

Mine Action and Development in Africa: Progress and Challenges

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

This meeting and the upcoming 2nd Review Conference of the Mine Ban Convention provides an opportunity to positively reflect on our work to eliminate the threats posed by landmines, the contribution of the Convention to development and its role in helping define a common peace and security agenda in Africa. The Conference also provides space to reflect critically on our work analyzing the challenges and opportunities.

Prior to the Mine Ban Convention landmines were used across Africa and other parts of the world with impunity. The suffering they caused was incalculable in humanitarian and development terms. More than ten years on, concerted and focused action is being undertaken to eliminate this threat across the world. Today, African countries are seated around a common table discussing strategies to meet their obligations to support survivors, clear all mined areas, destroy stockpiles and to reaffirm that they will never use these weapons again.

Significant progress has been made towards achieving these aims, even though progress has varied from one country to another. Enormous areas have been cleared of mines and released to communities, and since 2005 both Swaziland and Malawi have declared themselves mine free. Following a recent survey in Zambia, it is expected that Zambia will do the same in the near future. Mozambique, known ten years ago as one of the most affected countries in the world, has set in place a strategy that should see it free from the threat in the not too distant future. Using Mozambique and others as examples, we can say with some degree of confidence that Africa may one day be a truly mine free zone.

In most mine-affected countries there are now national structures, standards, laws and strategies, operational partners and resource mobilisation frameworks to address the problem. Today only a few countries in Africa have United Nations led programmes and the vast majority work under national management and execution with the support of the United Nations and other national and international partners. It is only through national capacities that these threats can be addressed in a sustainable and cost effective fashion. The presence of these institutions also promotes good governance. They have established a crucial space for government and civil society to discuss issues of mine contamination and its impact on local populations and have provided important opportunities for transparency in matters related to national security. They promote government accountability and are a physical representation of the government's efforts to promote humanitarian and human rights standards. Generally, these structures represent a success of mine action in the region and can act as an example to other sectors moving towards similar goals. This is not to say they are perfect or without fault, but they are essential in enabling national governments to undertake their responsibilities related to the social and physical protection of the population from landmines and the rehabilitation of those affected.

Progress has however been accompanied by setbacks.

As we pass ten years of the Convention and 20 years of mine action we remain very conscious of the humanitarian and development challenges posed by landmines and other explosive remnants of war. They increase insecurity, constrain development and hinder the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Their presence often means that poverty stricken communities are barred from accessing or developing their land resources, which could otherwise be put into for productive use. Community access, security and community development underpin all MDGs and mine action is one effort among many that can help countries achieve them. Therefore, mine clearance and rehabilitation of affected communities and survivors should be accelerated and more strongly linked to broader national and regional development strategies, peace and security agendas.

African countries have almost universally ratified the Mine Ban Convention, but there remain a few states in Africa not party to the Convention. These same states have acknowledged the humanitarian aims of the Convention and those which are mine affected have also established mine action programmes. The Convention is not only about mine clearance but also a legal undertaking never to use the weapons again. This commitment is what will ultimately lead to the elimination of the problem and build confidence between and among neighboring countries. National and regional security is promoted and advanced by membership of the Mine Ban Convention. States party to the Convention are engaged in a long term strategic partnership that introduces development and humanitarian dimensions to questions of national security, where national security is in part promoted through disarmament rather than through militarization. Justifying the retention of mines stands in the way of longer term security planning and may exacerbate more present threats such as poverty and inequality.

Africa is well on the road to becoming mine free, though commitments to join the Convention from states not party need to be made if the vision is truly to be realized.

There are also operational challenges that risk slowing the progress. The ability of countries in the region to effectively utilize their own resources or access international assistance to undertake mine action programmes is a clear case in point. There are positive developments such as the significant national investments made by the Angolan government in clearing the country of mines. But not all countries have access to such resources. At this critical juncture traditional and non-traditional donor countries should intensify their efforts and contributions to making Africa mine free. Having said this, to ensure national ownership international contributions need to be complimented, if not always matched, by meaningful contributions from national state budgets and in kind contributions .

Moreover, security and access to affected communities remains a serious issue in countries presently experiencing armed conflict. In such countries mine action programmes may exist but progress can be painfully slow, often dangerous and almost always challenging. In these settings the success of mine action very much depends on the success of national and regional peace processes. In this regard the regional community has a very important role to play as a facilitator and a mediator.

It has been noted that numerous requests for extensions to the Convention's clearance deadlines have been submitted. There are many reasons for this, but not least is the extent to which national capacities, our understanding of the mine problem and access to resources have varied from one country to another. Because of this it is very difficult to meet a common expectation or a common deadline. On a more positive outlook the process of requesting extensions has led to the development of plans that are more realistic than many of those drafted ten years ago. This gives cause to hope that no subsequent extensions will be requested by those concerned. It also highlights the need for states approaching their deadlines to ensure that planning is timely and based on evidence of the true nature of the problem and the efficient allocation of resources.

After ten years, our work has also diversified. Mine action can no longer be viewed as a single issue sector – focused solely on the elimination of antipersonnel landmines. Africa and many other parts of the world face multiple challenges in terms of the proliferation and use of indiscriminate weapons, insecurity, violence and conflict. This Convention has provided a proving ground for successful cooperation between and among African states and framed a common agenda concerning the use of indiscriminate weapons.

All states that are committed to the elimination of mines need to reflect on the pioneering elements of mine action and the Mine Ban Convention, and how the lessons can be applied to wider peace and security programmes. In this vein it is important that all governments seriously consider the adoption of the new Cluster Munitions Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. By linking the Convention with other humanitarian and disarmament initiatives we decrease the means of armed conflict and the possibility for conflict. To date African countries have demonstrated a very high degree of focus and commitment to the new Cluster Munitions Convention and engagement with civil society. This gives reason to be optimistic about what can and will be achieved.

To conclude, I would just like to summarize some of the key points for the coming years. This includes the need to:

1. Focus on the completion of our obligations under the Convention
2. Develop mine action plans that are realistic, based on evidence, and include land release strategies and community protection linked to national development priorities
3. Ensure that programmes are led by national governments and that national resources are made available to ensure ownership, sustainability and success.
4. Encourage non state parties to join the Convention in the interests of national and regional security
5. Ensure active participation in other humanitarian and disarmament processes to further build confidence between nations and limit the means for armed violence and conflict
6. Analyse the role of the Convention in promoting transparency, participation and good governance and how these lessons might be applied to other similar initiatives within governments and the African Union.

Thank you.