



The role of non-governmental organizations in clearing mined areas in Afghanistan

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NGOs, Afghan and international, are the backbone of mine action in Afghanistan. They provide around 8,000 deminers and accounted for over 90% of the antipersonnel landmines cleared in 2008. As a result of operational reforms, they have also greatly increased efficiency – the 84,000 APMs cleared in 2008 was more than three times the number cleared the previous year. HALO Trust, the biggest operator with over 3,000 personnel, cleared more than 50,000 APMs in 2008.

Commercial companies focus on commercial and infrastructure-related tasks, including roads, power lines and military bases. These often involve battle area clearance rather than demining, but the NGOs are clearing the mine hazards most immediately affecting communities.

In the past Afghan NGOs functioned mainly as a source of demining manpower and logistics, fulfilling tasks assigned by the UN mine action centre. With the growing pressure on donor funding and a growing tendency within the UN to competitive bidding for demining tasks, the demining NGOs are having to become more competitive and efficient in their management of assets and resources as well as in streamlining operations.

As security deteriorates, the importance of the NGOs increases. At a time when the ability of international organizations to deliver aid to the community has shrunk in the face of rising insurgency and their retreat into secure zones, the demining organizations illustrate what can still be achieved with attention to community relations. Demining NGO's have strong community ties, their neutral role (demining continued in the years of Taliban control) and the service they provide gives them a generally respected status in the community.

That background, however, did not prevent the NGOs from facing a sharp rise in attacks in 2008 by both armed opposition groups and criminal gangs (who hijack vehicles and equipment and ransom kidnap victims). In response, the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan has adopted a policy of regionalization which concentrates the activities of demining NGOs in areas where they have family and community links which provide much more effective protection than security guards. In some of the most conflicted areas, Afghan NGO's are now undertaking Community Based Demining – hiring, training and equipping local villagers for demining and deploying regular staff for quality assurance.

Some international organizations express skepticism about the benefits of this approach: it is difficult to manage quality of demining, involves training people up and then laying them off after a relatively short time, and involves putting dual use goods (radios, explosives, protective gear) into areas of conflict. The MACCA and Afghan NGOs say CBD takes more time to plan and organize but has proved effective.

As we have heard, the MACCA is still driving for completion of its Article 5 obligations within the deadline of 2013 but it acknowledges that security issues which have blocked or limited mine action in a significant area presents a serious challenge. But there are other major questions. One is the extent to which donors will sustain funding for what is already among the most costly programs in the world. Another major problem is the continual discovery of new areas of contamination which offsets the progress made by clearance in reducing overall estimates contamination.