



Research & Studies

Shifting the Status Quo: Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing the Needs of Population affected by Explosive Ordnance Contamination in Afghanistan

Armed Violence Reduction (AVR)

2024

RS | FP | 47



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Author

Jenisha Shah, Armed Violence Reduction Technical Officer, Humanity & Inclusion (HI)

HI Contributors

Abdul Basit DURANI, Humanitarian Access Liaison and Advocacy Specialist; Alma Taslidzan, Disarmament and Protection of Civilians Advocacy Manager; Aude Brus, Research Specialist; Héloïse PIHERY, Senior EORE Technical Officer; Jessica TROPEA, Humanitarian Advocacy Officer; Kaitlin HODGE, AVR Specialist; Mathilde SAVINI, Global Armed Violence Reduction Policy and Development Manager; Perrine BENOIST, AVR Director; Umo YOUNG, Technical Head of Program Afghanistan.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks all those in HI and its partners for their assistance in supplying information and guidance for this assignment. This report would not have been possible without their time and participation. The author wishes to acknowledge the experts and key informants from the humanitarian mine action (HMA) sector in Afghanistan and from a wide range of CSOs, humanitarian agencies, and bilateral and multilateral partners working in Afghanistan, whom HI interviewed during the study. HI also recognise the inputs of individuals from a wide range of communities across Afghanistan who participated in the interviews and focus group discussions.

With the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The findings and views expressed in the report are those of the author, based on her understanding of available documentation and interviews conducted during the assignment.

A Humanity & Inclusion publication

Armed Violence Reduction (AVR) Division

Editing & Layout

Stéphanie MASSONI – Innovation, Impact & Information Division, Angélique BOU NAKHLE MOUJAES, AVR Institutional Communications Officer

Cover Photo

© Jenisha Shah, AVR Technical Officer HI

Rights and Permissions



This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Under the Creative Commons-Non Commercial-No Derivatives license, you are free to copy, distribute, and transmit this work, for non commercial purposes only, under the following conditions: **Attribution**-Please cite the work as: Jenisha Shah. Shifting the Status-Quo: Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing the Needs of the Population Affected by Explosive Ordnance Contamination. Lyon: Humanity & Inclusion, May 2024. License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). **Non-commercial**-You may not use this work for commercial purposes. **No Derivative Works**-You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Content

List of Acronyms.....	4
Introduction	5
Case Study Objectives.....	8
Methodology.....	9
1. Design of the study.....	9
2. Individual Selection.....	9
3. Tools and modalities (questionnaires / data collection process)	9
4. Limitations	10
5. Ethical aspects	11
Findings and discussions	14
Part 1: Priority demographic for HMA: Identifying the target population and their challenges.....	14
1.1 Young Boys Caught in the Crossfire of Poverty, Unemployment and EO Contamination threat	14
1.2 EO survivors and victims in the face of lost livelihoods and discrimination.....	15
1.3 Women and their silent struggles	17
1.4 Returnees and people on the move risking contact with EO contamination	20
Part 2: Confronting the challenges in delivering effective HMA in Afghanistan	21
2.1 Restrictions from the DfA.....	21
2.2 From the Top Down: Lack of funding and Inconsistent Governance Impede HMA Operations and Institutions	23
Part 3: Adaptable Responses to Ensure Effective HMA Continuity in Trying Contexts.....	26
3.1 Building trust with the communities and the authorities	27
3.2 Creativity and flexibility in decision making.....	29
3.3 Better coordination, communication and consensus between humanitarian organisations	31
Conclusion.....	33
Appendices	35
Bibliography.....	35

List of Acronyms

AFG	Afghani
AVR	Armed Violence Reduction
CAAVR	Comprehensive Approach to AVR
CIS	Contamination Impact Survey
COVID	Coronavirus
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DMAC	Directorate of Mine Action Coordination
DfA	De-Facto Authorities
EO	Explosive Ordnance
EORE	Explosive Ordnance Risk Education
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
EUR	Euro
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDI	General Directorate of Intelligence
HI	Humanity & Inclusion
HMA	Humanitarian Mine Action
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IMAS	International Mine Action Standards
IMSMA	Information Management System for Mine Action
KII	Key Informant Interview
MATC	Mine Action Technical Cell
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOK	Norwegian Krone
NTS	Non-Technical Survey
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPD	Organization of Persons with Disabilities
PPQC	Plant Protection Quarantine Certificate
PT	Physiotherapy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TS	Technical Survey
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNMAS	United Nations Mine Action Service
USD	United States Dollar
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
VA	Victim Assistance

Introduction

It's winter in Kabul, where the mighty Hindukush range frontiers the city in a narrow valley. Sub-zero temperatures grip the region regularly and resilience becomes a way of life. In many homes, the biting cold yields to the comforting warmth of the *bukhari*—a traditional wood-burning chimney. A typical morning outside Humanity & Inclusion (HI)'s Kabul premises feels chilly with crisp air; next to it lies a trolley laden with freshly chopped wood, patiently waiting to be turned to a cozy fire.



Wood in a trolley outside HI Office, Kabul
© Jenisha Shah



Bukhari inside HI Office, Kabul
© Jenisha Shah

However, the luxury of this home-delivered wood is not extended to every home in the country. Faiza¹, a resident of Kabul whose humble home mirrors that of many, could not afford such conveniences. On a winter morning in 1992, she stepped out to collect wood for her *bukhari*. It was the time of intense fighting around Kabul and she could hear the echoes of the conflict, as she walked carefully into the nearby forest. Unfortunately, in the quiet of the forest, an unknowing step on a mine triggered an explosion that pushed Faiza's world into darkness. Faiza lost her vision in the incident.

Through numerous interviews conducted for the research, a common theme appeared – **Explosive Ordnance (EO)² incidents often occurred when people sought the simple comfort of collecting wood to keep warm or undertook seemingly routine tasks.** Faiza's story, echoed by many others, demonstrates the hidden costs and profound consequence of undertaking everyday tasks in a country grappling with the aftermath of a protracted conflict.

¹ Given the sensitive nature of the case study, only first names in the form of pseudonyms have been used and organisations have been anonymised.

² EO includes a range of hazardous items. This includes but is not limited to: different types of landmines (such as anti-personnel mines and anti-vehicle mines), unexploded ordnance (UXOs), and explosive remnants of war (ERW). All of these are covered by the IMAS.



Naan Shop, Kabul
© Jenisha Shah

Consider another scenario from the streets of Kabul that are full of fruit and vegetable vendors offering abundance of colourful produce, accompanied by the aroma of freshly baked tandoor bread from bustling naan shops. This vibrant scenery of produce sharply contrasts with the harsh reality of starvation amidst the current economic strife in the country. In the course of one of our interviews with an Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) in Kunduz, a city in the Northeastern province of Afghanistan, we learned how members of the OPD had pooled their meagre resources each contributing 20 AFG, approximately 20 cents, to prevent a desperate father from selling his son, due to poverty. This is not an isolated story. Desperation, fuelled by economic conditions, is increasingly driving parents to sell their young daughters into marriage³.

The case of selling children, confirms the unmissable economic situation that has spared no one. The economic conditions in Afghanistan are undeniably dire, casting a shadow that looms larger for those already struggling with the hardships as EO victims.

Following decades of war, Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of explosive hazard contamination in the world including both legacy explosive contamination and new types of explosive hazards, in particular Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), as well as explosive remnants of war (ERW)⁴.

³ Washington Post Editorial Board. (2024, January 16). [Afghanistan's child brides: The stories behind the statistics](#). The Washington Post.

⁴ Humanitarian Programme Cycle. (2023). [Humanitarian Needs Overview](#). Issued January 2023.

Based on mine action projections, 4.9 million people (including people living within 1 km of explosive hazards, cross-border returnees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and conflict affected non-displaced populations) need mine action services⁵. Over 3,750 hazardous areas continue to affect approximately 1,500 communities across the country.

The government of Afghanistan requested a clearance extension at the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention meeting in 2012, with a plan to clear all-known contaminated areas by 2023.⁶ Another extension request was submitted at the Meeting of States Parties of the Mine Ban Treaty in November 2022, to clear all known contaminated areas by March 2025. While working towards this objective remains very important, Afghanistan is far from realizing it, let alone by 2025, but not at all until some important changes and efforts are effectuated by all parties involved.



Explosive Ordnance Risk Education Poster, Kunduz
© HI, Afghanistan

⁵ ibid

⁶ MAPA. (2023). [30 Years of Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan \(MAPA\)](#).

Case Study Objectives

The objectives of this case study are threefold:

- I. At the outset, the objective of the study is to address the need for contemporary, firsthand information concerning population affected by EO contamination in Afghanistan. The study aims to do this by **identifying the segment of the population most in need of Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) and their challenges**. Though interviews for this purpose were conducted in Kabul, Kunduz and Kandahar, the findings can be applied to the larger context of Afghanistan.
- II. Secondly, the study examines the **obstacles encountered in delivering effective HMA to the population**. Interviews with HMA actors, Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) informs this section of the study.
- III. Lastly, the study explores **both current and potential approaches for navigating these challenges through HI's people-centred and integrated responses** in the given context of Afghanistan.

With the help of testimonies from those affected, the case study aims to contribute essential insights currently absent from the discourse. This understanding is critical for delivering targeted and effective HMA.

Methodology

1. Design of the study

The research questions were addressed using a combination of desk review of literature, testimonies, Key Informant Interviews (KIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with relevant stakeholders and individuals from the affected population.

The initial phase of the study involved a desk review of available literature, focusing on the extent of EO contamination and its impact on the population. This literature review was also crucial in understanding the broader context of Afghanistan and the evolving political dynamics since the 2021 takeover by the De-facto Authorities (DfA)⁷. The insights derived from this desk review informed the development of qualitative interview grids and were incorporated into the case study, where relevant.

The primary data collection for this study was done through qualitative interviews and testimonies, with an aim to collect firsthand information on the experiences of the population affected by EO contamination and the responses of mine action actors⁸ in the evolving political environment.

2. Individual Selection

Respondents were identified primarily through a snowball approach. For interviews with individuals from the affected population, efforts were made to ensure inclusion in terms of gender, age, and disability status. While complete inclusion was not always achievable (refer to Limitations), efforts were made to include persons with physical and visual impairments.

Through a qualitative research approach, a total of 13 KIs and 2 FGDs were conducted, engaging 51 stakeholders and individuals combined, including those working for HMA and victims of EO contamination. All interviews in Kabul, Kunduz, and Kandahar were conducted in person.

3. Tools and modalities (questionnaires / data collection process)

The qualitative interview grids were developed before each interview. Interviews with members of the affected population covered questions on personal situation, experiences and challenges of living in EO contaminated areas, Victim Assistance (VA), Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) and personal views. In interviews with mine action partners, questions were oriented towards understanding their responses to the needs of the population and their access challenges. Lastly, questions focused on their views on addressing the needs of the affected population, especially in changing circumstances and across different provinces, using adapted approaches.

⁷ The study uses the term DfA to refer to the group that took control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. The words 'Taliban' and 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)' are used to refer to the same group.

⁸ Mine action actors refers to the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), United Nations Mine Action Services (UNMAS) and the authority governing humanitarian mine action in Afghanistan.

Additionally, two separate FGDs were conducted — one with a group of 10 men and another with 10 women, selected from different districts in Kandahar. The FGDs centred around their experiences of living in EO contaminated areas, aiming to understand associated challenges and seeking suggestions on reaching the population given the current restrictions on conducting community based EORE imposed by the DfA. The FGDs were conducted keeping in mind HI's people centred approach. This approach aims at placing people at the centre and allowing them to collectively influence the decisions that affect them. All the interviews and FGDs were conducted through a span of three weeks in the month of December 2023.



Who is a Victim?

For the case study, the term 'victim' refers to persons, either collectively or individually⁹:

- Who have experienced physical, emotional and/or psychological injury, economic loss;
- Whose recognition, enjoyment or exercise of their human rights on an equal basis with others has been hindered; or
- Whose full and effective participation in society has been restricted by an accident with a confirmed or suspected presence of EO;
- People killed, injured and/or impaired, their families, and communities affected by EO.

Also note that 'indirect victim' is a sub-group of 'victim' that include family members of direct victims, as well as individuals and communities affected by EO¹⁰.

The term 'survivor' refers to direct victim who has been injured and/or impaired, but not killed as a result of an accident with EO¹¹.

4. Limitations

Research for the case study presented some limitations. At the outset, access to some segments of the population was a challenge. Restrictions imposed by DfA especially limited our access to women. Nevertheless, we managed to engage with some women in the affected communities through FGDs, OPDs comprising female members, discussions at EORE sessions and other humanitarian staff. However, direct engagement with children was not feasible. Instead, we relied on conversations with caregivers who conveyed the needs of the children.

A significant number of interviews with the affected population were conducted in Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik the local languages encountered during interviews in Afghanistan. Given that the researcher did not speak Pashtun and professional translators were always not available, posed a risk of some information being lost in translation.

⁹ IMAS for Victim Assistance 13.10

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

This challenge was mitigated to some extent through informal conversations in Urdu, a language known to and spoken by the researcher and many of the interviewees who had lived in Pakistan at some point in their life and through a strong influence of Bollywood in the country.

The case study relied on some secondary sources that had not been updated since 2021. This outdatedness potentially impacts the relevance of some of the information gathered. Insights derived from interviews and testimonies were important in addressing this limitation. By prioritizing firsthand accounts, we aimed to gather more recent and pertinent information, compensating for the potential limitations of certain dated sources of information.

5. Ethical aspects

Due consideration has been given to the eight ethical principles adopted by HI specific to managing data as part of a study. These principles include guaranteeing the protection of subjects, adopting a community-centred approach, obtaining free and informed consent, ensuring referral mechanisms, securing personal and sensitive data, guaranteeing the appropriate use and sharing of information, ensuring the scientific validity of the activity, and conducting an external review of the study.

Moreover, due to the sensitive nature of some of the information shared and the volatile operating environment in Afghanistan, first name pseudonyms have been used for all individuals quoted in the study to maintain anonymity.



Temporal Milestones in Afghanistan's recent past

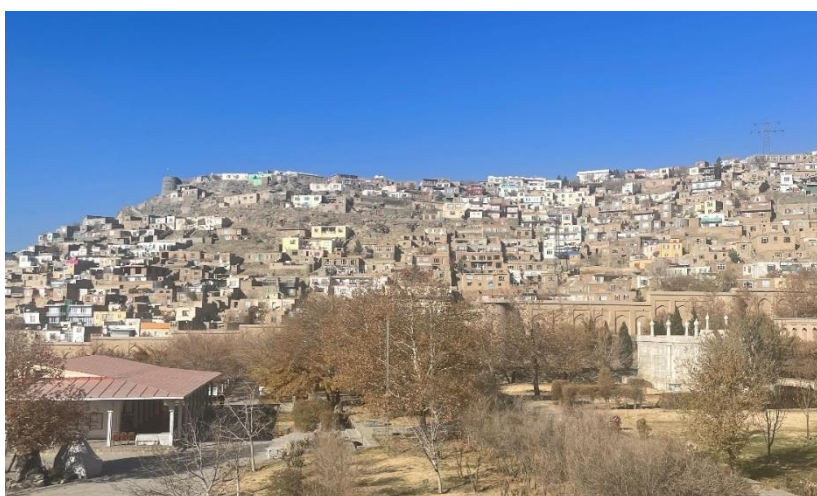
While in most parts of the world we have been looking at recent periodic events in the pre and post COVID-19 era, in Afghanistan, these milestones look different. The country's recent past is characterized by a series of notable events, each affecting different segments of the population in different measures. An important marker for many is the demarcation of timelines before and after August 2021. This watershed moment in demarcation is subsequently accompanied by markers for changing governing modalities, affecting diverse demographic groups. Each segment interprets and experiences the events through the lens of their own unique challenges.

For example, for girls, the demarcation aligns with the pre and post-girls' education ban, while women NGO workers reflect on the timeline before and after the prohibition on women working in NGOs¹². Opium cultivators, on the other hand, perceive a division in their lives corresponding to the ban on opium cultivation.

¹² On 24 December 2022, the Taliban issued a letter banning women from working in international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). To date, two exceptions have been made to the ban: (1) a verbal exemption granted for women health care workers, and some localized agreements made whereby women can participate in select activities/interventions; (2) an education exemption enabling women teachers and girls to attend school up to grade six.

Persons living with disability anchor their temporal reference to the period before and after the loss of stipends. The repetitive shift in governance impacts every segment of the population, with the introduction of sudden, vague, and often exacerbating changes in governing modalities.

Therefore, it is important to look at the challenges faced by the population, not only within the context of the protracted conflict but also under the prevailing circumstances that dictate their daily lives. These circumstances are at times directly influenced by the edicts issued by the DfA, and, at other times, by the unwritten mandates of the provincial governing authorities.



Homes on hills bordering Kabul
© Jenisha Shah



Shifting Governance, Employment Realities and Regional Disparities

The most recent Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey indicates that half of the country's population lives in poverty, with 15 million facing food insecurity¹³. This economic uncertainty affects provinces differently. Moreover, governance in the country at the moment remains highly decentralised generating a complex employment landscape. During an interview it was revealed that following the DfA's rise to power, in certain provinces a significant number of people erstwhile employed by the then Afghan government were dismissed, resulting in widespread unemployment. However, at the time of the dismissal, the DfA retained some personnel in each department to preserve institutional knowledge. But three years since 2021 and upon acquisition of this know-how, they have begun letting go of even those previously retained. This has created a situation where employment opportunities are closely tied to one's affiliation with the DfA, requiring a history of fighting against allied forces for qualification.

¹³ [Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan 2024](#).

In Kandahar particularly, it was observed that individuals not associated with the DfA struggled to find employment. A partner working in mine action highlighted the drastic decline in opium cultivation in the southern provinces, leading farmers to switch to cereal crops with lower market value. There is also a shift in the gravity of employment opportunities based on geographic location.

During the FGD in Kandahar, participants, many of whom were farmers, unanimously identified the deteriorating economic situation as their top concern. The suspension of fresh fruit and vegetable imports from Afghanistan to Pakistan due to new customs requirements, particularly the Plant Protection Quarantine Certificate (PPQC)¹⁴, further compounded economic woes for them. Farmers expressed frustration not only with the changing governing modalities but also with the irregularity of governance and deteriorating relations with neighbour Pakistan, adversely impacting their livelihoods.



Heaps of grated carrots and raisins sold at a marketplace in Kabul for the preparation of a local rice delicacy, Kabuli
© Jenisha Shah

¹⁴ Dawn. (2023, September 19). [Import of edibles from Afghanistan suspended](#).

Findings and discussions

Part 1: Priority demographic for HMA: Identifying the target population and their challenges

1.1 Young Boys Caught in the Crossfire of Poverty, Unemployment and EO Contamination threat

In a country highly contaminated with EO, young boys emerge as the key demographic in need of HMA. Their lack of awareness on threats posed by EO contamination coupled with the relatively unrestricted movement and the harsh socioeconomic conditions, often lead them into dangerous situations.



"Only recently, a group of young boys returning from school stopped by an ice cream shop. Realizing they didn't have enough money to buy the ice cream, the seller agreed that he would exchange the ice cream for scrap metal. To materialise this barter, the boys searched the roadside corners, unknowingly crossing paths with EO that went off. The boys didn't make it alive. All this for the want of ice cream," recounted a mine action partner.

An interviewee from an OPD, shares another heart-wrenching episode highlighting the desperation driving young boys to risk their lives, "**Recently, five children lost their lives while innocently playing with what they believed were toys — only to discover they were deadly explosives. In a separate incident, a young boy stumbled upon a piece of metal, innocently pressed it, lost both his arms. The father was crying. Sending their children in search of scrap metal seemed like the only choice he was left with. For these people, collecting scrap metal becomes a desperate means to secure even the barest essentials.**"



Ongoing EORE session with boys in Kunduz
© HI, Afghanistan

The allure of the 40mm shiny grenades is especially infamous for attracting young boys. **Almost unanimously identified by all interviewees, boys bear the brunt as the segment most likely to encounter EO.** And the underlying reason for this heightened risk is their pursuit of scrap metal in the deteriorating economic situation, compelling them to resort to this dangerous activity in a heavily contaminated country.

While the connection between economic challenges and the decision to send children to collect scrap metal may not always have a direct correlation, it highlights the prevailing dire economic conditions in Afghanistan. Given the gravity of the situation, there is an urgent need to address economic uncertainties along with mine action through comprehensive and sustainable interventions supporting alternative livelihoods opportunities.

1.2 EO survivors and victims in the face of lost livelihoods and discrimination

Among the segment of population in need of HMA, are the survivors of recent and legacy contamination in Afghanistan. The country's Northeastern Province of Kunduz has witnessed heavy fighting and frequent shifts of alliances through the years. This has resulted in significant contamination in the province.



"I was driving my car in the Chardhara district of Kunduz when it ran over a mine. I lost my legs during the incident." recalls a survivor, his voice carrying the weight of the tragic accident.

Similarly, during the FGD in Kandahar, participants highlight the enduring legacy of conflict. **They explain that while much of the contamination stems from the Soviet Afghan War era, subsequent civil wars and clashes with allied forces and the DfA have led to an increase in the use of IEDs, resulting in widespread EO contamination in the province.** Other participants recall tragic incidents, such as one individual losing their uncle in Panjwayi district after accidentally stepping on a mine while gathering leaves for sheep herding. In Arghandab district, amidst heavy fighting during the 2021 regime change, another man lost his eyesight when attempting to unearth a suspicious object with a shovel, which turned out to be an IED. The discussion is ripe with similar stories from Kandahar's Zhari district.

For survivors of EO incidents, the change of regime also marks a shift in their lives and livelihoods. Take the case of Abdul, a father of four who served as a soldier in the Afghan government back in 1988. His life took a drastic turn when he was wounded by a mine explosion during a mission near Kabul's outskirts. Following his injury, Abdul's journey has been marked by tides of regime changes. He first sought refuge in Iran in 1992, then traversed to Pakistan, only to return to Afghanistan in 2003 under the governance of allied forces. During this period, the government provided allowances to war victims, a lifeline for many like Abdul. However, he started worrying when in 2021 as Kabul ceased these payments, many like him were left without any income. The case of Aazar, a Kabul-based soldier, is similarly laden with uncertainty. **Aazar, who had sought work as a painter in Iran and later in Pakistan, returned to Afghanistan only to find that his daughter can no longer attend school and with the stop in payments of allowance, his son will now need to make ends meet by washing cars after school.** The abrupt halt in payment of allowances by DfA plunged families like Abdul and Aazar into financial distress.



"Life abroad was not easy either. We frequently encountered bullying and racism in Pakistan. So, we returned to Afghanistan, unaware that we'd lose our meagre earnings one day", Abdul explains.

In Kandahar, accounts reveal a stark contrast in support provided by the past and present regimes. **"As it turns out, only those sympathetic to the current government benefit from the allowance now, and among them, only those who engaged in recent conflict against allied forces"**, a mine action actor familiar with the situation confirms.

Accounts of survivors revealed that they once received an annual allowance of 60,000 AFG equivalent to about 750 EUR (8700 NOK) under the previous government, but since the regime shift, their meagre support was halved for a year before vanishing entirely two years ago. In an unsettling revelation, it was disclosed that survivors who fought with the DfA now receive triple the original allowance, a disparity that compounds the struggles of the survivors.

In Kunduz, the loss of allowance is just one of the many challenges faced by survivors. To make matters worse, they now find themselves at odds with community elders, as well. They explain that when aid reaches the hands of these elders for distribution, they staunchly refuse to allocate it to survivors, citing that they already receive government assistance, without any due diligence into the matter. This leaves survivors in a situation wherein they are excluded from all relevant support networks.

Moreover, assembling together for survivors and OPDs has become increasingly difficult. As was revealed during an interview, **any gathering that can potentially trigger an ideological uprising in the minds of the DfA, is swiftly quashed.** In Kandahar, the landscape is particularly hostile for OPDs, rights advocates, or awareness groups trying to assemble.

In Kandahar, the evidence of confiscation of the rights of the survivors and people with disability is even tangible. **This is visible through the deprivation of their right to assembly, tangibly manifested by the confiscation of their meeting premises, making it exceedingly difficult for them to advocate for themselves or resist the adversity.** Adding to their predicament is the stigmatisation of the disability itself.



"I fear they'll expel us from the country. I don't trust them. If I could flee on foot, I would, but with my injury I cannot even go too far, I tried," confides a survivor of an EO incident. When questioned about his aspirations for the future, he states, **"I've lost all hope for myself and my family here. There's no way for me to earn a living."** Others we interviewed expressed a longing for their children, both daughters and sons, to receive education and have access to better livelihood opportunities.

The loss of livelihood, confiscation of property and the right to assemble, coupled with living with the stigma associated with the disability, makes it ever more urgent for survivors and victims of EO to receive inclusive HMA and VA services.

1.3 Women and their silent struggles

During an EORE session in Kunduz's Chaardhara District, a woman weeps as the session is concluding. She regrets not being able to join earlier. Her grief is still raw from losing her daughter to a recent EO incident. Her daughter's search for a slipper fallen in the canal had led to a fatal encounter with a hidden EO. Meanwhile, in Kandahar, insights from a FGD reveal the ordeals of women like the participant who lost her fingers to a concealed EO while cooking, or those who mourn spouses lost in the fighting.



Ongoing EORE session for women in Kunduz
© Jenisha Shah

In Afghanistan, it's undeniable that women remain among the most vulnerable to the impacts of shifting governance structures that influence every aspect of their lives, including their experiences as victims of EO. Although statistics show men and boys more frequently encountering EO, societal constraints amplify the challenges for female survivors and victims.

Decades of war have changed gender dynamics in Afghanistan, with more women becoming heads of household, a role traditionally reserved for men, as many men have been killed or injured.

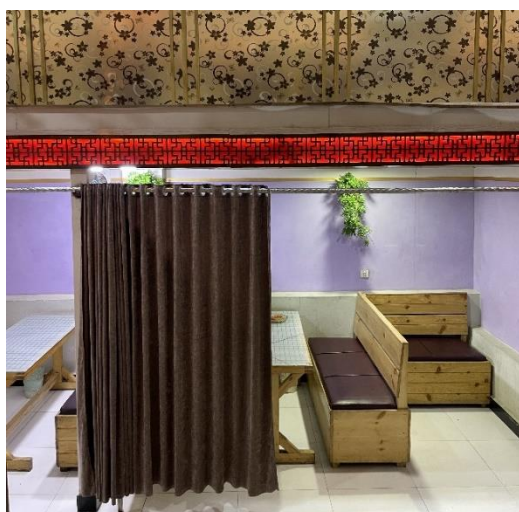
These women have been shouldering the responsibility of providing for their families following the EO incident. However, with the prevailing restrictions in employment and movement for women, they have been bearing this burden under constant threat of scrutiny from the DfA. Women led households in villages are the most impacted. In many cases, when they can no longer step outside, they are now compelled to send their young boys to fetch for the household.

In Kandahar, widows struggle to sustain livelihoods, with some resorting to traditional crafts like Kandahaari suit embroidery. In Kabul, there's a ray of hope, where women persist in their work, in utmost secrecy, always wary of the sudden scrutiny resulting in adverse consequences for them. In Kabul, a survivor shares how his wife's beauty salon, now operating from their home, serves as their sole source of income following the women's beauty salon ban. Another survivor narrated a similar story of his wife sustaining their household through her tailoring business conducted from their home.

The women engaged in tailoring or beauty salon services in Kabul, as well as embroidery in Kandahar, are individuals who received training in vocational activities before the regime change. However, the future for the younger girls remains grim, particularly in light of the ongoing restrictions on their education. In Kunduz, two young girls, spoke of a sense of aimlessness, complaining about the abrupt abandonment of their education due to the ban. They express a desire for vocational training to fill their idle days and provide a sense of purpose. **Additionally, without any secure means for livelihood, buying a house for women survivors has become especially difficult. Living in rented homes means that they cannot make changes to it to make it more accessible to adapt to their needs.**

In Kabul, long after COVID-19 pandemic, women on the streets continue to wear surgical masks over their abayas and headscarves, adhering strictly to the prescribed dress code, revealing only their eyes. In Kandahar, one doesn't even see women on the streets. Meanwhile, in Kunduz, women are forbidden from venturing out to restaurants in the evenings, even if they are accompanied. The little concession is for a local park being open to women every Wednesday, exclusively, presupposing women unemployment allowing them to stroll in parks during a weekday. The directive on the dress code adversely impacts women survivors. An interview with a woman survivor revealed her apprehension about wearing a burqa due to her use of crutches, which poses challenges for mobility.

Such restrictions not only limit women's freedom of movement but also their spirit.



Segregated eating space in a restaurant for families with women | © Jenisha Shah



A poster in the streets of Kabul © Jenisha Shah

The imposition of the Mahram in Islamic jurisprudence further exacerbates challenges faced by women victims in accessing essential services. Mahram mandates that women cannot travel unaccompanied by a male guardian for distances exceeding 72 kilometers. This male guardian, typically a husband or person with whom marriage is prohibited because of their close blood relationship, must accompany her on all her travels¹⁵.

¹⁵ It is important to note that while Mahram was also mandated in the previous regime, it was not monitored as strictly as it is, today.

The strictness with which Mahram is implemented varies across provinces but is worsening. For the many women heads of households, it is practically impossible to be accompanied by a mahram, as their male relatives may be dead, have gone missing, or have migrated¹⁶. This impedes them from accessing critical medical and other essential services located beyond their immediate vicinity.

In addition to physical constraints, social restrictions also impede women's ability to assemble or voice their concerns in Afghanistan. In Kandahar, the limitations are unmistakable, as women are restricted from participating in shoras (community councils) and organizing themselves. Instead, they rely on male family members to communicate their issues to community elders. However, for households without a male member or with uncooperative male family members, silence is their only recourse. Previously, they could seek assistance from an elderly woman in the community, but such avenues are now off limits.

The laws governing not only women who have been victims, but all women, have worsened since the DfA assumed power in 2021. Additionally, there is also a gradual but definite trend toward the normalization of the abnormal among women.



"In the beginning, when there was a change in the regime, we lived in a lot of fear and were very worried. By now, we have accepted our fate and know that at least there is no fighting," remarks an interviewee.

Likewise, Rania is a confident woman, always smiling and eager to speak up. When asked about her daily challenges, she claims there aren't any. She works as a tailor from her apartment, and is the sole breadwinner for her family. Her only wish is to have more clients and make some more money to live more comfortably.



UNHCR Reception Centre, Kandahar

¹⁶ George Washington University. (2022, August). [Mahram: Women's Mobility in Islam](#).

1.4 Returnees and people on the move risking contact with EO contamination

Another segment of the population in need of HMA in Afghanistan concerns the many returnees. Take the case of Nadia, a 9-year-old girl, who recounts her harrowing events of her encounter with an EO, at a health center in the Chaardhara district of Kunduz.



" It was the day we were shifting houses. On our way to my grandmother's place to collect our belongings, my elder brother spotted a large piece of metal on the side of the road. He saw it as an opportunity to sell for money and brought it home. Everyone, including my aunts, cousins, and uncles, had gathered at my grandmother's house for breakfast. One of my aunts who was educated, identified the EO and warned my brother to immediately remove it from the house. As he was carrying it outside, the EO slipped from his hands and exploded. Following the explosion, we found no trace of my brother, and my aunts and mother all perished in the explosion, while I lost a leg. Now, I live with my grandparents and father," recalls Nadia. She and her family had recently returned to Kunduz from Pakistan and had not received any prior EORE sessions.

Similarly, consider Hafiz. He was 20 years old when he visited relatives in the Panjwai district of Kandahar while residing in Pakistan. During his visit, he was struck by a Russian mine, resulting in the loss of his legs. Like Nadia, Hafiz had not received any EORE sessions. As he lacks proper documentation, he does not even qualify for government allowances, if any, and relies on financial support from his brother.

Both cases, involving Nadia and Hafiz, predate Pakistan's recent crackdown on undocumented foreigners, of which, the majority are Afghans. Since September 15, 2023, approximately 1.9 million Afghans have returned to the country, including over 471,000 from Pakistan¹⁷. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has warned that approximately 5,00,000 more Afghan migrants are expected to return to the country in 2024. In a statement made by OCHA, it was also revealed that Afghanistan ranks first in South Asia and second globally in terms of displaced people¹⁸.

The increased access to previously restricted regions following the regime change has led to a corresponding increase in movement of returnees to potentially contaminated areas. These people, having spent their lives in Pakistan or Iran, have never received EORE sessions nor faced the threats of EO, and consequently, remain highly susceptible to the risks posed by EO contamination.

¹⁷ [Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan 2024](#).

¹⁸ Khaama Press. (2023, December 20). [UN warns of return of 500,000 migrants to Afghanistan](#).

Part 2: Confronting the challenges in delivering effective HMA in Afghanistan

2.1 Restrictions from the DfA

The presence of EOs, rooted in the protracted conflict in the country, combined with the challenges faced by the population, makes the need for effective mine action very pressing. However, from the many interviews and informal conversations with various mine action actors, it was evident that delivering effective HMA in Afghanistan has become increasingly difficult.



HI Physical Rehabilitation
Centre, Kandahar

Almost unanimously, for every mine action partner we met with, along with HI's own HMA colleagues, the message was clear: **We now have more access in Afghanistan than we have ever had in the history of the country.** While this may be true geographically within the current context of the country, the said access remains highly conditional. Gaining entry to regions previously inaccessible, or even those once accessible, involves navigating a labyrinth of approvals from DfA. Such approval may be contingent upon the nature of service proposed, the gender dynamics of the team, operational modality, who is providing it and sometimes even on the whims of the higher up authorities.



"The Minister will tell you that he received a directive and that he cannot do anything about it," explains a stakeholder, when asked if it was possible to challenge some of the directives.

Among the different pillars of HMA, HI in Afghanistan is active in EORE and VA. HI's operational modality for delivering these services is through its own Physical Rehabilitation Center (PRC) such as in Kandahar, sharing spaces with an existing health center, and through mobile services reaching the remote villages in the provinces in which it is active for community based EORE. However, from January 2023 to August 2023, all EORE activities were suspended and came to a standstill. Thereafter, since August 2023, HI has been restricted to static centers, bringing their mobile services to a standstill. The directive to abruptly stop mobile services meant that HI could no longer visit the villages to deliver EORE or VA services.

Redirecting the delivery EORE and VA services to static centers requires appropriate and adequate infrastructure, which is not immediately available following the sudden change of modalities. Given that there is only one tent for Physio Therapy (PT) and MHPSS services, the two sessions cannot take place simultaneously to accord a space of confidentiality to the patient. This consequently affects the efficiency and number of people the service can reach. Similarly, at many centers, EORE is considered low priority with no dedicated indoor space for sessions. This is especially tiring during the winter months.



Ongoing EORE Session held outdoors
for boys at static health centre, Kunduz
© HI Afghanistan

There can be several justifications for this. One explanation could be that it is difficult for the DfA to regulate these services on the move, amid concerns that mine action organizations might exploit this close contact with the communities to incite unrest against the DfA. On the other hand, with the static centres, especially when the space is shared with the local health centres, authorities find it easier to oversee and regulate the services provided.

Moreover, there is also the question of the type of services being provided. For the DfA, EORE or the broader efforts¹⁹ under VA concerning MHPSS and socio-economic inclusion for women are of little significance. There is pressure from the government to prioritise activities which are tangible over what they perceive as ‘soft’ services. Another purpose for the authorities to direct a halt of the mobile services is linked to the neglect of the local health facilities due to lack of funding.



Ongoing Mobile EORE session
© HI Kunduz, Afghanistan

¹⁹ **1.** VA broader efforts refers to broader efforts through multi-sector and multi-stakeholder engagement by non-mine action actors that reach people who are injured, survivors and people otherwise impacted by EO accidents. Whereas, VA Specific efforts undertaken by the mine action sector include: information management, including data collection on EO victims and VA services, analysis of disaggregated data and dissemination of aggregated data; **2.** Referral of victims to relevant service providers through the appropriate government body, using existing referral mechanisms, if available; **3.** Promotion of multi-sector and multi-stakeholder engagement and raising awareness and sharing of information on specific issues related to victims with relevant actors, in an effort to mobilize a multi- sector response; and **4.** Support of the development of relevant national action plans and related coordination mechanisms including mobilization of resources required to support VA



“A lot of money was being spent by the HMA actors on awareness in the communities, why not spend that money in strengthening the health facilities? I agree with the Ministry of Public Health on this because they are struggling to support their existing health facilities. Every time NGOs abandon the health centre due to lack of funding, the authorities panic,” explained an interviewee.

Notwithstanding the reasons for stopping mobile services, the population living in remote areas have certainly suffered the brunt of it. Not everyone can afford the cost of transportation to reach health services. This is particularly difficult for women who need to arrange for a mahram to be able to travel and for people living with disability.

2.2 From the Top Down: Lack of funding and Inconsistent Governance Impede HMA Operations and Institutions

Afghanistan is considered the birthplace of HMA, with one of the largest and longest-running mine action programmes in the world²⁰. DMAC Afghanistan serves as the lead coordinator of mine action activities in Afghanistan. DMAC is responsible for oversight, coordination, implementation, task registration and certification, and quality control. It was supported in its coordination role by the United Nations Mine Action Services (UNMAS)²¹. Until 2021, DMAC was almost entirely funded by the international community. However, with the DfA takeover, and the gradual changes in the operational modalities announced by the DfA, UNMAS completely stopped funding DMAC. Since most of the staff working with DMAC were financially supported by this international funding, a halt in the funding also meant a weakened capacity of DMAC. With the lack of capacity to undertake quality controls and the halt in activities, DMAC eventually ordered NGOs to stop with EORE, and to file for new accreditation if they wished to commence activities.

The lack in funding also meant that DMAC has remained inoperative with a staggered coordination between mine action actors since 2021. Moreover, even the data management was adversely impacted when the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) remained inoperative in Afghanistan for over a year.



“Money remains the biggest impediment. We can now reach every corner of the country. That’s the most positive. But we need to open the door with mine action. Given that Afghanistan is not new to mine action, there is already a lot of capacity to deliver it, skills and equipment are also present, but without money we cant get anywhere,” explains a mine action partner.

²⁰ Mansfield, I. (2015). "Humanitarian Mine Action in Afghanistan: A History," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*, 19(3), Article 10

²¹ 30 years of MAPA

Additionally, the constant changes in modalities also impede the implementing partners' ability to provide services effectively. The requirement of a *mahram* further complicates the situation for women who need to travel for work or participate in teams providing mobile services. They must be accompanied by a *mahram*, making it costlier for organisations to employ them. Given that funding is insufficient for many NGOs, they may decide to stop the activities altogether. This is because sending male-only teams not only contradicts with the gender principles of the NGO but also prevents services from reaching the women in the affected population.

Even though rule of *mahram* is not new to Afghanistan, it is the strictness with which it is being enforced since the DfA takeover, that is challenging the effective delivery of services. In Kandahar for instance, a woman stepping out at any time without a *mahram* would certainly be questioned, regardless of the distance travelled. To enforce *mahram*, the authorities now issue *mahram* cards to the eligible male relatives of the women in Kandahar, so that they can step out with their designated *mahrams*. In Kabul and Kunduz, guards are stationed at bus stands, and at different checkpoints through the city to patrol any woman found disobeying the *mahram* policy.

The financial struggles for local NGOs are further worsened when donors maintain a fixed fund in USD, and the local NGOs are required to convert it to AFN given the banking challenges in Afghanistan. While 1 USD was equal to 90 AFN in January 2023, by December 2023, this had dropped to 69 AFN. The highly volatile exchange rate to the detriment of the AFN, has adversely impacted the local NGOs' capacity to operate. Even procuring any technical equipment from abroad has become increasingly difficult.



“The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan was supporting two of our rehabilitation centres, but since the Quran burning incident in Sweden, even those two projects had to be closed down,” recalls the head of a local NGO²². **“The sustainability of any project is impossible when we remain so highly dependent on the relationship between the donors and the changing regime. We rarely ever have funding for an entire year. It is mostly for 3 months or at best for 6 months,”** he continues.

Even though Afghanistan remains among the top five recipients of mine action funding in 2022²³, the many challenges in institutional and operational modalities, makes little of the HMA effort to trickle down to the population in need. The current procedure to implement a mine action grant involves navigating many layers of bureaucratic hurdles. At the outset, HI in Afghanistan would have to go to the Ministry of Economy, who would then delegate them to the relevant ministry or authority.

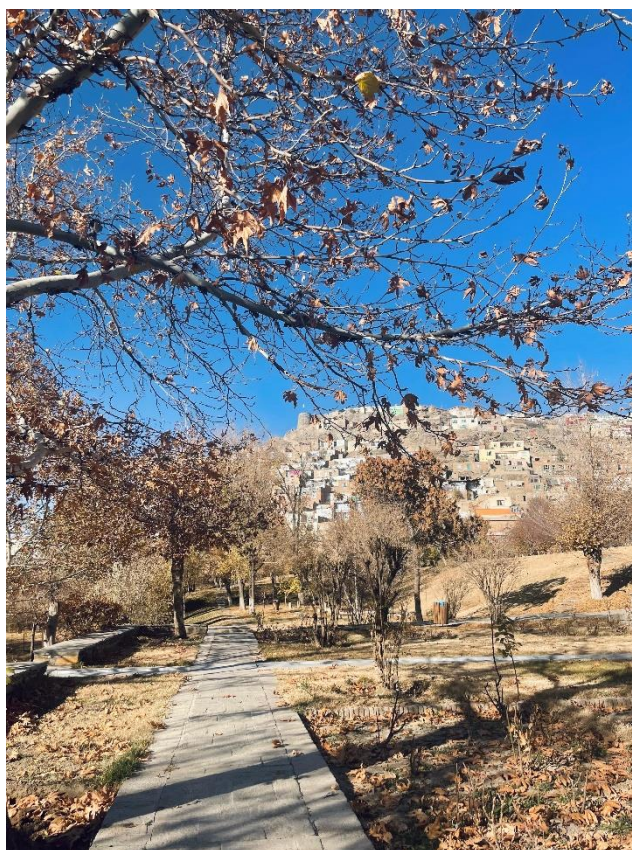
²² On July 11, 2023, the Taliban ordered the suspension of all Swedish activities in Afghanistan because of the public burning of the Quran at a protest in Sweden the month before. Access article [here](#).

²³ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor (2023). [Landmine Monitor 2023](#).

Considering HI works on VA and EORE, and most components of VA were related to health, they would be asked to visit the Ministry of Public Health to sign off on its projects. However, soon thereafter, DMAC directed all HMA operators to sign an operational accreditation with them. The accreditation process which takes months, puts a halt to all activities in the interim.

Working on mixed components is especially difficult given the overlapping governance from the authorities. The long and complex registration process not only slows down HI's capacity to operate, but also affects the operations significantly. Similarly, even though children are identified as being particularly at risk²⁴, EORE activities are not conducted at school. This again is linked to challenges of negotiating with the Ministry of Education, which would add to the bureaucratic procedures.

The landscape of institutional governance in Afghanistan remains volatile and often conflicts its own directives. For instance, NGOs in Afghanistan fall under the legal control of the Ministry of Economy. However, there are also three other governmental bodies which could control the affairs of the NGO. These include the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), the Ministry of propagation of virtue and prevention of vice and a newly formed Directorate of monitoring edicts and decrees.



The empty lanes of the Babur Gardens, Kabul
© Jenisha Shah

²⁴ 30 Years of MAPA.

Part 3: Adaptable Responses to Ensure Effective HMA Continuity in Trying Contexts



“One of the biggest problems with Afghanistan is that every time a revolution comes and there is a change in regime, the implications of such change on us is very significant. We try to adapt but these adaptations are only becoming difficult for us. We have continuously suffered under the changing and radically changing regimes for the past 40 years. We now have some hope from the new authorities who have committed to security. I am also hopeful that soon, the authorities will loosen the restrictions imposed on girls’ education as well. But without any international recognition, it is all up in the air. There is a lot of uncertainty,” explains an interviewee, from Kandahar.



On the road in Chaardhara district of Kunduz, the car wobbles on the road near the outskirts of one of the villages. The accompanying driver explains how the road has not been repaired since the severe conflict the province saw in 2021. The traces of conflict are as tangible as they are emotionally engrained in the minds of the people.

Traces of the conflict on the walls of the mosque, Bagh e Babur
© Jenisha Shah



“With all these years of conflict in Afghanistan, we need normalcy more than anything. But how do we have that with EO lying in the environment and so much contamination,” explains a mine action actor we spoke to.



HI’s Comprehensive Approach to Armed Violence Reduction (CAAVR)

To understand the potential responses to the challenges in delivering HMA in Afghanistan discussed above, and address the needs of the population living in EO contaminated areas, we look at HI’s Comprehensive Approach to Armed Violence Reduction (CAAVR). Through CAAVR, the 5 pillars of mine action (clearance, EORE, VA, advocacy and stockpile destruction) are not only delivered to complement each other for a better response, but also complement activities in other sectors and ultimately aim to address the root causes of violence. At macro level, comprehensive responses should help reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and facilitate the shift from crisis response, to recovery, development and peace (Nexus).

In theory, CAAVR appears to be the best response to address the needs of the population in Afghanistan, who need HMA that is sustainable with development goals and aims at long lasting peace. However, given the context of Afghanistan and the challenges in delivering effective HMA discussed above, the politics of humanitarian aid far surpasses the aims of CAAVR. In this case, going back to the fundamentals of humanitarian principles can bring us closer to achieving a CAAVR.

While implementing different activities, one may forget that the underlying principle guiding humanitarian action is that human suffering should be prevented and alleviated wherever it is found. And while rendering humanitarian aid, one should do no harm. When aid is delivered from the allied forces that fought the current DfA, it is difficult to perceive the humanitarian NGO as neutral or independent. In the context of Afghanistan, if organisations focus on the principles of humanitarian action, while acknowledging the interference from the DfA, there are still ways in which mine action actors can reach the population in need of HMA, effectively.

3.1 Building trust with the communities and the authorities

With the constant change in regimes and the sporadic withdrawal of humanitarian aid services, it is natural for members of the community to be suspicious each time a new project is piloted. At the same time, there is a pervasive environment of mistrust between the DfA and the international aid community. A lot of mine action actors HI spoke to highlighted that while the decisions are made at a central level, the directives are interpreted and implemented in a very decentralised manner. This decentralisation has inadvertently created opportunities for local NGOs to gain provincial government approval for direct community engagement. One local NGO that was interviewed admitted that they agreed on carrying out community based EORE without including women staff, as they lacked the budget to pay allowance for mahrams.



“This compromise is not our preferred modality of operation, but the lack of funding for local NGOs as opposed to INGOs, leaves us with little to work with”, the head of the local NGO confides.

This compromise is not the solution for NGOs upholding the principles of humanitarian action.

It is therefore important that the NGOs arrange to speak to the community members and the provincial authorities before starting the project. Employing locals for project implementation has proven to enhance community acceptance, both among community members and authorities alike. Moreover, community participation from the very inception of the project can lead to discussions that propose solutions for navigating the social obstacles and reaching the affected population. Local partnerships further provide opportunity for strengthening capacities for these services.

Community members and also the provincial authorities are also privy to information that is sometimes not documented by the NGOs. Their inclusion in the discussion process helps in providing targeted HMA services to those in need. For example, discussions with them can help in identifying common routes taken by the returnees so that people on the move can be accessed.



The importance of building trust with the local community through communication was further acknowledged by a mine action partner, who said that, **“the approach for mine clearance in Afghanistan is far from centralised. We go from district to district and in each district there is a different agreement – we can then determine what we can do. Before the clearance team goes, the community liaison officer goes and they are the ones who communicate with the authorities. We trained them on how to communicate and increase acceptance within the community. Communication is key and can go a long way.”**

The local authority often feels excluded from the decisions that impact their own population. There is a need for better and more effective consultation process so that they are adequately included in the discourse. This feeling of being excluded was explicitly expressed by DMAC when they mentioned their disappointment at not being invited to the international meetings on mine action, since 2021²⁵. However, it is also important to acknowledge here that humanitarian principles should be upheld with undertaking these discussions with the DfA and the community members.

Moreover, to be able to operate in an effective manner, the international mine action actors need to advocate for the development and updating of Afghanistan’s National Mine Action Standards in line of the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). Training the national authorities on their responsibilities and the requirements of the IMAS for delivering HMA in a safe, effective and efficient manner, would eventually allow the services to reach the population most in need of them. Advocacy is also essential to regulate scrap metal sales in the country.

The DfA is known for its pragmatism on some rare accounts. For example, this is visible in Bamyan where they adopt a softer approach towards the Hazaras, who constitute the majority in this province, in an effort to promote the peace in the geographical location and attract international tourism. This leniency is sometimes extended to Shia communities as well. Sometime in November 2023, they organised a conference for women entrepreneurs in Kabul to change international public view. While these may be public relations stunts to gain the confidence of the international community, mine action operators can take advantage of these windows to reach the communities and employ women with relatively less restrictions.

²⁵ No representative was present at the Meeting of State Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty in 2023. While a representative was present at the MSP MBT in 2022, it was a representative from the permanent mission of Afghanistan to the UN in Geneva and it is unclear if there was any coordination between the Mission and DMAC.

However, given the dynamics of mistrust at play, the prospects for resuming community-level activities remain limited. Moreover, international mine action operators are often weary of partnering with local NGOs to conduct community based EORE, due to their inability to undertake quality control. It is for a similar reason that DfA ordered HI and others to stop with mobile services reaching remote communities in the first place - their lack of capacity to supervise and looming suspicion. If only there were greater trust among community members, local authorities, and international stakeholders, prioritizing the needs of the population in all negotiations, reaching the communities in need would be feasible.

3.2 Creativity and flexibility in decision making

The restrictions on women, including their movement, employment, education, and access to services, have worsened over time.



“They keep telling us that this is temporary. However, I know that this is no different from the last time. The promises of the ban being temporary were also made the last time. But they never lifted it,” explains an interviewee.

The NGOs need to be realistic about their expectations from the DfA and, prioritizing the needs of the population, work around with creative and strategic solutions. One HMA actor managed to get around restrictions by employing *mahram* couples to provide mobile services directly to communities. To navigate the ethical considerations, they have been training the *mahram* couples together on the task, making it possible to render essential EORE and VA services directly to the communities.

To be able to reach more people, the employee trained in PT could also be trained in EORE, so that integrated services can be offered without bureaucratic delays. Similarly, EORE staff can be trained on data gathering and Contamination Impact Survey (CIS), an activity that they can carry on as they go about their EORE visits. The CIS is the first step towards the non-technical (NTS) and technical surveys (TS) that is required to kick start the land release process, which is the need of the hour in Afghanistan.

While reaching women has become progressively difficult, it was identified that micro-credit groups among women in Kabul and in some smaller towns were still common and schools are open to girls till class 6. Even though these are small windows of opportunity, they need to be optimised to not leave any stone unturned. These settings could serve as valuable platforms for conducting EORE sessions. In a religious country such as Afghanistan, including religious leaders for spreading awareness messages could also be highly successful. Moreover, including religious leaders to lobby with the DfA could also help in improving inclusion and de-stigmatisation of direct victims of EO incidents, and to attain other advocacy objectives.

In many provinces, starting vocational activities for building capacities for women has become tougher. However, there are already a lot of women who have been trained and are skilled in vocational activities. Donors could consider providing them with the resources to set up businesses so that they can operate from their homes. An OPD that was interviewed also mentioned how young girls who can no longer be trained in vocational activities because of the restrictive modalities, can be trained by these women provided adequate resources are made available.

UNMAS in Afghanistan share a finding that those who collected and sold scrap metal as a means of livelihood said that they would continue to do so, even if the item looked suspicious²⁶. To tackle this, they partnered with DMAC to strengthen the behaviour change communication approach for EORE to motivate sustained individual and community-level changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Such evidence based and well targeted approaches, can be useful when dealing with risk-taker behaviours in Afghanistan.

The long bureaucratic wait time for accreditation, such as obtaining approval from DMAC which has historically taken 6 months for signing an MOU, can be discouraging and impede the timely and effective flow of services. But it is possible to facilitate the process also by distinguishing between VA specific and VA broader efforts. Under this approach, the Ministry of Public Health would oversee VA broader efforts and approve related activities, including the involvement of women NGO workers under the exception of health services. While awaiting DMAC approvals, obtaining approval from the Ministry of Public Health could initiate some services, thus mitigating delays.

Moreover, the donors need to show more flexibility in their funding, enabling implementing partners to adapt swiftly to operational challenges, so that people in need can be reached and served in the face of the challenges. An example of this comes from the reorganisation of DMAC. Recently, when DMAC expressed its intention to resume operations from its pre-2021 office location, donors hesitated to fund this arrangement due to concerns over cost-sharing and direct payments to the DfA. Accordingly, in January 2023, an arrangement was reached wherein the parties agreed to open a separate office by the name of the Mine Action Technical Cell (MATC), with premises adjacent to DMAC. It was decided that while MATC would manage all the coordination work, DMAC would be responsible for signing off the MoUs, accreditation and communication.

The process of negotiations with the UN agencies and the DfA, since the funding dried up earlier that year, to setting up of the MATC office, was far from easy. However, with some flexibility, and creativity, a solution was reached keeping the need of the hour at the forefront and acknowledging that the challenges faced by the population in face of EO contamination need to be addressed. With the setting up of the MATC office, there is renewed hope that with better coordination and renewed capacity, mine action in Afghanistan will be revived since its slowing down in the aftermath of the 2021 takeover.

²⁶ MAG Vietnam. (n.d.). [Scrap metal collection continues to be a dangerous issue in Quang Tri province.](#)

3.3 Better coordination, communication and consensus between humanitarian organisations

When the women ban in NGO was first announced in December 2022, many NGOs stopped operations all together. A year later, almost all of them are back and working employing different methods to evade scrutiny. While some no longer register women in their projects officially, others employ women but only for 'work from home'. Notwithstanding the category of NGO one would fall into, there is also common knowledge among the authorities about the resumption of female staff employment in NGOs. This was understood through a letter received by NGOs from the DfA reminding them of the adverse consequences that such disobedience of the edict would result in. This considerably increases the risk for women employees of NGOs who are operating under the constant threat from the Ministry of promotion of vice and prevention of virtue, conducting regular unannounced inspection.

The work undertaken by the NGOs is crucial to the country, not just for those whom they work for, but also for the resources they bring in and the people they employ. A temporary suspension of activities in the face of shock when the directive is announced, and resuming activities without exercising any leverage over the authorities and independently from other organisations, allows the DfA to divide and rule. A better coordination between the humanitarian organisations and a consensus in the face of unreasonable restrictions, can help establish a unified stance towards the DfA. However, the unilateral responses as they are currently, present huge risks for the women employed by the NGOs, as also for the affected population, who finally bear the brunt of cessation of activities.

Finally, it's not just better communication between the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, but broader sharing of best practices that can help navigate complex environments such as the one in Afghanistan. HI undertakes AVR work in over 32 countries and sharing practices between these operations itself can provide valuable insights.

For example, government authorities and NGO staff continue to consider ways to discourage and eliminate random scrap collection. But as RENEW's survey data and the UNMAS finding earlier shows – and local people have said many times – as long as people are poor and they see an opportunity to make some extra money, even though they know the risks, it is difficult to convince them to stop this dangerous activity²⁷. When Laos saw the problem of children coming in contact with UXOs while collecting scrap metal, HI came up with a pilot project that gave families the inputs for a home garden in return for a written commitment not to collect scrap metal. Kim Warren, HI's UXO programme coordinator in Laos in 2009, said there had been an overwhelming response, with 60 families in three districts of southern Savannakhet Province signing up for the project, where it is hoped they can sell their excess produce.

²⁷ ibid



“We are insisting - and we are very strict about this - that they are willing to stop doing this and will get rid of their metal detectors,” Warren said. She also added that, “unless you’re replacing people’s livelihoods and giving them something else, to stop them from collecting or using a metal detector, it’s tricky²⁸”

Given that young boys in Afghanistan are often at risk of coming in contact of UXOs while collecting scrap metal, lessons from the pilot project such as in Laos, can certainly help in addressing the situation in Afghanistan.

²⁸ [The New Humanitarian](#). (n.d.).

Conclusion

Through numerous interviews and data examined, it was clear that boys constitute a segment of the population at heightened risk of encountering an EO in search of scrap metal or while carrying out their livelihood activities. Returnees who now have access to previously inaccessible and potentially contaminated areas, without prior EORE, are also prone to coming in contact with an EO. Additionally, with the confiscation of rights of assembly, unrestricted and unaccompanied movement, and loss of livelihood not only for women, but also persons living with disabilities, put them in need for HMA services.

Unfortunately, the current environment of restrictions from the DfA for reaching the communities, combined with insufficient funding for HMA operations, has significantly affected HMA actors' ability to operate effectively. This has consequently limited the institutional capacity of the local authorities to coordinate and conduct quality controls. However, there is renewed hope with the recent reorganisation of DMAC and MATC for better coordination between mine action actors in Afghanistan.

Also, HI's CAAVR can help in addressing these challenges and deliver effective HMA. For a response to be considered a CAAVR, in addition for it to be implemented in complementarity with other HMA activities, it also needs to be connected to the Nexus. The aim of CAAVR is thus to offer services that are sustainable over time and tackle the root causes of conflict in the area of intervention.

However, for a response to be sustainable over time, stable funding is a must. Given the political nature of funding, there needs to be a stable government to ensure the flow of multi-year flexible funding. In the given context of Afghanistan, the non-recognition of the DfA by the international community, has severely impacted funding stability. Therefore, achieving the ideal scenario for a CAAVR still appears distant.

But there are steps organisations can take to move closer to CAAVR. At the outset, this involves, maintaining quality and efficiency in our activities. For example, referring a victim identified during EORE to health services, can be considered to be a comprehensive response, but if the EORE agent fails the referral obligation, this opportunity is lost. Therefore, prioritising principles of humanity and not doing harm can guide them in assisting those in need to the alleviate their suffering. Similarly, putting principled humanitarian action before the politics of funding and adopting a bottom-up approach to remind the decision makers of the realities of these challenges, can bring us closer to a CAAVR.

Afghanistan today has historically unprecedented access for NTS, along with an urgent demand for EO mapping in the country. At the same time, there is a pressing need to reach the victims and raise awareness among the population. **However, given the current situation, it's clear that unless a key actor in the decision-making process demonstrates adaptability and flexibility, the status-quo is likely to persist, and the opportunity presented by the unprecedented access be lost.**

But the lingering question that persists is: Who will be willing to adapt their approaches to prioritise humanity? Will it be the donors willing to adapt and be open to trust and negotiate with the DfA? Or perhaps the NGOs willing to reach a common consensus and leverage their position to navigate the restrictions imposed by the DfA? Would it be the DfA, willing to extend their occasional pragmatism to the lifting the restrictions on women? Or then again, will the existing state of affairs endure, as survivor, said, **"In the end, it is always us who adapt to the circumstances, but the circumstances never adapt to our needs."**

Appendices

Bibliography

- Dawn. (2023, September 19). [Import of edibles from Afghanistan suspended](#)
- George Washington University. (2022, August). [Mahram: Women's Mobility in Islam](#)
- [Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan 2024](#)
- Humanitarian Programme Cycle. (2023). [Humanitarian Needs Overview](#). Issued January 2023.
- Khaama Press. (2023, December 20). [UN warns of return of 500,000 migrants to Afghanistan](#)
- Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor. (2023). [Landmine Monitor 2023](#)
- MAG Vietnam. (n.d.). [Scrap metal collection continues to be a dangerous issue in Quang Tri province](#)
- Mansfield, I. (2015). "Humanitarian Mine Action in Afghanistan: A History," The Journal of ERW and Mine Action, 19(3), Article 10.
- The New Humanitarian. (n.d.) [Scrap metal income courts UXO danger](#). 2009
- Washington Post Editorial Board. (2024, January 16). [Afghanistan's child brides: The stories behind the statistics](#). The Washington Post.



Shifting the Status Quo: Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing the Needs of Population affected by Explosive Ordnance Contamination in Afghanistan

The objective of this study is to address the need for contemporary, firsthand information concerning population affected by EO contamination in Afghanistan, by identifying the segment of the population most in need of Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) and their challenges. Though interviews for this purpose were conducted in Kabul, Kunduz and Kandahar, the findings can be applied to the larger context of Afghanistan.

The study also examines the obstacles encountered in delivering effective HMA to the population. Interviews with HMA actors, Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) informs this section of the study.

Lastly, the study explores both current and potential approaches for navigating these challenges through HI's people-centred and integrated responses in the given context of Afghanistan.

With the help of testimonies from those affected, the case study aims to contribute essential insights currently absent from the discourse. This understanding is critical for delivering targeted and effective HMA.

Humanity & Inclusion
138, avenue des Frères Lumière
69371 Lyon cedex 08
France

publications@hi.org



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

