



Research and Studies

RS Brief | FP | 47

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

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About HI

Humanity & Inclusion (HI) works alongside people with disabilities and vulnerable populations, taking action and bearing witness in order to respond to their essential needs, improve their living conditions and promote respect for their dignity and fundamental rights. HI works to contribute to global dialogues about data collection disaggregated by disability.

About this brief

A Humanity & Inclusion publication

About this study

This study has been conducted with the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

Context of the study

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)¹. 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 services². To add to this, the country is battling with economic challenges and political instability which exacerbates these risks, making effective Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) crucial for the safety and well-being of the population living under these circumstances.



Naan Shop, Kabul

¹ Humanitarian Programme Cycle. (2023). [Humanitarian Needs Overview](#). Issued January 2023.

² *ibid*

Objectives

This case study has three objectives:

1. To identify the segment of the population most in need of HMA and their challenges.
2. To examine the obstacles encountered in delivering effective HMA to the population.
3. To explore both current and potential approaches for navigating these challenges in the given context of Afghanistan.

Methods

Through a qualitative research approach, a total of 13 interviews and 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, engaging 51 stakeholders and individuals combined, including those working for HMA and victims of Explosive Ordnance (EO) contamination. Additionally, secondary data from existing reports and surveys were analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Data was collected in person in Kabul, Kunduz, and Kandahar provinces. The findings presented in this case study provide an overview of the main insights gathered from our research, contributing to the broader understanding of EO challenges in Afghanistan and informing future HMA interventions.

Findings

PART I: Priority demographic for HMA: Identifying the target population and their challenges

1. Young Boys caught in the crossfire of Poverty, Unemployment and EO Contamination Threat

Young boys in Afghanistan enjoy relatively unrestricted freedom of movement and, in many women-led households, bear the burden of providing for the family. In rural areas, this includes herding, while in cities, it involves collecting scrap metal. These activities, whether herding, collecting scrap metal, or playing with curious objects, often lead to fatal encounters with EO. The lack of awareness and the necessity to contribute economically to their families put young boys at high risk.

2. EO survivors and victims in the face of lost livelihoods and discrimination

Victims of EO incidents face severe physical, emotional, and economic hardships. The change in regime has further marginalized these survivors, cutting off previously available allowances and support networks. In many regions, Organisation of Persons with Disability (OPDs) have been asked to forgo their premises, and resources thus discouraging the possibility of assembly. In other cases, there is a prevalent stigma associated with the disability.

3. Women and their silent struggles

In Afghanistan, it's undeniable that women remain among the most vulnerable to the effects of shifting governance structures that influence every aspect of their lives,

including their experiences as victims of EO. Women led households are the most impacted. Given the restrictions in employment and education, they no longer have the means to earn a living. At the same time, any attempts for assembly are swiftly quashed. Dress restrictions from the De-facto Authorities (DfA) are especially difficult for women with disabilities, to follow. Moreover, they are also faced with strict restrictions on freedom of movement in the absence of a *mahram*³.

4. Returnees and people on the move risking contact with EO

With increased returnees following Pakistan's crackdown on undocumented foreigners, many Afghans are moving into potentially contaminated areas without having received Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE). This situation is exacerbated by Afghanistan's ranking as one of the highest in the world for displaced people, and the increased geographical access.

PART II: Confronting the challenges in delivering effective HMA in Afghanistan

1. Restrictions from the DfA

With the regime change, Afghanistan now offers unprecedented geographical access for delivering HMA. However, this access remains conditional, given the many restrictions imposed by the DfA. In many provinces, mobile services to reach the communities have been halted, confining operations to static centres. Moreover, the DfA does not prioritise "soft" services like MHPSS and socio-economic inclusion, further limiting the effectiveness of comprehensive HMA efforts. Reaching communities in rural areas is further constrained with the restrictions imposed on women employment in NGOs and the imposition of *mahram*.

2. From the Top Down: Lack of Funding and Inconsistent Governance Impede HMA Operations and Institutions

The operational capacity of the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) in Afghanistan weakened considerably when their funding was stopped following the change in regime. The cessation in funding disrupted quality control, data management, and coordination among mine action actors. The volatile exchange rate and banking challenges further strained local NGOs' financial stability. Finally, the lengthy accreditation processes across multiple ministries complicates operations.

PART 3: Adaptable Responses to Ensure Effective HMA continuity in Trying Contexts

1. Building Trust with the Communities and the Authorities

With the constant change in regimes and the sporadic withdrawal of humanitarian aid, 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. Often decision making in the country is done at the central level, but the implementation is very decentralised. This decentralisation has

³ Under Islamic jurisprudence, *Mahram* mandates that women cannot travel unaccompanied by a male guardian for distances exceeding 72 kms. 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 travels.

inadvertently created opportunities for local NGOs to gain provincial government approval for direct community engagement. It is therefore important that the NGOs arrange to speak to the community members and the provincial authorities before starting the project and to foster trust.

2. Creativity and Flexibility in Decision Making

The restrictions on women, including their movement, employment, education, and access to services, have worsened over time. 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 be able to reach more people, employees trained in PT could also be trained in EORE, so that integrated services can be offered without bureaucratic delays. Other windows of opportunities lie with using micro-credit groups or religious meetings for providing EORE.

3. Better Coordination, Communication, and Consensus between Humanitarian Organizations

The response to the women ban in NGOs in December 2022 highlighted the need for better coordination among humanitarian organizations. While many NGOs resumed activities employing various methods to evade scrutiny, the lack of unified action allows the DfA to enforce restrictions more effectively. Better coordination and consensus can establish a unified stance towards these restrictions, reducing risks for women employees and ensuring continued service delivery to affected populations. Sharing best practices among the humanitarian community in Afghanistan and beyond can also help navigate complex environments.

Conclusion

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. HI's comprehensive approach to armed violence reduction can help in addressing some of these challenges by tackling also the root cause of conflict. However, for any response to be sustainable, stable funding is a must.

Afghanistan today has historically unprecedented access for HMA. At the same time, there is a pressing need to reach those in need and raise awareness on EO contamination 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.



The complete study is available at the following link: [Shifting the Status Quo: Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing the Needs of Population affected by Explosive Ordnance Contamination in Afghanistan](#)