

National Ownership and Donor Strategies in Mine Action: Challenges and Opportunities

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Background

The national ownership of landmine programs is a pillar of the 1997 Mine Ban Convention. We know, however, that the extent to which mine action programs have come under the authority of national governments and institutions is lagging, and still remains far from satisfactory. Mine action continues to be characterized by externally managed mechanisms, international organizations, with only limited transference of ownership to nationally based institutions. Although the situation is improving slowly, significant room for improvement remains.

The reason for this lack of progress on national ownership is multi-faceted, and developing fully sustainable national mine action ownership programs necessarily demands a multiplicity of strategies – by donors, mine action organizations, and governments. In this Policy Brief, we examine what options donors have, and what they can do in terms of facilitating national ownership through donor strategies. Given the very different contexts in which mine action operates, it is both difficult and somewhat misguided to presume that the same strategies will work in all cases. While this is a somewhat obvious point, it is nevertheless vital to underscore the fact that so-called “blueprint” approaches are unlikely to meet with success, and that policy must be flexible enough to accommodate the very different situations that characterize different countries.

The recommendations outlined in this Policy Brief are based on studies conducted by the Assistance to Mine-Affected Communities (AMAC) project at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). Specifically, we draw on our fieldwork from Afghanistan, Mozambique, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, and Ethiopia. We do not fo-

cus on each of these cases in detail; instead, we draw out a number of overarching lessons learned, and use these to point the way forward.

National Ownership Understood

National ownership has become a buzzword within the development and humanitarian assistance policy sector. While widely invoked as an ideal to aspire to, it is not often sufficiently understood. It is possible to identify at least three different aspects of national ownership: (1) the integration of programs into national institutions and governmental responsibility, (2) the active participation and involvement of civil society groups and organizations, and; (3) capacity building of relevant local and national actors. This distinction is important, because each entails a very different way of approaching the issue of national ownership, and each has distinct policy implications which are outlined in the latter sections of this Policy Brief.

There are a number of general dilemmas inherent to national ownership. While it would be difficult to do justice to these discussions in their entirety here, a few of the more central debates are nevertheless worth noting. In terms of ownership at the national level, one issue pertains to the wishes of donor agencies with regard to the capacities and priorities of recipient countries. In instances where recipient countries have not formulated a cohesive policy, donors may seek to impose advice – advice that may reflect donor preferences rather than the needs of recipient countries. In cases where recipient countries do not have the necessary administrative capacity to implement policy, donors tend to see it as their responsibility to build such capacity, but then as a reflection of their own priorities and values. Demands on the part of donors that authorities in recipient countries implement programs

designed to reduce poverty have also proven problematic – particularly with the transition to sector program aid. Donors, for instance, have linked aid to poverty reduction initiatives, environmental concerns, or the increased participation of women in development processes. Although few would contest that each of these are important, they may also conflict with the priorities of countries or local communities. In essence, when donors insist on countries meeting these demands, they may also effectively be undermining their parallel ambition of facilitating national ownership. While these are concerns in virtually any recipient country, it is considerably more problematic in nations characterized by a weak state as opposed to countries where state institutions are relatively well developed. There are also clearly cases where state capacities are weak, and political institutions are poorly developed. At the same time, weakened societal institutions can not be taken as an excuse for failure to transfer ownership to national and local authorities. Even in the most war-torn countries, there is likely to exist some identifiable elements that have the legitimacy and capacity to serve as sustainable agents.

With these considerations in mind, we now turn to some of the more specific challenges associated with mine action.

Challenges in National Ownership

In spite of the best intentions, the tenets of the Landmine Convention, and current policy, facilitating national ownership has met with a number of obstacles.

Institutional Capacity. Since mine action generally occurs in the aftermath of armed conflict, facilitating national ownership occurs in an already fragile context. Armed conflict almost invariably results in a breakdown in the ability of state functions. The enduring character of conflicts such as those in Angola, Burundi, the Sudan, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone, for example, have demonstrated the debilitating effects of conflict on state institutions since much of the violence was directed against the existing government or regime. Common characteristics of state disruption are the loss of physical control over its territory by a government, the weakening of authority to make and enforce decisions, the inability to provide public services, and limitations on resources. The capacity to foster national ownership is contingent on a degree of policy coherence in the administrative arena, both horizontally (e.g., geographically) and vertically through the various levels of government. From the perspective

of mine action, a lack of functioning political and governmental institutions has greatly restricted the potential for successfully transferring and integrating responsibility for mine action to national authorities in certain cases.

Political Will. A somewhat different problem regards the political will to fund and sustain national mine action programs. As with the institutional capacities of national authorities, the political will of governments can be compromised as a result of armed conflict. Conflict-ridden states are characterized by regimes that prey on their constituents, patrimonial rule dependent on a patronage-based system of extraction from citizens, the increase in insecurity among ordinary citizens, oppression by governments, increased criminal violence, deterioration of infrastructure, and a neglect of the educational and health systems. Political institutions degrade to the point where only the executive functions, and the legislative branch merely serves to rubber-stamp decisions by the executive. Corruption flourishes, and opportunities for economic gain become rife for a select few, at the expense of society at large, while the state loses its legitimacy – among its own citizens as well as internationally. The weakening of political will can manifest itself in the political decision-making apparatus (e.g. policy advice and formulation), the prioritization of broader humanitarian tasks in relation to mine action given limited resources, or even as a result of dependency on the flow of resources from external donors. In terms of the latter point, countries recovering from armed conflict are obviously besieged by a host of problems and challenges. While addressing the issue of landmines may be one of these, it is not always at the top of the list of priorities for governments and policy makers. This has been a barrier within mine action, with governments lagging in their willingness to assume responsibility for mine activities within their own national borders.

Donor Driven Priorities. As with humanitarian assistance more generally, a problem within mine action has been a tendency on the part of donors to impose their own priorities. Such impositions may not necessarily be intentional, but instead result as a byproduct of a lack of donor coordination, short-term funding horizons, or favoring established organizations, such as through targeting prominent international NGOs. While these organizations have largely performed extremely well, they may not always have national ownership and long-term sustainability as part of its priorities. There has also been a pattern of donor fragmentation, with donors largely focusing on funding their selected countries

individually in the absence of central coordinating mechanisms within mine action.

Recommendations: The Role of Donors

Gaining an Overview. Any mine action initiative, whether it regards national ownership or other activities, needs to be based on solid analyses that both includes and is supported by stakeholders. Analysis at an early stage can help establish the feasibility of national ownership, and what steps must be taken in order for national ownership to take root. Analyses are often overlooked when initiating mine action activities, and there is a tendency to want to get projects up and running as soon as possible. While moving quickly is vital in many instances – and limited emergency measures are key in certain instances – devoting the time and resources to gaining an overview of the potential opportunities and barriers for facilitating national ownership are key, particularly with respect to the effective use of time and resources over the long-run, as well as for the ultimate success of national ownership itself. Improving partnerships on the ground also means that there need to be explicit procedures for vetting performance and holding both parties to account, not simply allowing donors to impose conditions.

Assess Capacities of National and Local Governmental Structures. Given pressures within mine action to promote national ownership, it is easy to become blind to realities. Not all states or governments possess the institutional capacities or political will necessary to develop fully operational national mine action programs. While this is a pillar of the Mine Ban Convention, funding strategies must continually assess the actual capacities that exist from country to country, the level of functioning governance structures, and monitor the level of political will. This does not need to be a time and resource-demanding project, but should be based around reasonable research and assessments. It is vital regularly to monitor and re-assess the capacities of states and governments given that they may be strengthened over even a relatively short space of time. In this sense, donors should strive to fund in ways that facilitate the integration of mine action programs into existing governmental structures, but they nevertheless need to be realistic about existing capacities. Stated somewhat directly, weak institutional capacities along with a lack of political will are unlikely to facilitate national ownership or yield successful mine action programs more generally.

Understand and Accept Realities on the Ground. National ownership forms a pillar of the Mine Ban Convention, and therefore it is vital to strive to subsume mine action programs under the aegis of national governments. However, and for reasons outlined in this Brief, this is not always possible, and or even feasible in some extreme cases. This does not mean that one should abandon the ideal, but it does imply patience and taking the steps necessary to allow the necessary conditions – such as institutional and political will – to develop. The point to be gleaned is that fostering national ownership is a process that takes time, and is contingent on sufficient conditions from which truly sustainable national mine action programs can emerge. National ownership of mine action programs cannot be isolated from other parts of politics and society, and therefore cannot be manufactured where it is not conducive. This entails supporting a well-developed civil society, grassroots groups, and national institutions that have the capacity and will to sustain ownership. This is not tantamount to state-building, but does imply looking for possibilities as they present themselves. In some cases, realities on the ground may dictate the need for going to “second-best” options based on realism and pragmatism.

Dialogue With Stakeholders. National ownership is not something that external agents can “hand over” to indigenous actors. Developing capacities, local and national ownership entails a process by which external actors work in dialogue with stakeholders, establishing modes of working, priorities, and strategies. While this is not something that donors can do directly, donors nevertheless have a responsibility to devise funding strategies that prioritize organizations and groups who demonstrate the capacity and willingness to engage in dialogue with local stakeholders, as well as national authorities.

Foster Grassroots Organizations in Civil Society. While NGOs constitute one significant part of civil society, grassroots organizations – which are often more difficult to identify – constitute a particularly vital avenue. Although international and indigenous NGOs can take steps and measures to facilitate national ownership, it is local grassroots organizations that most often have the legitimacy necessary to sustain ownership over the long-term. Identifying grassroots organizations is by no means easy. However, if mine action seeks to develop real national ownership, then supporting the informal elements and groups that indigenous people view as legitimate and worthwhile constitutes an important part of the overall equation.

Coordinated Donor Strategies. To the extent possible, donors should seek coordinated strategies with a specific focus on fostering national ownership. If donors wish to see national ownership facilitated, they must also make it a primary principle in their funding strategies. This can be at the policy level, whereby donors strive to coordinate their funding efforts with the express objective of fostering national ownership. A unified coordination mechanism is also of vital importance. In the absence of such mechanisms, mine action programs run the risk of becoming splintered, encouraging donors to fund their preferred organizations directly. Central coordinating mechanisms should be flexible enough to delegate decision-making on operational issues to the local and regional levels in an effort to make sure that priorities remain in touch with what is happening on the ground. Building national ownership cannot be an afterthought, but must come as part of a broader, coordinated effort with national ownership as a primary objective.

Concluding Remarks

National ownership is one of the fundamental principles of the Landmine Convention. Building national ownership, however, requires a long-term, multi-pronged effort on the part of all mine action organizations, including the focus here – donors. Donor strategies aimed at facilitating national ownership must be explicit in their aims, based on realistic assessments of conditions in specific contexts, and conducted in coordination with other donors. Lacking institutional and governmental capacities poses a considerable – albeit not insurmountable – hurdle in terms of national ownership. The challenge in such situations is to find creative routes to national ownership. Engaging grassroots civil society organizations is one such alternative; in other cases, national ownership will require patience and a long-term perspective in order to allow for viable political and governmental structures to emerge. Mine action, conversely, should not be engaged in attempting to strengthen state institutions as a primary ambition. Instead, the objective of donor strategies within mine action should be to foster

national ownership under the given conditions of different countries, anchored in sound assessments of social and political realities.

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