



Localization in Humanitarian Mine Action in Afghanistan

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The views and opinions contained in this document should not be seen as reflecting the views of the Dutch Government. The content is based on the views of key informants and workshops participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of DRC or MCPA.



Cover photo © DRC (2022) A DRC deminer in Mormul district of Balkh province, Afghanistan. On this anti-personnel (AP) task, DRC found and destroyed 21 AP mines and 520 unexploded ordnances (UXOs).

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Abbreviations

- **AIM** - Abandoned Improvised Mines
- **AMAS** - Afghanistan Mine Action Standards
- **DMAC** - Directorate of Mine Action Coordination
- **EOD** - Explosive Ordnance Disposal
- **EO** - Explosive Ordinance
- **EORE** - Explosive Ordnance Risk Education
- **ERW** - Explosive Remnants of War
- **IMAS** - International Mine Action Standards
- **INGO** - International Non-Governmental Organization
- **IP** - Implementing Partner
- **IMSMA** - Information Management System for Mine Action
- **MAPA** - Mine Action Program of Afghanistan
- **NGO** - Non-Governmental Organization
- **NNGO** - National Non-Governmental Organization
- **OCHA AHF** - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund
- **UN** - United Nations
- **UNMAS** - United Nations Mine Action Service
- **VTF** - (The United Nations) Voluntary Trust Fund
- **VA** - Victim Assistance

Executive Summary

Afghanistan's prolonged conflicts have resulted in extensive explosive ordnance contamination, leading to the establishment of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) in 1989. MAPA has been instrumental in addressing the threats of landmines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERWs). However, post-August 2021, the MAPA has increased access to previously unreachable areas while facing severe funding and operational challenges. Recognizing these shifts, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands initiated a study on localization in humanitarian mine action, focusing on Afghanistan. Conducted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA), this research aims to understand the evolving dynamics affecting MAPA and guide international stakeholders in supporting its lifesaving endeavors.

Coordination before August 2021 was perceived by many interviewees both INGO and NNGO, as well as UN, as working well, while acknowledging the strong support that was given to the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) in form of technical assistance by the UN and donor community. While several coordination mechanisms still exist in theory, the frequency of meetings has drastically reduced, and most meetings are called for ad hoc by DMAC - as a consequence of this reduced technical support from the UN. This means most actors are coordinating on bilateral basis with each other – this goes among Implementing Partners (IPs), as well as with DMAC. All of the IPs, national and international, express strong dissatisfaction with the irregularity of meetings.

The current **funding** landscape presents a complex and challenging scenario, with organizations navigating a myriad of obstacles to continue their humanitarian efforts. It is a race against time, with organizations striving to maintain existing funding levels while seeking new donors. The need of the hour is a concerted effort from all stakeholders to break the existing deadlock and pave the way for a more collaborative and supportive funding environment.

Partnerships and relationships form the bedrock of effective mine action operations, emphasizing mutual respect, honesty, and support. While there's a shared understanding of the importance of these partnerships, there exists a gap in actualizing them, often due to inherent power imbalances and top-down approaches. NNGOs, with their deep-rooted understanding of local contexts and long-standing ties with communities, are poised to offer unparalleled value. However, they often face challenges in accessing donors and gaining visibility. The essence of partnerships should be mutual growth, with INGOs facilitating NNGOs' access to donors and ensuring equitable sharing of resources and responsibilities.

The MAPA, with its rich history and expertise, stands as a testament to the **capacity** and capabilities of NNGOs in Afghanistan. However, the landscape of capacity enhancement has been marred by budget constraints, staff turnover, and a decline in technical training. The cessation of support from global entities has isolated MAPA from the broader mine action community, hindering its growth and evolution. The perspectives of various stakeholders, including INGOs, the UN, and NNGOs, highlight the need for a strategic shift in capacity enhancement approaches. The focus should be on continuous learning, exposure to global best practices, and most importantly ensuring the sustainability of NNGOs through adequate funding and technical support.

The mine action landscape in Afghanistan has undergone significant shifts, particularly post-August 2021. While coordination mechanisms were once robust, the current scenario reveals a decline in regularity and effectiveness of coordination meetings, leading to bilateral coordination efforts. The funding challenges further compound the situation, necessitating a unified approach to secure and optimize resources. Partnerships, though recognized as crucial, face implementation challenges, with NNGOs often sidelined despite their invaluable local insights. The MAPA's legacy and potential underscore the importance of continuous capacity enhancement, which has been hampered by various constraints. As the mine action community navigates these challenges, the overarching need is for collaborative efforts, equitable partnerships, and a renewed focus on capacity building, ensuring that the strides made in mine action in Afghanistan are not only preserved but also propelled forward.

Introduction

Mine Action in Afghanistan

The persistent issue of explosive ordnance contamination in Afghanistan, a consequence of prolonged conflicts, has necessitated a robust response through the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA), established in 1989.¹ Over the years, MAPA has expanded into one of the largest demining programs worldwide. Bringing together national implementing partners (IPs), INGOs, and victim assistance (VA) organizations, MAPA, led and coordinated by the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC), has been a cornerstone in the fight against the dangers of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERWs) in Afghanistan. MAPA implementing partners have not only played a crucial role domestically but have significantly contributed to global mine action initiatives, showcasing proficiency and efficacy in mine clearance and victim assistance.

At present, the program stands at a critical juncture grappling with funding constraints that threaten the continuity and localization of its efforts. This funding shortfall arrives at an unfavourable time, coinciding with expanded accessibility to previously unreachable contaminated areas after August 2021, when widespread conflict decreased after the Taliban takeover of the country. This newfound access opens avenues for people to return to their areas of origin, but coupled with the heightened mobility of the population, it potentially escalates the risk of civilian casualties. The total number of casualties for the years 2019-2021 stands at 4,669, with an average of 129 recorded accidents per month, of which 49% were children. For 2022, the total reported casualties are notably lower, numbering at 298 for the year. This significant decline in reported figures should not be misinterpreted as a decrease in incidents. Instead, it reflects a troubling gap in data collection and coordination, largely due to the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) being inactive for that year.

The implications of inaction from the international community are severe and far-reaching. The once robust capacity of MAPA is on a decline due to limited funding, and if this trend continues, there may be no capacity left to fund within a few years. This would furthermore undermine previous efforts and investments made. Moreover, mine action projects are often community-based, employing local deminers in remote areas. A continued lack of funding not only jeopardizes these employment opportunities but also blocks local livelihoods in pasture, agriculture, development interventions, and local markets. This could potentially lead to increased movements as families seek economic stability elsewhere, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these vulnerable communities.

Localization

Localization emphasizes the significance of engaging and strengthening local actors within the broader humanitarian response framework. This approach aims to enhance the capacity and ownership of local actors, ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes. In humanitarian mine action, localization is critical as it facilitates a more contextually relevant and effective approach to mine clearance, risk education, and victim assistance. By leveraging local knowledge and resources, greater efficiency, sustainability, and community impact can be achieved, contributing to safer environments for those affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war.

¹ Samuel Hall (2021) [30 Years of Impact: An evaluation of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan](#), p. 5, 92, commissioned by UNMAS Afghanistan

The MAPA has long been a pioneer in the field, as the world's first civilian-led humanitarian mine action program primarily fuelled by the commitment and expertise of Afghans. In recent years, MAPA has set numerous industry standards, including being the first to draft national guidelines for Abandoned and Improvised Mines (AIM), initiating policy on liability in mine action, standardizing beneficiary definitions for Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE), and consistently enhancing operational efficiency through ongoing trials and improvements. MAPA was also an early adopter of digital technologies, incorporating advanced tools like the Afghanistan Mine Action Standards (AMAS) databasing for monitoring and exploring the use of modified drones for technical surveys. On an international scale, the MAPA have made invaluable contributions, such as assisting in the development of mine action information systems, training staff in other countries on advanced survey techniques, and conducting international mine action surveys. These accomplishments not only emphasize MAPA's strong local capacity but also its role as a global leader in mine action initiatives.

Contextual changes since August 2021

Since the significant political shift in 2021, with the Taliban assuming control as the authority in Afghanistan, the nation's mine action program finds itself adapting to a significantly transformed environment. The increased access to previously restricted regions signals an augmented movement of internally displaced persons and returnees reclaiming lands and Kuchi tribes exploring new territories, raising the potential for encounters with hazardous areas. Concurrently, the unavailability of funding through the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS's) Voluntary Trust Fund and overall limited financial support to humanitarian mine action has brought a severe financial strain in the sector, which, combined with brain-drain in the previous years, is hampering operations and dismantling previously established robust coordination structures upheld by technical experts. These financial challenges, coupled with a rise in returnees, who have not undergone risk education training, needing agricultural land and safe play areas for children, amplify the interconnected challenges the mine action program faces, highlighting the urgency for localized, agile, and informed responses to prevent a growing risk of explosive ordnance casualties, which already hover at an alarming estimate of 129 incidents per month for 2019-2021, including around 49% children.

Gender considerations

In Afghanistan, MAPA has a sustained commitment to gender and diversity mainstreaming. Within its five-year strategic plans, both from 2016-2021 and 2021-2025, a standalone goal is expressly dedicated to the mainstreaming of gender and diversity. Significant efforts were realized pre-August 2021, as MAPA fielded its first-ever all-female demining team, marking a pivotal shift from their conventional roles as facilitators and EORE trainers. Additionally, gender mainstreaming officers have been technically trained to undertake monitoring activities, as well as to provide oversight on needs assessment, project design, implementation, and evaluation. Originally, UNMAS provided funding for these positions. When UNMAS encountered difficulties in securing continued funding, some NNGOs stepped in, allocating a portion of their overhead costs to keep these professionals employed. However, the ongoing ban on women working in NGOs, along with financial difficulties faced by NNGOs, are hampering the sustainability of these key positions. Such challenges threaten to undermine the substantial gains made in recent years, risking the dilution of the program's inclusivity initiatives.

The Localization Journey

Why

At this pivotal moment in Afghanistan, the mine action sector risks losing the substantial progress achieved over more than three decades. NNGOs might be due to several interconnected reasons no longer able to continue their work in the near future, which would ultimately undermine the collective achievements and the role of local actors in the sector, including the loss of valuable know-how and local ownership upon which the MAPA stands. Against this background, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands embarked on a global learning initiative to unpack what localization means for the humanitarian mine action sector, focusing on Iraq and Afghanistan. DRC and MCPA set out to conduct an inclusive and partner steered learning journey to learn and identify ways for the international community to engage with MAPA NNGOs to maintain their critical role in the sector.

The research intends to dissect the various interlinked dynamics that national Implementing Partners (IPs) are navigating, analysing the influence of the current financial environment on the quality and sustainability of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA), and its broader implications on program impact. This research seeks to illuminate the coordination challenges faced by the national authority given their sudden lack of technical support by the international community, upon which they relied for many years, and the repercussions these have on implementing partners and the broader MAPA framework.

Methodology

The research builds on 18 interviews and numerous informal conversations conducted with national and international implementing partners in the MAPA, as well as the UN at different levels, and others who have been involved in mine action in Afghanistan for many years. Most of these interviews were conducted in July and August 2023. Additionally, a workshop bringing together national and international stakeholders of mine action in Afghanistan was conducted in August 2023.

The focus areas within Localization and of the research itself – Coordination, Funding, Partnerships, and Capacity Enhancement – were chosen by the NNGOs in a first workshop taking place in Kabul in May 2023, as being the most relevant to the current context. Other areas considered but not selected for immediate focus included Participation Revolution, Visibility, and Policy. Yet, the interconnectedness of the various dimensions shines through throughout the research. From beginning to end, NNGOs were consulted and involved to ensure their views are building the basis for this research, as much as this research will aim to bring their views and voices abroad in a time where their participation in international fora is extremely limited.

The content of this report is therefore aiming to accurately reflecting the views of all key informants and workshops participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of DRC or MCPA as facilitators of this research.

Limitations

Navigating through an unstable political environment poses a significant challenge to our research, as the rapidly evolving policy landscape might render some of the data and insights collected — reflective of the time and circumstances of their collection — outdated or no longer relevant. The changing dynamics between UNMAS and DMAC, along with the absence of donor interviews, might further affect the relevance of our findings, documented in mid-2023.

In a sector that is already comparatively male-dominated the recent regulations and decrees such as the ban of women working in NGOs have made the participation of women in the study even more difficult. Nonetheless, their voices are represented and their participation in various ways was ensured. However, exchanges among participants of the study were especially in the beginning limited given the challenges of mix-gender meetings in the current context.

While under normal circumstances localization also can concern local authorities, given the political complexity of Afghanistan, the focus in this research lays on the national implementing partners, and how to strengthen them. While there are recommendations directed towards the national authorities, they were not actively involved in this research although efforts have been made to bridge this gap through dialogue with other stakeholders.

Dimension: Coordination & Collaboration

Coordination & collaboration is essential to fostering synergies among diverse stakeholders, including at a local level. Coordinated efforts including local, national, and international actors ensure that resources are allocated efficiently, expertise is shared, and Mine Action safety protocols are adhered to.

Coordination in humanitarian mine action relies on and turns around data and information management concerning hazards, contaminated and cleared areas, prioritization of tasks as well as accidents, etc. Further, coordination will allow proper quality assurance, including monitoring and verification of survey and clearance reports. For all of these, technical capacity is needed. Coordination will ensure avoiding duplication and awareness of each other's work when implementing operations in the same area or district.

Coordination before August 2021 was perceived by many interviewees both INGO and NNGO, as well as UN, as working well, while acknowledging the strong support that was given to DMAC post August 2021 in form of technical assistance by the UN and donor community, mainly via the Liaison Office. Despite intermittent interruptions in its operations, the Liaison Office offered valuable assistance to the DMAC. These encompassed reviews of mine action reports, support in quality management, and data management, assisting DMAC's operational capabilities in these critical areas.

While several coordination mechanisms still exist in theory, the frequency of meetings has drastically reduced, and most meetings are called for ad hoc by DMAC. This means most actors are coordinating on bilateral basis with each other – this goes among IPs, as well as with DMAC. All of the IPs, national and international, express strong dissatisfaction with the irregularity of meetings.

“[There is] no formal coordination mechanism where all the concerned parties can gather to discuss challenges, opportunities, and provide suggestions and updates like in the past. We solve our coordination problems by approaching the concerned party directly. For instance, if it is with DMAC, we approach DMAC, if [it is] with AHF then OCHA etc.”

-NNGO representative

Although there seems to be a fair amount of confusion among IPs on the current role division between DMAC, the Liaison office, and the UN, it is clear from all interviews and conversations that the expectations are for the

national authorities to take the lead in coordination of humanitarian mine action activities, as coordination should be state-level responsibility and centralized. NNGOs expressed disappointment in the UN not having stepped up more when DMAC has reduced capacities, as the expectation is that in the absence of a functioning national authority effectively coordinating, the UN should lead.

How is coordination currently happening?

Most NNGOs spoken to were part of several coordination bodies. These include among other:

- Relevant (sub-)clusters of the UN coordination system, i.e. health and mine-action within the protection cluster;
- A monthly MAPA coordination meeting, bringing together all IPs and VAs. In this meeting common challenges and issues arising in operations are discussed;
- DMAC technical working groups which were at the time of research not or not regularly convened but used to serve as a platform to discuss technical and policy issues related to e.g EORE, International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) and AMAS, Land release, AIM, and Quality Management;
- The Executive Committee of the NGOs. This used to serve as a platform where directors of IPs are coming to coordinate ad hoc, e.g. joint requests to the donor community or UN (INGO1). However, VA organizations are often neither aware of the meetings nor invited (NNGO9);
- Stakeholder meetings, before August 2021 bringing together not only the IPs and national authorities, but also embassy and donor representatives, have halted. This is due largely to the absence of donors in country, but also DMAC not having called for these meetings. Several interviewees mentioned how critical these meetings were ensuring regular exchanges between the various actors involved in mine action in Afghanistan. Especially for the NNGOs, it was one of the direct avenues of exchange with donors, and have their work seen and recognized;
- Where relevant, working groups under other ministries, e.g., the Ministry of Public Health, Department of Disability. However, even those are reportedly not functioning at the moment (NNGO5).

All IPs are coordinating bilaterally with each other, especially operational coordination when working in the same provinces. None of the NNGOs mentioned language as a factor limiting their participation in cluster or other coordination meetings.

Current challenges

DMAC, as the coordination body, was almost fully funded by the international community until August 2021. The international community's contribution was instrumental in building, sustaining, and continually improving DMAC, which was widely acknowledged to be the backbone of what was then the largest mine action program in the world, boasting significant achievements. Over 90% of DMAC staff were seconded and financially supported by the international community, while only a small percentage of staff were civil servants under the Afghan government. However, since August 2021, these secondments have ceased, leading to a drastic reduction in the workforce and technical capacity of DMAC. The current weakened structure of DMAC is a direct consequence of the halted direct support from the international community.

The current backlog in DMAC is critically affecting the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA). This system is needed to ensure up to date information on hazards, cleared areas, etc. Furthermore, oversight of clearance activities as well as (handover of cleared areas) is facing delays, causing challenges to NNGOs as some donors only transfer funds upon provision of a completion certificate.

The absence of DMAC at regional level is having a significant impact. The lack of external monitoring and thus quality assurance is risky not only for deminers, but also the communities to whom cleared areas will be handed over. Given the lack of technical capacity within DMAC resulted in a delay with regards to updating IMAS and AMAS. Only recently did the Technical Working Group concerning Mine Action Standards start their critical work again.

It has to be noted that improvements were reported on the coordination led by DMAC in the past few months. While the capacity is still too low to deal with all coordination matters arising, structures are slowly reestablished and start functioning on some levels, e.g., meetings to avoid duplication of operational activities implemented in the same districts, updating IMSMA, etc. Although, the IPs are appreciative of DMAC's role in supporting them, it's not meeting the expectations nor the level it was before August 2021.

"Donors should find ways to support DMAC, we (the national NGOs) need this coordination body"

-NNGO representative

Key recommendations

- **Reinstall regular coordination meetings:** All actors interviewed are eager for DMAC to reinstate the various monthly and technical coordination meetings immediately. These should include not only national and INGOs, but also VA and UN agencies.
- **Include VA fully:** VAs reportedly do feel often left out in the various coordination mechanisms. To ensure well-functioning referral mechanisms, proper coordination with all actors needs to happen. Thus, VA organizations should be involved and invited to the relevant meetings.
- **Technical capacity of DMAC:** Both, a national as well as international NGO mentioned that IPs could support DMAC with the backlog of data management by seconding staff part-time to DMAC.
- **Stronger coordination among NNGOs:** The NNGOs wish to establish a small secretariate to enhance coordination among themselves and support the existing Executive Committee. To ensure better communication, follow up and technical support, resources are required. This would allow them - while DMAC and the UN are unable to call for coordination meetings, and only as a temporary measure - to ensure at least more regular and proper coordination among themselves.
- **Stronger role of UN:** Several IPs wish to see a stronger engagement of UN agencies in coordination and providing support with the challenges pertaining yet are clear that DMAC must be in the lead of coordination in the long run.
- **Donor coordination with NNGOs:** Donors should pro-actively find ways to establish engagement and communication channels with NNGOs to learn and understand about their work.

"We want you here. Be with us. Be with us side by side. Without you, we are incomplete. And without us, you are not complete."

-NNGO representative

Dimension: Funding & Fundraising

In the evolving landscape of humanitarian mine action in Afghanistan, the funding and financing dimension serves as a cornerstone that facilitates various mine action programs. This dimension encompasses the strategies, mechanisms, and financial resources that are mobilized to facilitate sustainable mine action initiatives, which are vital in fostering a safe and secure environment in Afghanistan.

Over the years, the sector has witnessed fluctuations in international donor funding. Pre-August 2021, these often resulted in the MAPA not being able to achieve its set goals, leading to further extension requests to meet its goal of seeing an Explosive Ordnance (EO) free Afghanistan. Post August 2021, the hesitance of donors to fund different aspects of the MAPA has intensified due to the policies and stance of the national authorities, making funding often contingent upon the host government adhering to certain terms and conditions to qualify for international assistance. Unfortunately, the current scenario is characterized by a severe decline in funding, exacerbated by the current halt of funding via the Voluntary Trust Fund (VTF) managed by UNMAS, a vital platform that facilitated funding access for both national and international NGOs.

The lack of VTF funding has particularly impacted national NGOs, limiting their access to international markets and funding avenues. Despite hefty UN administrative costs, the VTF served as a crucial conduit for channelling international funds to Afghanistan, benefiting a wide array of organizations involved in mine action. Given the absence of embassies, the VTF could serve as a viable funding channel, as monitoring and management responsibilities are with the UN. However, it's worth noting that the administrative costs associated with UN management are higher compared to bilateral channels. Post August 2021, there has been a significant decline in bilateral funding available to NNGOs, making the resumption of VTF funding an important consideration for sustaining mine action initiatives within a localized ecosystem.

Current Challenges

Funding is pivotal in facilitating Afghanistan's commitment to clearing landmines and other explosives nationwide. Unfortunately, funding shortfalls have prevented the timely execution of planned clearances of identified hazards, necessitating multiple extensions requests. This issue is exacerbated by Non-Technical Surveys consistently identifying new hazards in previously inaccessible areas, thereby expanding the clearance database, and increasing funding requirements. The urgency for increased financial support has, therefore, intensified, particularly given the significant decline in mine action funding in Afghanistan since August 2021. Moreover, there is a perception among NGOs that the current funding landscape is shaped by complex geopolitical factors.

The acute financial challenges arising from insufficient funding have compelled all NNGOs to lay off staff, undermining not only the immediate goals of clearance but also the long-term sustainability of MAPA's localized, community-based approach. This has far-reaching consequences: it puts vulnerable populations living near explosive hazard sites at immediate risk, neglects communities whose development and livelihood opportunities are stifled by Explosive Ordnance (EO) contamination and disrupts Victim Assistance (VA) services. Furthermore, the community-based nature of mine action projects, which train and employ local individuals, serves as a stabilizing factor by providing employment and discouraging migration for economic reasons. The current lack of financial support for MAPA, especially NNGOs, not only endangers lives and limbs but also risks

eroding the very fabric of MAPA's localized and adaptive response to the multifaceted challenges it faces across Afghanistan.

Donor conferences have served as a vital nexus connecting key MAPA stakeholders, encompassing both national and international IPs, with the donor community. These events facilitated a direct dialogue platform where IPs could articulate the program's funding needs and challenges openly to the donors, as well as presenting their work. Unfortunately, these conferences have been halted, disrupting this critical line of communication and collaboration.

Critically, if such lack of funding towards NNGOs persists, many of them face the dire prospect of imminent closure. This would result in a severe depletion of local expertise within the MAPA. Rebuilding this expertise would be an arduous task, and the years of effort and collaboration by donors, the international community, and the NNGOs to cultivate a potentially localized MAPA could be rendered futile.

“If the funding continues to decrease, the local NGOs may stop operations and close business. This will pose a serious challenge to the MAPA activities that follow – it’s a huge risk that is currently upon MAPA’s localization.”

-INGO representative

Lastly, NNGOs are also grappling with a myriad of financial challenges that impact their operational efficiency. Procuring technical equipment from abroad and conducting international financial transactions have become increasingly difficult. To navigate these issues, some NNGOs have resorted to opening bank accounts in foreign countries. Additionally, the return of unspent balances to donors’ post-project closure presents another hurdle due to limited international money transfer options. Compounding these challenges is a weekly withdrawal limit of 5% for projects, severely hampering the mobilization of assets to the field at project start. Moreover, while NNGOs maintain accounts in USD, they are often paid in AFN at rates significantly below market value, exacerbating their banking woes.

Key recommendations

- **Donors:** Recognize the ground realities and complexities of operating in the current environment. It is essential to break the ice and initiate steps to resume technical support to DMAC, facilitating functionalities like data management and external quality assurances. Additionally, consider the possibility of potentially funding the NNGOs bilaterally to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of mine action initiatives. A positive step in this direction has been the recent AHF allocation, which was exclusively earmarked for national NGOs, acknowledging their limited access to funding.

“If INGOs accept to support this [localization process], they can arrange or facilitate connections with the donor community for local actors.”

-NNGO representative

- Consider funding NNGOs bilaterally, as this approach not only proves to be more cost-effective compared to other channels but also significantly bolsters the localization efforts within the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan.
- Consider multi-year and flexible funding for NNGOs. This approach not only ensures the sustainability of their core structure but also allows them to progressively enhance their administrative and technical capacities.
- Promote equitable partnerships between INGOs and NNGOs by establishing grant agreements that ensure a fair allocation of overhead and budget and provide the necessary time and flexibility for the organization and execution of comprehensive training and capacity strengthening as necessary.
- **International NGOs:** Consider forming partnerships with NNGOs to foster national expertise. Collaborative efforts with NNGOs would not only enhance the effectiveness of mine action initiatives but also ensure the sustainability of these efforts amidst the current funding constraints. This approach would facilitate a seamless transition and continuity of operations once the funding environment becomes more favourable.
- **National Authorities:** Work towards improving the human rights record and fostering an environment conducive to receiving international funding. This includes addressing issues related to women's education and participation in the workforce.
- **UN:** Elevate the issue to the highest levels to foster a dialogue that addresses the existing above-mentioned challenges and seeks solutions that benefit all stakeholders. Additionally, the UN should consider mobilizing resources specifically for mine action projects aimed at National NGOs (NNGOs). Furthermore, the UN could assume a role in providing technical support to the Mine Action Program of Afghanistan (MAPA), enhancing its capacity and facilitating the successful implementation of its initiatives. Moreover, UN agencies within the interagency coordination group on mine action should continue to explore alternatives ways to channel funding to IPs.

Dimension: Partnerships & Relationships

In the context of localization with regards to Partnerships and Relationships it intends to strive for more genuine, complementary, and equitable efforts between international humanitarian organizations and local entities, such as NGOs, governments, and community-based groups. Partnerships, when building on each partners strength, do have the possibility to enhance synergies, foster mutual capacity-building and resource sharing.

Across the IPs, national and international, is a shared understanding that partnerships should build on mutual respect, honesty, in support of each other. This includes the expectation on power sharing and co-leading projects, which will help NNGOs in the long run achieve better quality of their work. There is no clear opinion on project-based vs. programmatic partnerships among the INGOs, while most of the NNGOs favour longer-term partnerships that go beyond specific project activities. None of the IPs reported having sustained programmatic partnerships with any of the IPs, though several IPs have been working together for years when opportunities arise.

There is a broad agreement among IPs that the NNGOs are the ones who are committed to the country, long after INGOs might have exited, and often have a better understanding of the local context and cultural norms. They had -prior to August 2021- access to more regions than INGOs, thus have often longer-standing and closer ties with the communities. In case of a sudden withdrawal of INGOs, the NNGOs stress the fact that they can stay and continue operations.

When in a partnership, NNGOs interviewed do see a responsibility and have expectations towards INGOs to support and take the lead on financial and donor reporting, given stronger systems and more resources in place. Likewise, INGOs are seeing it as their role to provide the assurance and guarantee to the donors that there's value for money, transparency, and accountability.

A positive point noted was that among the IPs, support even outside of formal partnership agreements is given easily and readily when it comes to lending or renting equipment to each other or including each other in capacity building measures.

Current challenges

NNGOs reportedly would like to have more partnerships with INGOs but feel it difficult to approach, engage and start these given inherent power imbalances. At the same time, one INGO stated they'd be eager to partner more with NNGOs but did not have the opportunity to yet. This shows that while on both sides the willingness and interest is there, it often requires a specific donor call for proposal to actually enter in a partnership.

At the same time, NNGOs have the perception that INGOs often have top-down approach and own agenda when in a partnership, while NNGOs have better understanding of needs. As one NNGOs states, in a partnership this can be levelled out to work for the best benefit for the people.

One major challenge reported by NNGOs is the difficult access to donors. This is linked to a general lack of awareness outside of Afghanistan of the strong capacity and many NNGOs doing clearance and victim assistance. Additionally, when in partnerships it is often linked to very limited visibility and credit given to national partners by INGOs. Given the strong links of INGOs to the international donor community, and their more systematic contacts with these, they should support and raise the visibility of the NNGOs, whether partners or not.

Further, when in a partnership, NNGOs expect a sharing of overhead costs, as well as a fairer share of allocations and activities to be implemented. Given the sustainability of organizations often depends on core funding and ability to bridge gaps, one NNGO states that “partnership is very much needed for the sustainability and organizational development.”

With significant differences across regions, several NNGOs report having interference with regards to hiring processes, procurement, or when signing MoUs with concerned ministries. While INGOs face similar challenges, these are reportedly less, possibly linked to their stronger capacity to push-back and negotiation.

Almost all NNGOs stated that they would prefer direct donor funding over a partnership with INGOs, speaking strongly to the perceived lack of recognition of their work by INGOs as well as donors. This suggests a need for building and improving partnership skills on donor and INGO side.

Key recommendations

- **Partnerships as donor requirements:** Donors should consider including partnerships with NNGOs as a funding requirement. NNGOs highly appreciate donors encouraging or even mandatorily requiring a partnership as funding requirements. INGOs are also highly appreciative of the push for partnerships and state that INGOs should partner more with NNGOs and ensure support via partnerships.
- **Programmatic Partnerships:** Donors should consider longer-term INGO-NNGO partnerships as they provide more stability with regards to funding and capacity to NNGOs. Given the high turnover of staff in NNGOs, there is a continuous capacity development need which can be considered in longer-term partnerships and build organizations’ rather than individual capacity. These equitable partnerships should include grant agreements with a fair allocation of overhead and budget and provide the necessary time and flexibility for the organization and execution of comprehensive training and capacity strengthening.
- **Budget for Capacity Development:** Each partnership should have, in addition to shared overhead and activities, a dedicated budget line for capacity development of the NNGO partners.
- **INGOs** should facilitate contact with donors and provide more visibility to NNGOs. When being in a partnership and implementing together, bringing the local partner along to donor meetings and providing them the opportunity to present and engage.
- **Partner Assessments:** NNGOs urge the UN and INGOs to mutually recognize previous due diligence and partner assessments passed, instead of renewing. If NNGOs have passed the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (OCHA AHF) due diligence this could be recognized by all INGOs going forward.
- **Principled Response:** Donors should strengthen their support to NNGOs, especially now, with regards to principled humanitarian assistance. There is reportedly less interference with INGOs, thus a partnership can be a powerful tool in itself. Further, NNGOs should feel empowered and supported, including financially, to be able to make decision regarding potential adjustments incl. temporary suspensions of activities without negative implications for their organizations by partners or donors. Through partnerships, which include coverage of costs in case of an eventual suspension of activities to keep principles, NNGOs can be strengthened.

Dimension: Capacity Enhancement

Capacity enhancement within localizations emphasises a more effective support for strong and sustainable institutional capacities of local actors, and less undermining of these.

The Mine Action Program of Afghanistan (MAPA) maintains a strong capacity, although its once globally renowned prestige has experienced some decline. It is noteworthy that the national NGOs have been conducting mine action operations since 1989, maintaining the highest standards of operation. However, there are areas where further strengthening is necessary. While the availability of trained staff is not an issue, the specialized equipment necessary for the land release aspect of the AIM is inadequate. Incorporating modern technology could potentially enhance productivity rates. Moreover, the NNGOs have a thorough understanding of and access to all communities and hard-to-reach areas across Afghanistan, which has been a significant asset in their operations.

There is a commendable spirit of collaboration among the various MAPA IPs. They extend invitations to each other for training sessions and lend training areas and equipment to facilitate the capacity-building efforts of other organizations. This collaborative environment significantly contributes to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the MAPA.

Since August 2021, the support from UNMAS has ceased, particularly in terms of financial assistance for technical interventions and facilitating participation in global platforms. This has hindered MAPA's ability to stay abreast of developments in the global mine action sector. The cessation of support has had negative implications, isolating MAPA from the global mine action community and creating challenges in e.g., importing and exporting essential mine action equipment.

Perspectives

- **INGOs' Perspective:** INGOs make a compelling case for a strategic transformation in donor funding approaches. Moving away from the limitations of short-term, one-year initiatives, they advocate for long-term projects as the optimal path for NNGOs. This approach ensures not only consistent funding but also creates an environment conducive to ongoing assessment and capacity enhancement for NNGOs, thereby securing a more impactful and sustainable future.

It's also our responsibility, if we give them funds, [...] part of these funds should be for capacity building of the national IPs. Partnerships always come with capacity.

-INGO representative

- **UN Perspective:** The UN acknowledges the substantial capacity within NNGOs. However, they note a centralization issue at DMAC, which conducts activities centrally due to limited access to all regions and funding constraints. The UN suggests mobilizing resources specifically for mine action projects aimed at NNGOs and assuming a role in providing technical support to MAPA to enhance its capacity and decentralize coordination efforts. Furthermore, the UN emphasizes that efforts should be made to ensure that resources earmarked for Afghanistan are distributed equitably among INGOs and NNGOs.

- **NNGOs' Perspective:** NNGOs believe that while they have been meeting donor standards and requirements proficiently, comparative research with global practices could help in identifying gaps and training needs. They emphasize the necessity of being exposed to global best practices consistently to stay updated with worldwide developments. Additionally, they advocate for adequate funding to maintain responsive equipment to address the challenges of AIM contamination effectively.

There are several challenges like for instance any training that is internal or external requires budget. We have a lack of budget so we cannot train our staff to begin with. Furthermore, there were other trainings like senior management training before which aren't being supported now. I think it is still required as we have a lot of staff turn-over. Furthermore, there were other technical trainings like Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) up to level 3 and above which aren't being provided anymore.

-NNGO representative

Challenges:

- **Budget Constraints:** Limited financial resources hinder the provision of essential training for staff.
- **Staff Turnover:** The MAPA, historically known for its stable workforce, is now grappling with increased staff turnover due to recent financial challenges.

"We lost our staff, experienced staff. At the management, technical level, field level. They worked with us for 15-20 years in the field. We invested in them. Donors have invested in them. But they are no longer working in HMA. They are working in the other fields. Do you know how many courses and capacity building sessions took place over 34 years of activities of the mining in Afghanistan? This is all going to be lost!"

-NNGO representative

- **Coordination Capacity:** The current lack of direct support to DMAC by the international community has weakened the coordination capabilities of the national authority, emphasizing the pressing need to strengthen their structure and technical capacity.
- **Long-term Sustainability of NNGOs:** The future stability and continuity of NNGOs, especially regarding key staff and facilities, are at risk due to lack of funding.
- **Technical Training:** The discontinuation of access to vital technical training, such as Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) level 3 and above, potentially threatens to compromise operational standards.
- **Policy Representation:** The MAPA's reputation is waning due to its absence from international forums, leading to a lack of awareness of international best practices and experience sharing. Furthermore, its lack of representation on the IMAS review board exacerbates this challenge.
- **Partners' Involvement in Capacity Enhancement:** There's an imbalance in how partners contribute to defining capacity enhancement needs, primarily due to them facing strict and insufficient funding to support their key staff and facilities.
- **Technical vs. Administrative Capacities:** There's a blurred distinction between technical and administrative capacities, which can lead to inefficiencies.

Recommendations:

- **Addressing Budget Constraints:** Suggested in recent interviews, the donors should consider dedicated funding lines for capacity development.
- **Tackling Staff Turnover:** Implement continuous senior management training programs. Additionally, fostering a culture of collaborative learning and mentorship can, to an extent, mitigate the effects of turnover.
- **Enhancing Coordination Capacity:** The international community should find ways to support coordination enabling it to strengthen synergies among stakeholders and establish robust communication frameworks to ensure smooth operations and efficient project execution.
- **Ensuring Long-term Sustainability of NNGOs:** Prioritize funding mechanisms that address the core needs of NNGOs. Also, facilitate access to advanced technical trainings, ensuring NNGOs can both send staff abroad for training and invite international trainers to Afghanistan.
- **Reviving Technical Training:** The donors should support NNGOs in adopting a comprehensive approach to capacity development, ensuring both technical expertise and systemic improvements are addressed.
- **Restoring Policy Representation:** It's imperative to reinstate MAPA's representation on the IMAS review board and ensure its active participation in international forums. This will facilitate a better understanding of international best practices and experience sharing. Additionally, reigniting collaborations with international technical support entities is crucial to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of mine action operations.
- **Balancing Partners' Involvement:** The donors should adopt a collaborative approach where all partners have an equal say in defining capacity enhancement initiatives that focus on essential needs. This ensures that the strategies are both relevant and effective, especially considering the severely weakened capacity NNGOs that is presently under threat.
- **Clarifying Capacities:** Clearly delineate between technical and administrative capacities to ensure each area receives the attention it deserves, leading to a more holistic capacity enhancement strategy.

Furthermore, to address these challenges, a recurring idea is the necessity for continuous learning and improvement, with an emphasis on exposing NNGOs to global best practices in mine action on a consistent basis. This approach will ensure that they remain updated with developments around the world, fostering a culture of excellence and adaptation, thereby preserving the years of progress and efforts invested in building a localized MAPA.

Cross-cutting topics raised

While there was agreement among NNGOs to focus this research on the four focus areas discussed, a few cross-cutting issues were brought up continuously.

Gender

There may be some exemptions to the ban on women working. DMAC is continuously actively dedicated to ensuring that mine action projects benefit all ages and genders across Afghanistan and has consistently shown support towards deploying essential assets for this cause, however significant restrictions across the country still pose a substantial barrier to the full realization of gender mainstreaming. Many IPs appreciate a strong stand by the international community, and advocacy for a realistic and achievable approach to incorporating women into various roles. These should align expectations with ground realities to prevent undue pressure on IPs.

Governance in the IPs

For many of the NNGOs, leadership has been the same for several years, sometime having left Afghanistan a while ago or not being there frequently. To foster innovation and adaptation to changing circumstances and new methodologies developed around the world, it is suggested to involve younger generations.

Politicization of aid/Principle-led assistance:

Many IPs, national and international, as well as other actors spoken to admit the strong perception that the current reluctance by donors to fund mine action or support the national authorities in coordination efforts is linked to political constraints and donors low risk appetite, given the humanitarian exemptions to the sanctions in place. It is noteworthy, that especially within DMAC the civil servants have been the same pre- and post-August 2021, one only the top leadership has changed with the national authorities.

While UN and donors might be reluctant to engage as they do not want to be perceived as the ones normalizing relations with national authorities, the IPs made a strong plea that humanitarian activities, including mine action, should be supported and funded to ensure the safety of Afghan people.

Another aspect in this regard is the lack of representation of Afghanistan in global humanitarian conferences and fora, such as the National Directors Meeting or Mine Ban Treaty meeting. The absence of an Afghan representative in due to the lack of recognition of the national authorities means that not only the global awareness on contamination is lower, but thus also risking funding opportunities. Several interviewees suggested temporary representation by a civil servant from DMAC unrelated to national authorities until a more permanent solution can be found.