

Gender Mainstreaming in Mine Action in Conflict Situations

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Background

The concept of gender mainstreaming in mine action has been steadily advanced over the past years to the point where gender considerations can no longer be ignored by mine action organizations. In 2005, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) published the UN Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes, a document intended to inform all UN organizations involved in mine action of the different gender aspects relevant to their work, and how they can best be addressed. While this document can be criticized for not addressing issues on the ground, it nevertheless offers a valuable starting point for the development of context specific gender strategies.

These gender mainstreaming guidelines and strategies are, however, developed primarily for post-conflict situations. The guidelines presuppose relative stability, disarmament, and demining programs that are supported by former parties to a conflict. Nevertheless, mine action is carried out in countries and situations that are still experiencing a certain level of conflict. These situations demand that mine action practitioners, donors, and policy-makers rethink commonly held assumptions regarding gender mainstreaming. Depending on where a country finds itself on the conflict/post-conflict continuum, mine action actors need to find ways in which to refine and adapt strategies in order to meet the specific challenges demanded by conflict situations. Based on a field study conducted by the Assistance to Mine-Affected Communities (AMAC) project in May 2008, this Policy Brief provides some reflections and suggestions regarding mine action gender mainstreaming initiatives in conflict situations.

Gender Mainstreaming and Conflict: Guiding Assumptions

A number of assumptions formed the starting point for our understanding of gender mainstreaming in mine action.

- Conflict situations pose different challenges in terms of gender mainstreaming than post-conflict situations.
- Existing guidelines for gender mainstreaming do not adequately address these challenges.
- Mine action must be integrated with other aspects of conflict related measures in order to be efficient.

Mine Action and Gender Mainstreaming: Integrating the Pillars

For gender mainstreaming to have a thorough impact, it must form part of policy, and be integrated throughout all pillars that form part of mine action. In this Policy Brief, we assess gender mainstreaming in relation to mine clearance, mine risk education, and victim assistance.

Mine Clearance. Conducting mine clearance in conflict situations is likely to be more challenging than in a post-conflict situation. The chosen strategies will depend on the response to questions such as the strategic importance of the mines, or whether or not the mines have been laid by the same state or armed entity that is clearing the mines. If the mines serve an important strategic purpose, it is likely that any demining effort, however humanitarian in its intentions, will be considered an act of aggression and responded to accordingly. If the clearance initiatives are considered important enough to be carried out in spite of potential complications, a detailed plan for the protection of civil-

ian populations during and after the clearance operation must be adhered to. In the case of Colombia, local populations were opposed to mine clearance initiatives due to fear of sanctions from guerilla groups. In addition the likely heavy re-mining of territory once deminers and the Colombian army had left, local populations feared they would be punished by guerilla groups for what could be construed as cooperating with the national army.

Decisions regarding whether or not to conduct mine clearance should, ideally, be undertaken after close consultation with local communities so that concerns such as the example above can be properly heard and addressed. In carrying out such consultations, it is essential to receive the views and opinions of a wide selection of the relevant population. A gendered perspective is thus necessary in order to achieve this, and the gendered strategies chosen in any context will depend on cultural factors related to gender roles and expectations regarding gender in the affected community. In post-conflict situations, the value added of ensuring the equal participation of men and women in consultations are primarily related to acknowledging that they are likely to possess differing knowledge on the presence of mines based on a gendered division of labor, and that this may inform the prioritization of which areas are most vital to clear. In a conflict situation, however, other concerns are likely to take precedence. If the community fears future sanctions by insurgents, these concerns may be experienced in different ways by men and women. For example, in many conflicts sexual violence is used as a tool to intimidate the local population, aggravating the fear women might have for future sanctions from the armed groups if demining is carried out against the groups' interest. In other contexts, forced recruitment of boys and young men may be used to intimidate or punish a community, potentially leading to concerns along gendered lines as described above. This, in turn, will need to form the starting point for strategies taken by demining organizations. Depending on factors such as experience with earlier sanctions by insurgents, or the perceived importance of clearing land, men and women may have different priorities or preferences with respect to mine clearance. In some instances, this will entail a preference for leaving mines in order to avoid sanctions, or clearing them regardless in other cases.

Mine Risk Education (MRE). Due to difficulties associated with demining in conflict zones, the role of mine risk reduction measures and mine risk education in limiting the harm to local communities from landmine contamination can potentially be signifi-

cant. Depending on the nature of the conflict, these initiatives are likely to encounter a number of challenges specific to conflict situations not necessarily addressed by predominant post-conflict mine action measures. One of these is based on the same logic as the challenges related to demining. If the landmines are deployed by insurgents based on existing strategic needs, there is a chance that they will be apprehensive about allowing mine action organizations to operate within their sphere of influence. The placing of the mines is likely to be militarily sensitive, and there may also be concerns about whether MRE will be used for political purposes, such as rallying support for the government against insurgents. In order to avoid aggravating the armed conflict, it may be necessary for the mine action organizations to carefully consider whether it may serve them well to negotiate with insurgent groups, especially if these have significant territorial control in the area in question prior to establishing MRE programs.

In conflict and post-conflict situations alike, there are two main aspects for MRE and gender considerations:

1. Ensure that men, women, boys and girls have the same access to mine risk education.
2. Ensure that the material is gender sensitive in that men, women, boys and girls benefit equally from it. In many contexts this entails adapting aspects of the material in order to reflect gendered risk-prone activities and behavior.

In most situations, men will be significantly more exposed to risk than women due to gendered labor roles. Men generally move in wider circles than women geographically speaking, by virtue of activities such as herding, working the fields, and trading at the local markets. Because of their significant dominance on mine accident statistics, it is especially important to reach men with MRE projects and to adequately address the reasons behind their risk exposure.

Conflict situations, however, may pose specific challenges in order to provide the best possible gender sensitive risk reduction training for the local population in the contaminated areas. Analyses of specific risk-prone behavior in an area should form the basis for MRE activities. This needs to incorporate issues such as what the gendered division of labor is in an area, and how the spatial movement of the population is structured – keeping in mind different activities between men and women – and how this impacts their differential exposure to mines. Further, it needs to consider if men and women are

involved in activities to protect the community or in other aspects of armed conflict, such as organizing vigilante groups, and if this changes their regular pattern of movement and increases their exposure to landmines. Does, for instance, the involvement of men in combat activities mean that many women are left, temporarily, as heads of the households? Does this alter the regular gendered division of labor and thus the exposure to mine contaminated areas?

In terms of equal access to MRE, much of this is a matter of logistics. Because of their different obligations to work, family and subsistence activities, men and women may be limited in terms of their flexibility to attend MRE sessions. This has to do both with the time at which the sessions are held and with the venue in which they are given. A more complex issue regards the feasibility of integrating men and women in the same MRE sessions. This depends heavily on the cultural context, and the pros and cons of this must be explored before the sessions are initiated. In some situations it is obvious whether or not mixed gender sessions can be held. For instance, in areas characterized by segregation between men and women, or, in contrast, where men and women generally participate on an equal footing in all aspects of the community, it is relatively clear what one should do. Some important considerations, however, need to be made regarding the many contexts that fall between these two extremes. First, will men and women be comfortable attending the same sessions? Will the fact that the sessions are mixed in any way impact their legitimacy in the local population? If mixed sessions are held, are women likely to be able or willing to express their views and otherwise actively participate in the meeting? Such gender specific assessments must thus form the starting point for MRE activities.

Victim Assistance. As with mine clearance and mine risk education, victim assistance can also benefit from a gender-sensitive perspective, and there are a number of specific considerations in terms of where a country or area finds itself on a conflict/post-conflict continuum. Conflict situations will tend to be characterized by the need to act quickly, such as gaining emergency access to mined areas, or the potential need to negotiate access with insurgent groups. In such cases, issues of concern include the proximity of civilian populations to closest health care facilities, or alternately, the need to set up remote facilities in remote – and potentially heavily affected – areas. Beyond immediate emergency issues, there is the need to ensure access to rehabilitation for victims. In some instances,

conflict-related injuries can be construed as a sign that the victim was a participant in armed struggle, which may in turn prevent them from gaining access to – or even seeking – assistance. It thus becomes a priority for mine action organizations to reach people who may otherwise be impeded in gaining access to assistance, and offer them support in claiming their right of assistance from the state.

The above considerations are vital from a gender perspective. Apart from the issue of the immediate need to address injury, there is the situation of female-headed households in a volatile conflict situation if they lose the husband or son. In some contexts, women also compromise their human security should they suffer the loss of a male head of household. In such cases, victim assistance initiatives must be in a position to assess whether or not women require protection in order to maintain their level of security. There are also issues related to access to health care services. Quite fundamentally, conflict situations may make it more difficult for either men or women to travel the distance required to get adequate help. Health care services may also not be sensitive to the specific health issues women face, while cultural contexts may impede the right of women to gain access to health care at all. Men may also face gendered issues in accessing health care, such as when injury may be perceived as a sign of participation in conflict. For a mine action organization to be able to provide the best possible victim assistance in these situations, it needs to factor in the additional challenges posed by the conflict and assess how these challenges impact the respective abilities of men and women to access adequate health care and rehabilitation.

Lessons Learned and Implications

Basing recommendations on a single case study is obviously difficult, and one should therefore be careful in drawing definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, the case study of Colombia does point to a number of important lessons learned and implications for mine action policy, as well as for practitioners.

- While the gendered challenges for mine action are in many respects similar in conflict and post-conflict situations, the former demands some specific considerations that existing policy and practice does not necessarily address. It is thus important to address these in a systematic manner.
- Mine action in conflict situations ought to be based on a thorough understanding of specific conflict dynamics, and in particular how the

presence of, and cooperation with, mine action organizations may place the security of local populations at risk.

- In addressing these potential risks, mine action operators need to maintain a gender sensitive view since the risk related to reprisals from armed actors can often be gender specific.
- Since conflict situations often aggravate the gendered challenges usually found in virtually all contexts, conflict situations require new and contextually adapted approaches to alleviate the problems.
- New challenges, gendered and otherwise, may appear depending on the nature of the conflict. These must be dealt with based on an analysis of the given conflict and would benefit from being seen in a greater context of conflict-related relief work.

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