring to a singular success story, or referring to one particular mechanism.

On a positive note, the policy statements by the major donors indicate that the general relationship between mine action and peacebuilding is at least partly acknowledged. However, there is little in the way of suggesting principles, or developing the range of possible mechanisms. Furthermore, when links are developed, they are almost exclusively with reference to security or development aspects, and rarely with reference to the political aspects of peacebuilding. Therefore, I will focus on the political aspects in the following section.

Opportunities

As a concept, peacebuilding is as broad as it is vague. It is a term coined to sensitize actors to particular aspects of interventions in conflict and post-conflict settings, rather than to guide analysis, which is why pinning down the mechanisms requires substantial work. In this section, I will be looking at three core issues within the political domain.

Firstly, reconciliation: the effort to tear down old divisions and to make it possible for parties who may have been involved in great atrocities to live together. Generally, cooperative activities and processes of transitional justice are the primary mechanisms, and mine action may contribute to both. Mine action may contribute to reconciliation rather directly, as when former adversaries work side by side in a program, or when a former party to the conflict is seen by the population to be removing the instruments of war. Furthermore, when mine education activities incorporate rights issues and the international instruments aimed at protecting civilians, this builds awareness of social injustice.

Secondly, confidence-building: the gradual building of mutual confidence between parties that they are committed to peace. Building confidence is crucial at any stage of conflict settlement, from the initial stage where it is a precondition for any negotiations to start, to the late post-conflict stages, where it remains important to prevent the resumption of violence. Mine action can play an important role,

particularly in the earlier phases when parties may be hesitant to give up mines, as they are effectively still seen as instruments of war, vital to their security if conflict re-erupts. Stockpile destruction can play an important role here. Access to clear landmines, including the systematization of information about their whereabouts, may be extremely sensitive, yet we often see that mine action organizations have been successful in gaining such access, sometimes even as the conflict continues. A recent example from Sri Lanka, where the government and the LTTE agreed to demine the key highway A9, which links the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of the country, is a case in point. More generally, the confidence building efforts of mine action organizations are often conceived merely as a precondition for access. In negotiating access, however, confidence is built, and moreover, if clearance starts to give positive results with no setback in forms of renewed hostilities, confidence will grow.

Thirdly, conflict resolution: the bringing together of parties to seek joint solutions in the best interest of both. At times, mine action managers may be engaging in pure conflict resolution missions in order to be able to start information gathering and demining. Mine action initiatives in the Sudan have provided interesting illustrations of this. Similarly, as demining may free-up disputed resources, it may be necessary to set up mechanisms for dealing with the disputes, and those may again have effect far beyond the mine action sector. The land-disputes in Cambodia led to the setting up of institutions to settle landrights, and once these were in place, their activities extended far beyond clarifying the ownership of demined land.

Challenges

It therefore appears that mine action already has massive impact on peacebuilding processes, and that there are rich opportunities for developing the relationship. If so, what are the areas of concern, and what are the possible counterarguments? I will look at a few examples:

1. Increased risk to personnel? If mine action programs are designed and implemented in order to provide more direct support to peacebuilding processes, it may be that in some contexts, personnel and organizations are seen as political actors and subsequently become targets. This is a legitimate concern, but mine action unavoidably has strong political effects – seeking to eliminate an instrument of war; collaborating with belligerent parties; freeing up disputed resources. While it is not unlikely that a conscious political role may increase risk, it is equally true that neglecting the political impact of the interventions will be dangerous.
2. Reduced speed of clearance? The international mine action sector has developed a capacity for rapid response, based on strong organizations and established practices. Rapid response may be in conflict with the objective of maximizing the peacebuilding impact, requiring involvement of all relevant stakeholders, and building local and national capacities. This challenge, however, goes far beyond the debate about peacebuilding, as mine action practitioners have increasingly realized that a precondition for successful mine action interventions is to be ‘hurrying cautiously’.

3. Blurred objectives? If contributing to peacebuilding is defined as the main objective, this may be at odds with existing aims, such as reducing landmine incidents, or facilitating reconstruction and development. Furthermore, the peacebuilding objective is a particularly abstract one, and developing concrete measures of success is complicated. The concern with blurred objectives is important, and there is little doubt that managing mine action is becoming more complex as we keep adding objectives. Ultimately, there is little alternative but to address the issue head on. Mine action by and large works in conflict environments, and it addresses issues which are essentially political; hence, not paying attention to its impact on issues of conflict and peace is simply not an option.

Conclusions

Humanitarian Mine Action, like any other sectorial effort operating in conflict settings, need to strengthen its sensitivity to conflict. The minimalist approach is to aim at preventing negative effects of intervention. The maximalist approach is to place peacebuilding impacts at the center. A sensible approach probably lies between those extremes, where organizations and their personnel are equipped to assess the impact of interventions on conflict, but also to respond to arising opportunities for enhancing peace.

Current practices in mine action certainly are not blind to the political impact, and practitioners routinely assess the conflict dimensions of their intervention. Mine action programs already have a tremendous positive impact on peacebuilding, even if not acknowledged as such. There is a need, however, to understand more precisely what those impacts are, in order to further develop the peacebuilding impact of mine action, with implications for mine action policies and practices worldwide. The good news is that existing experiences provide a solid foundation for such a systematizing exercise.