

Mine Action and Peacebuilding: Exploring the Agenda

Summary

The **peacebuilding impact** of mine action programmes is substantial, but often not fully acknowledged. However, it is important to recognise that although mine action interventions can help build peace, they may also fuel conflict through insensitive policies and programming. By exploring existing experiences, the mine action community can establish a basis for developing the full peacebuilding impact of mine action, as shared experience feeds into policy and practice.

In order to explore these issues, the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies (Fafo AIS), the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and Landmine Action UK (LMA) hosted a roundtable discussion with practitioners and researchers in August 2003.

The roundtable discussed:

- the relationships between mine action and peacebuilding
- how mine action programmes can contribute to peacebuilding, and how they can potentially fuel conflict
- ways to increase awareness of the role of mine action in peacebuilding among practitioners.

Fafo, LMA and PRIO are now in the process of developing a collaborative policy research project, to be carried out between 2003 and 2005. The aim is to develop a more systematic understanding of how mine action and peacebuilding interact, and to provide affected communities, decision makers and practitioners with concrete policy and action recommendations.

Background

Peacebuilding is a concept that refers to the way in which a sustainable end to violent conflict necessitates an enduring effort across multiple domains in society. Peacebuilding also takes place at multiple levels – ranging from the local to the international – before, during and after conflict. The national level is usually the primary focus, where institutions are established to define the priorities of and to co-ordinate the overall peacebuilding effort. At the international level, programmes can be designed to heal the wounds of external engagement, a path that has been pursued by South Africa in its support for mine action in the wider southern African region. At the community level, external interventions can help to rebuild confidence between groups, demonstrate transparency in information gathering and decision making, and safeguard a just distribution of resources.

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Although it is *mine clearance* that is most commonly referred to as a peacebuilding activity, all of the various components of mine action – mine risk education, information gathering, victim assistance, advocacy and stockpile destruction, and mine clearance itself – have the potential to contribute to peacebuilding. However, in many cases, the peacebuilding impact of each of these components has yet to be identified.

To give an example: an initiative to gather information – such as the Sudan Landmine Information & Response Initiative (SLIRI), which involved representatives from both sides of the conflict – may be significant in terms of fostering confidence between belligerent parties.

In Afghanistan, the mine action programme has been operating successfully during conditions of war for more than a decade. The programme's positive impacts go well beyond reducing the impact of mines, and include demonstrating how people from various groups can work together for a common purpose, negotiating with armed groups over access to minefields, and raising people's awareness of fundamental rights.

Mine risk education initiatives have the potential to reach large sections of a country's population and can include more general lessons about the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty and principles of international humanitarian law.

Why is it important to link mine action and peacebuilding?

The role of mine action as a contributor to peacebuilding efforts has long been acknowledged. Yet, this role is formulated only in the most general terms, whereby mine action is seen as simply one of many elements on a list of peacebuilding activities. An alternative approach involves investigating the ways in which mine action may – or may not – play a larger role in the building of peace. At the same time, the current focus on security and development could be expanded to include the impact of mine action on peacebuilding in the political arena – in terms of confidence building, conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Awareness of the peacebuilding impact of mine action has primarily focused on the security domain, while less attention has been paid to mine action's long-term development impact, and little to none to its impact in the political domain. There is reason to argue that mine action may have considerable impact in all these domains, but as yet, its full contribution to peacebuilding has not been recognised.

A preliminary examination of the existing impact of mine action on peacebuilding reveals that mine action – like any other type of intervention in a conflict situation – has the potential not only to do good, but also to do harm. For example, demining projects in Cambodia during the mid-1990s were followed by land-grabbing by officials to the detriment of poor local

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residents, leading to new tensions and demonstrating the potential for doing harm. In some provinces, the problem was addressed through the establishment of so-called Land Use Planning Units (LUPUs), with a mandate to clarify land rights and to prioritise land for demining. As a part of the country's administrative structure, these LUPUs have an impact not only on the distribution of demined land, but also on land rights in general.

An improved understanding of the ways in which mine action contributes to peacebuilding should inform mine action and peacebuilding policies alike. Actors in the mine action sector would benefit from this both through increased recognition and understanding of what they already do, and from the opportunity that it would provide for improving their practices. Peacebuilding at large will have much to learn from mine action – a specialised sector with extremely concrete objectives – for example, with respect to the way mine action may serve as a vehicle to building peace and its success in bridging the gaps between global political agreements and implementing action on the ground.

Experience from other sectors can also inform the peacebuilding agenda of mine action. Lessons can be learned from relief aid, development and conflict analysis. There is already crossover in the experiences of these different sectors. For example, the employment of demobilised soldiers in mine action is an area that receives much positive attention when peacebuilding is considered. Yet, it is

increasingly acknowledged that employing ex-combatants may also have harmful effects. Such dilemmas are not exclusive to mine action, but are documented in the broader sector of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes.

Harnessing the potential of mine action's contribution to peacebuilding

In addressing the problem of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), mine action is extremely concrete in the effect that it has on people's daily lives. It also has huge symbolic significance, tackling the effects of an instrument of war that belligerent parties may be hesitant to give up when confidence in an enduring peace is lacking. Importantly, the perception of landmines as an illegitimate means of warfare is often strong amongst civilian populations, and parallels the principles that inform the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty.

Although poorly documented, there is already a wealth of experience within the mine action sector on what does and does not work in terms of contributing to peace. To solidify the peacebuilding impact of mine action, existing experience should be taken as a starting point. While there is undoubtedly large variation between the different contexts in which mine action operates, it is possible to draw general recommendations for policy and practice.

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The research project that Fafo, LMA and PRIO intend to undertake over the next two years will use case studies, fieldwork, literature reviews, interviews and roundtable discussions with practitioners and policymakers in mine action and peacebuilding, and will examine lessons learned in other sectors. In this way, we plan to build a fuller picture of the interaction between mine action and peacebuilding in order to improve mine action at both policy and field levels.

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Key documents

- German Initiative to Ban Landmines, 'Mine Action Programmes: From a Development-Oriented Point of View ("The Bad Honnef Framework")', Berlin, 1999; available at http://www.landmine.de/fix/BH_English.pdf
- Harpviken, Kristian Berg & Bernt A. Skåra, 'Humanitarian Mine Action and Peacebuilding', Third World Quarterly, vol. 24, no.5, October 2003
- UN Inter Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action, 'Mine Action Guidelines for Ceasefire and Peace Agreements', New York, 2003; available at http://www.mineaction.org/sp/highlights/displayhighlights.cfm?doc_ID=1494

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Fafo AIS
Borggata 2B
P.O. Box 2947 Tøyen
NO-0608 Oslo
Norway

www.fafo.no/ais
chr@fafo.no



Landmine Action UK
1st floor
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP
United Kingdom

www.landmineaction.org
rosy@landmineaction.org



International Peace Research Institute, Oslo

International Peace Research Institute, Oslo
Fuglehauggt. 11
NO-0260 Oslo
Norway

www.prio.no
amac@prio.no