TOWARDS COMMUNITY BASED DE-MINING?
AREA's project in Nangrahar province, Afghanistan

Kristian Berg Harpviken, Project Leader
Peshawar, 24 May 1999

Landmines Memo no. 3
Assistance to Mine-Affected Communities (AMAC)

The AMAC project undertakes studies of mine-affected communities, with the aim of further exploring the opportunities to build on local resources and local competence in Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA). AMAC works in close partnership with HMA practitioners - both in order to learn from existing experiences, and in order to engage in a dialogue that can have an immediate impact on field operations. The project is based on the conviction that improved assistance to mine-affected communities must start with a deeper understanding of local responses to landmines. Rather than viewing people in those communities as passive victims, AMAC acknowledges their importance as active subjects. It is imperative for the design of interventions that community capacities are properly understood. The challenge is to find ways in which the social dynamics within which mine action agencies operate can be integrated positively into the mine action process.

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The Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan (AREA) is currently running a de-mining programme in Nangrahar province. This project is unique in that it recruits de-miners from the mine-affected communities themselves. It might become an alternative to present-day highly centralized programmes, as it can offer greater flexibility, better use of financial as well as human resources, and better sustainability. The programme is as yet in a formative phase. Hence, the present paper is intended not as an evaluation of the programme, but as a contribution to an ongoing debate about where the programme should go. As such it is less descriptive than it is critical. It is written in the conviction that the AREA project is vital as a model project: its failure or success will have implications not only for AREA’s project or for the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA), but also for the future of community-based de-mining globally.

The report is based on three types of data:
• Observations during a field visit to Nangrahar, 9–12 May 1999, including the de-mining sites in Hakimabad, Khogiani district, and Sheikh Misri, Surkh Rud district.
• Interviews and informal conversations with AREA staff at all levels, plus interviews with senior staff of mine action organisations active in Afghanistan.
• Project documentation from AREA.

Let me again stress that this is not meant to be a formal evaluation of the project. The time and resources at my disposal would not have enabled me to perform an evaluation, even if I had wanted to. I am grateful to AREA personnel for arranging the field visit, for generously giving of their time, and for patiently responding to my many questions. I am also grateful for comments on a draft version of the report from: M. Rafaat Ludin, Managing Director; M. Ershad, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer; Barekzai, Jalalabad Regional Manager; and Abdul Shakoor Yusufi, De-mining Coordinator. The responsibility for the contents of the report remains entirely my own.

Project background
AREA inherited its project from Austrians Aid Afghans (AAA), a small NGO which set up small-scale, local de-mining capacities in Nangrahar in collaboration with an Afghan NGO, the Afghan Rural Development Association (ARDA). The project as run by AAA focused almost exclusively on low costs and local recruitment. It worked independently of MAPA. The programme was poorly supervised and had low standards of medical back-up. AREA took over the programme in January 1997. After a long restructuring period, the programme is now working within the framework of MAPA, in accordance with MAPA's Standards of Operation (SOPs). The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) has also trained the personnel, and is responsible for monitoring and evaluation. The funding, still from the Austrian government, is now channelled via MAPA, which in turn is a branch of UNOCHA.

AREA took over from AAA some equipment and some personnel, as well as inheriting the donor relation to the Austrian government – but it also inherited a programme which was known to be generally mismanaged, and to operate below any acceptable security standards. Since taking over, AREA has done a solid job of demarcating the shift in the project. Although a great deal of scepticism to the project remains, it is also clear that AREA has, in a very short period of time, been able to redesign the project and re-establish a certain degree of trust in the community-based approach.

Community basis

The basic principle of the AREA programme is that it is to be community based. This means that the de-miners are introduced by representatives of the local communities, that the community is relied upon for providing the core staff of AREA with housing and other facilities, and that AREA's community mobilizers work with the local communities, primarily through village and district shuras, at various stages of the de-mining process.

The stated objective of AREA is to treat de-mining as any other type of project within its larger development strategy. AREA builds its approach to local communities on their community mobilizers (CMs) – organizational employees who visit the villages repeatedly over a period of several months, with a view to establishing a representative village development shura of 15–20 members. Once the shura has been established, the CM can enter into a discussion about needs and priorities. The idea is that if de-mining is a priority for that particular community, AREA will be in a position to respond. In practice, currently running projects have not been through this sequence: the de-miners were introduced by selected local influentials, and AREA established local shuras afterwards. In a future expansion of the programme, this will be different, and is expected to result in a stronger degree of community engagement in the projects.

In line with the overall project philosophy of AREA, the community mobilizers are meant to play a crucial role also during project implementation of the project, whereas the staff of the de-mining operation, including the de-mining coordinator, should be responsible for supervising the day-to-day implementation of the project. In practice, the authority of the CMs is limited by several factors: they are younger; they have less experience within the organization; and there are no other projects running in the areas where de-mining is in progress. The CMs maintain contact with the shura and the
authorities, for example when there is a need to sort out accommodation for AREA’s de-mining staff. They also assist the de-mining staff, e.g. by conveying messages or equipment between the field and the Jalalabad office. Further, they gather information about incidents, and about areas suspected of containing mines or UXOs. The intention is that this latter task will be integrated with mine-awareness training for the local population, also to be run by the CMs. Today, those involved in the operation generally view the CMs as service staff for the de-mining personnel.

The project recruits de-mining personnel from several mine-affected communities within a district, rather than recruiting a whole team from one single community. A team will not work outside the district from which it is recruited, for several practically sound reasons. In most cases, the mine-problem of one single community would be too limited to justify the costs involved in establishing a team and training its personnel. However, the district-level focus means that the project is community-based only in a rather loose sense. District boundaries in Afghanistan do not coincide with the boundaries of people’s perceived solidarity groups. The average primary solidarity group is much smaller than a district in terms of how many people belong to it, yet many also cross-cut district boundaries. The implication is that the project’s strong assumption of being community-based needs to be relaxed. The current operation in Sheikh Misri is an extreme case. Here, a team recruited from several villages in the district clears minefields that are of concern almost exclusively to nomads. There is little reason to assume that the personnel do this on a voluntary basis, nor that their sense of belonging to the same community as the affected nomads is a strong one. The basic point here is that most of the AREA de-miners, most of the time, will be working in areas outside their own particular community.

The de-mining staff recruited by AREA receive a salary of Rs. 1500 a month. In view of the current economic situation in Afghanistan, this represents reasonable compensation, particularly as personnel work only from morning to lunch and have Fridays off, in addition to three days monthly. While this is certainly a salary level very different from that used by the other de-mining organizations, it would be naive to expect people to carry out such work on a voluntary basis. Few people in present-day Afghanistan can afford to spend half of their work time on totally unpaid work. Offering a reasonable compensation, as AREA does, is the only realistic approach to the problem. On the other hand, it should also be borne in mind that these might be attractive jobs, and shura members could be tempted to introduce their own associates. Likewise, work progress might be slowed down simply because once the job is completed, de-miners would have to return to unemployment.

While the project was run by AAA, each team numbered 11 people. From the beginning of 1999, teams were expanded to comply with MAPA standards, with each team comprising 22 people, plus support staff. The primary argument behind this was said to be the need to standardize team size, so that output by teams from different agencies could be directly comparable. A far more important consideration would be what is an appropriate team size for the kind of operations in which AREA is engaged. Smaller teams are more flexible, and they can take on small-scale tasks more effectively. The main disadvantage with small teams is that support staff (team leader, paramedic, driver) and equipment (car, medical kit, explosive, communication) are largely the same. According to the de-mining coordinator, large teams need minefields that have a width of at least 450 meters to operate in compliance with security restrictions, for smaller minefields, de-miners must work on rotational basis. Given
that large team size is seen as a general limitation for existing de-mining organisations worldwide, one would have expected a better-founded reasoning behind the decision to standardize team size.

Perhaps the most immediate challenge of the programme is to develop indicators for the community aspect of its operation. As it is, this project will be monitored and evaluated according to the standards that the MAPA programme use for all de-mining agencies under its umbrella, and the specific character of the AREA projects will not be appreciated. AREA can not expect MAPA, or its Monitoring, Evaluation and Training Agency (META), to develop such criteria. The draft SOPs worked out by MAPA have nothing to say about the community-basedness of the programme. Here, AREA ought to take a pro-active role and work out robust and understandable indicators itself. In the short term, this is the only way to ensure the survival of the community-based approach advocated by AREA. In the long term, these indicators might be brought to influence the work of other de-mining organizations, in Afghanistan and internationally. As a project leader of PRIO's project 'Assistance to Mine-Affected Communities', I would invite to a dialogue with AREA in developing specific indicators for community-based de-mining.

**Technical standards**

The core concern for any de-mining project must be to minimize risks – for the population using the affected areas, as well as for the people doing the work. For this reason, the best possible security standards should be maintained in any de-mining operation. When META was evaluating AREA's de-mining operation last year, it revealed numerous breaches of security procedures agreed upon by agencies operating under the UN umbrella. I myself have no technical de-mining expertise, but I did observe a general laxness on security issues in both of the operations that I was visiting. I also found that AREA staff expressed a more general scepticism to the standards applied by UNOCHA. Although there are always reasons to discuss the rationale for specific security measures, I still believe it is more constructive to focus on improving performance where it does not meet agreed standards, possibly also to discuss disputed points within the larger context of the UNOCHA programme. The fact that de-miners are recruited locally must not become an excuse for relaxing the standards. Neither should the fact that AREA deals exclusively with non-dense minefields. It is well-known that de-miners often get more relaxed under such conditions, and again the only answer is closer supervision. My concern is that unless AREA seriously addresses the technical performance of its personnel, it will do harm not only to its own project, but also to the entire concept of community based de-mining.

At the time of my project visits, the de-miners lacked basic protective equipment such as helmets and visors; moreover, the bayonets they used for probing were not suited for the task, and they did not have VHF radio equipment. Such equipment, of crucial importance for security, should be provided by MAPA. Delays in supplying equipment from MAPA are highly unfortunate, as it is a direct contradiction of the SOPs which AREA is to observe under the new agreement with MAPA.
Selection of minefields

Within the UNOCHA framework, AREA is tasked only to clear minefields which are low-priority, and which do not contain anti-tank mines or minimum-metal mines. The key argument here is that such areas are not to be addressed by the conventional de-mining organizations until all high-priority areas have been cleared, yet they might be of high priority for the community affected. It appears that the emphasis on clearing low-priority areas also has a secondary motivation, which is that it alleviates any fears of other de-mining agencies that the community-based de-mining is challenging its 'market share'. I cannot see any reason why AREA's de-mining teams should not take on higher priority areas, as long as the teams are properly equipped and all security precautions are observed. If such areas contain specific technical challenges for which AREA's personnel have not been trained or equipped, that is of course an argument for no involvement from AREA.

The actual selection of projects is based on the general survey data collected by the Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA). The de-mining coordinator takes the list of suspected areas within the districts in which AREA has established teams, and identifies those which seem to comply with the criteria for selection. These areas are then visited. On the basis of talks with the local population, as well as inspection of the sites, the coordinator decides whether there is a sufficiently strong suspicion of mines to justify undertaking an operation. If that is the case, AREA requests a survey by MCPA through the MAPA regional coordinator. If the project is not seen as interesting by AREA, nothing is done. The specific argument for not reporting a 'non-finding' to MAPA is that they could still not take the area off the list, as they would then be made responsible if a mine incident should occur. Whereas that makes sense, I think this also indicates a weakness. Even if a suspected area cannot be eliminated, it would be valuable for MAPA and MCPA to file the information that was obtained during a systematic assessment of the area by qualified personnel. I would suggest that this issue should be discussed with MAPA and MCPA, as at it indicates a shortcoming in the overall information-gathering routines of the Afghan programme.

AREA selects projects exclusively within the district from which the de-miners are recruited. This might decrease the effectiveness of the programme slightly, when the projects expands into other regions where de-mining is not possible during winter. This seasonal limitation is not likely to be a major problem, as the de-miners could simply be released, whereas the core staff would have to be salaried also during the inactive season.

Information

A community based de-mining project would be expected to have a solid documentation of the impact of the minefields they are working with, in terms of casualties, economic consequences, background of the minefield etc. Furthermore, one would expect general insight into the social, political, and economic aspects of these communities. Whereas individual miners from the nearest villages might have such knowledge, it was not evident from the permanent personnel of AREA that they had any deeper understanding of the situation in the communities where they were operating than what is the case with other de-mining agencies in Afghanistan. One reason is the problems that the organization has had with getting stable community
mobilizers; but, in general, community understanding needs to become a part of the overall organizational culture, rather than limited to the work description of a few individuals. A deeper understanding of the community impact of individual minefields is a precondition for successful implementation of community-based projects. It is a challenge for AREA to alter this situation.

A recent idea of AREA is to arrange mine-awareness training sessions in parallel with its de-mining operation. This should enhance the contact between the agency and the local population, and serve as a forum for gathering information on the local landmine situation. This is no different than what is currently done by all other de-mining agencies operating in Afghanistan. In AREA’s case, however, the mine-awareness training will be performed by the community mobilizers, not by full-time teachers. Mine awareness is important, and in general it is more likely to be effective when run in parallel with a de-mining operation. It is also a concrete way of collecting information, although one should be aware of the potential tension between information-gathering on the one hand, and the need to promote the best possible mine awareness on the other hand. Importantly, AREA needs to acknowledge that mine-awareness training is in itself a highly complex field, where various agencies operating in Afghanistan have different approaches. The bottom line is that mine awareness might be directly harmful. The 1997 mine-awareness evaluation by CIET international should be studied, as it provides some interesting ideas about what works and what does not. AREA’s current approach, which involves giving CMs a few hours of mine-awareness teacher training before going to the field, is unlikely to be useful. Mine-awareness teachers ought to receive proper training. One possibility would be to link up with Afghan Mine Awareness Agency (AMAA) in Herat, who have started a new, and very successful, project in community-based mine awareness, and to send AREA’s teachers to Herat next time AMAA is arranging a training session.

It may also be useful to integrate aspects of the ‘ban landmines’ issue in mine-awareness training. The arguments that underlie the demand for a ban on landmines can find strong support in local culture and religion. Once activated, this understanding can help to increase the legitimacy of the de-mining operation, as well as decreasing the legitimacy of future landmines use in the country. The only way to prevent parties to the conflict in Afghanistan from using landmines in the future is through stimulating popular sentiment against it. Mine action projects in general, and community-based ones in particular, provide the ideal setting for such work.

**Coordination**

One of the major changes in the programme after AREA took it over has been the coordination with other mine action agencies under the MAPA umbrella. This also means that AREA has in principle agreed to the same SOPs, and that it is evaluated by META. This is a clear strength in enhancing the quality of the programme, particularly in matters of technical standards and security, and was probably necessary to secure the future of the project. Most importantly, this was a key element in AREA’s larger

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1 MCPA has commissioned a paper on the use of landmines in terms of the principles of Islam, which should be out in the latter half of 1999. A parallel work is: Kristian Berg Harpviken & Mona Fjeldal, ‘Landmines: Just Means of War?’, Security Dialogue, no. 3, vol. 28 (September 1997).
manoeuvre to turn a discredited programme inherited from AAA into a model project in community-based de-mining.

There are also disadvantages to this coordination, however, not least since that MAPA is tailored to deal with conventional de-mining operations. Here we could note, for example, the dependence on MCPA for surveys. Whereas other de-mining agencies are mobile, and can move to another part of the country if nothing is surveyed in the area of their last operation, AREA’s teams depend on new minefields being surveyed within the same districts. When I visited Nangrahar, the two teams in Agam were on leave due to a lack of surveyed minefields in the district. From AREA’s side this has developed into a wish for having its own survey capacity. This might be one option in the longer term, but it should also be possible for the regional managers and for MCPA to adjust working routines so as to accommodate AREA’s specific, yet rather modest, needs. Again, this is an issue that ought to be brought up with MCPA and MAPA on a principle basis, as it represents a severe constraint on AREA’s programme. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of MAPA to ensure that AREA’s capacity is properly used.

Whereas the current de-miners of AREA have been trained to META’s standard two-week course at the training centre in Jalalabad, the plan is that the permanent staff of AREA will themselves train their personnel in the future. This, however, will remove one important control mechanism from the project. The requirement for standardized staff training ensured that the project complied with the standards of other projects. If META, which will in any case do the evaluation, has also done the training, this puts AREA and its staff in a much stronger position, as the two parties to the evaluation process have a common foundation for discussing standards and performance. It would seem wise for AREA to reconsider this element, and to concentrate its resources on strengthening operations in the field.

**Sustainability**

It has been suggested that after the major minefields in a district have been cleared, the AREA project will leave behind a local capacity to deal with smaller instances of mines and UXOs that may be identified. One proposal is for some technical equipment to be left with the district administration, a few mine detectors and security equipment. Personnel trained by the programme can be mobilized by the district administration as needed, and be compensated accordingly. There will clearly be a need for a long-term local capacity like this in Afghanistan. The exact mechanism for this needs to be carefully thought through, as even such a small-scale local capacity requires a supervisory function, medical back-up, and proper maintenance of equipment. One might argue that such institutional arrangements should not be sorted out until a governmental structure is more developed. However, I feel that this work should not be postponed – both because the current governmental structure might not change much in the foreseeable future, and because as soon as AREA’s teams have completed low priority minefields in one district, the issue will come to the fore with full force.

The sustainability of the project also stems from its sheer cost-effectiveness. Locally based de-miners receive low salaries, and they live in their homes for the operation. For both these reasons, the AREA project is much more likely to remain sustainable in situations where external funding decreases or disappears. Whereas I think the idea
of community-based de-mining has too many good features for it to be reduced to a mere question of saving money, it is also clear that financial effectiveness does contribute to the sustainability of the programme.

There is a serious concern that the capacity-building of the community-based programme might prove to be a double-edged sword. This competence might be applied for less noble causes than freeing communities for landmines – for example for collecting and re-deploying landmines in new conflicts. While this is poorly documented, a lot of indigenous de-mining is evidently going on, and landmines are sometimes recycled. This can occur with or without AREA’s presence, but it would be worthwhile for the agency to look into the potential danger of the misuse of the de-mining capacity it builds, and to look at ways to monitor it as well as possible ways to counter it.

One of the most interesting aspect of AREA’s approach is the idea that its de-mining will be closely integrated with other aspects of its engagement in the same communities. In the areas in Nangrahar, AREA has not been able to offer much in the way of other programmes. This is unfortunate because of the considerable interest that there is in integrating HMA-programmes more fully into reconstruction and development programmes. We definitely need to try out these ideas operationally in the field.