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## Humanitarian Demining at a Crossroads - a Farewell Lecture

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At the end of an outstanding academic career the American psychologist Leon Festinger did something unexpected: he dissolved his laboratory and started to ponder on archaeology. Based on prehistoric artefacts, simple remnants of housing, or traces of fireplaces he asked questions like: What language skill is needed for such a form of life? How was the division of labour done? What kind of gender segregation must have existed? Twenty years after its first edition, Leon Festinger's *The Human Legacy*<sup>1</sup> is a book still worth reading even if it never became as famous as his *Theory of cognitive dissonance*.

I was not thinking of Festinger when I started to work as the Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining some four years ago; but one day standing in a clearance site where once heavy fighting took place between the Cambodian Army and the Khmer Rouge Festinger's book came suddenly in my mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Festinger, *The Human Legacy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985

The climate was hot and humid, the air filled with the sound of chirping insects. I was in the midst of sticks of different colours; there were markings, parasols, tiny hills of stones and soil, deminers' tools ... the whole setting looked like modern concept art.

Suddenly I asked myself what an academic like Festinger would conclude about the human specie that left such battlefield behind. What would the conclusions be about the culture of warfare, killing and survival in the 20 and early 21<sup>st</sup> century? What would the judgement be on the ingenuity and minds of this species?

These kind of questions have followed me ever since to mine fields and hazardous areas – from the tropical heat in the Golden Triangle and the Ho-chi-minh trail to the borders in the Middle East, to the Balkans, Nicaragua, Colombia and other places. While my colleagues did not waver from their solid focus on detectors, prodders and flails I was thinking about this strange semiotics of violence. The quiet and gruesome traces of landmines revealed the horror and human suffering, but also political intentions and moral attitudes, the fading respect for humanitarian principles during armed conflict, and the change in warfare itself.

### Changes in Warfare

Particularly the changes in warfare during the past two decades had a major impact on humanitarian demining. Firstly, it led to new types of hazardous areas which are technically a big challenge. Secondly, the new forms of warfare very often caused lasting traumatic effects which fundamentally alter the condition for rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies of which humanitarian demining is part.

Let us have a look at the hazardous areas first. Minefields look quite different according to the type of conflict they result from. Regular armies usually left behind well organised, mapped and marked minefields. They are often located at borders, around essential installations or serve as a

counter mobility means to reinforce topography.<sup>2</sup> Guerrilla-type forces, besides regular armed forces the most common combatants during the Cold War area, did not extensively use anti-personnel mines because it would have challenged their own mobility.

Since the end of the Cold war, when many states and insurgents could not any further rely on support by major powers in placeholder war settings, the conduct of war changed significantly. Many insurgents rapidly transformed to structures in the grey-zone of political action, banditry and organised crime.<sup>3</sup> Lacking the aspiration to become a legitimate government one day, the respect for humanitarian law and human rights deteriorated rapidly. In this context it became common to use landmines as a cheap mean to mutilate other ethnical groups, to prevent displaced people from returning to their places, or to control over live and death by giving or denying information on the location of mines. The minefields left from such atrocities look very different from regular military minefields. Typically only a few mines are scattered over huge areas, hence the uncertainty on their location makes large surfaces unusable. As a consequence entirely new methods to prevent accidents, to do surveys and to clear land are needed – for instance the use of risk management approaches or mine detecting dogs.

But the new forms of warfare not only changed the sites deminers work on but also the broader working environment in affected countries.

Humanitarian action against landmines usually starts during armed conflict with awareness programmes for the civilian population or with

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Prokosch, *The Technology of Killing – A Military and Political History of Antipersonnel weapons*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1995; Mike Kroll, *The History of Landmines*, Lee Cooper, UK, 1998; *Anti-personnel Landmines – Friend or Foe? A Study of the Military Use and Effectiveness of Anti-personnel Mines*, ICRC, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford University Press, 1999; John Mackinlay, *Globalisation and Insurgency*, Adelphi Paper 352, IISS, Oxford University Press, 2002; Erhard Eppler, *Vom Gewaltmonopol zum Gewaltmarkt?* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2002; Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*, Rowolth Berlin, 2002.

emergency clearance operations for medical or food supply, or to access critical infrastructure for the civilian population.

Today in the often disastrous security environment, humanitarian demining suffers from the same problems as institutions like the ICRC, UNHCR, WFP and others. Security often remains precarious for a long time after the end of armed conflict given the amount of small arms available, the disrupted social networks and the lack of perspectives in individual lives. The way ethnic groups have been antagonised, and atrocities committed during conflict, have a significant impact on the viability of humanitarian demining projects, on the role local authorities play, and on the prospects of local capacity building or local ownership.

### The Ban of Anti-Personnel Mines

Given this increasingly difficult environment for humanitarian affairs the ban of anti-personnel mines and the process launched to respond to the problems created by landmines during the past decade is extraordinary.<sup>4</sup> There are many publications about this so called Ottawa-process, written testimony of persons involved, or studies on specific aspects.<sup>5</sup> Many statements focus on how the process can serve as a model to achieve similar progress in other areas. I am convinced that the persistent focus on the humanitarian aspect of the landmine crisis, as well as the very innovative and cross-discipline approach to address it, were decisive for the success. In my view these two elements are also the ones others can most learn from.

### The Humanitarian Focus

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<sup>4</sup> The Banning of Anti-Personnel Landmines. The Legal Contribution of the International Committee of the Red Cross 1955-1999, edited by Louis Maresca and Stuart Maslen, Cambridge University Press, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Maslen, The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction. Commentaries on Arms Control Treaties, Volume I . Oxford University Press, 2004

The emphasis on the humanitarian dimension of the landmine issue seems quite obvious, but looking closer it becomes much less trivial.

When landmines became an important topic of international negotiations during the first half of the 1990s the issue was captured by traditional military and security policy thinking. This was also the time when I was in a quite different function for the first time involved with the landmine issue. Many countries were initially reluctant to give up the military option of using anti-personnel mines as they were not sure that other countries would take the same commitment. To overcome this stalemate it was important to shift the focus fundamentally from military-technical considerations to humanitarian ones. This happened in the mid-1990s under a strong influence from the ICRC and non-government organisations. Gradually landmines were redefined by a critical number of countries as a humanitarian and not as a disarmament or classical security policy issue – even though the legal instrument to achieve the ban had eventually the form of a disarmament treaty.

The humanitarian focus has remained extremely important for the successful implementation of the Convention as well. The commitment to the humanitarian imperative, to neutrality and impartiality allows work in and for mine affected populations even in states that have not ratified the Convention, and also allows co-operation with donors not party to the Convention like the United States. Such co-operation would be difficult under a security policy driven logic of disarmament where a balance of give and take is always carefully observed. Another effect of the humanitarian orientation is that the split along political groupings, particularly between North and South, does not play a significant role in humanitarian demining. It is also much easier for former foes to start working together in humanitarian demining when it is perceived as a purely humanitarian issue.

#### A Convention Achieved Unconventionally

As a student I was impressed by Thomas Kuhn's book *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*, one of the outstanding academic bestsellers of my generation.<sup>6</sup> Kuhn found that significant innovation is most likely to occur in the margins of a discipline, or from people still new in the business, or even from genuine outsiders - but ... hardly ever from the mainstream. If we consider the ban on landmines as a breakthrough, which I do, Kuhn's conclusion is valid in this area as well.

Landmines were recognized from the early 1990s as an important problem. Intense negotiations were started. But it was neither the orderly development of humanitarian law, nor the work of the Conference on Disarmament, or within the United Nations that led to a break-through. It was an innovative process with quite original working methods that brought success.<sup>7</sup>

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and hundreds of non-governmental organisations under the umbrella of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) played an important role in awareness rising among the broader public and for the political agenda setting. On the side of the governments major powers were not in the forefront but smaller countries like Canada, Norway, South Africa, Mexico, Belgium, Austria or Switzerland. Despite considerable public attention landmines were not a political priority in most countries, a situation which usually leaves more flexibility to government officials entrusted with an issue. However, many of the involved diplomats and other government officials had to struggle hard within their administration and to take risks when acting in the grey-zones of their instructions or even beyond. The individuals involved exploited swiftly the new communication technology of the 1990s, which helped to set up interaction and networks at a pace difficult to follow and to counter for the more conventionally working administrations.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago, 1962, 1970

The quite peculiar working method did not end with the signing of the Convention. On the contrary! It has remained a strong driving element for implementation as well. The informal intersessional process - gatherings open to everybody on implementation issues - is an illustrative example. The unique compliance monitoring based on the Landmine Monitor, an annual compilation of reports prepared by NGO researchers, is another. Likewise unconventional is the mandate given by the States Parties to the Geneva Centre to act as a sort of secretariat which is unique for a private Foundation.<sup>8</sup>

Unconventional and cross-discipline working methods are common and perhaps even more important in field programmes. The strong culture of cooperation that has emerged in humanitarian demining facilitates the interaction of people from very different professional background. It is also promising to see at what impressive rhythm new persons are continuously joining the effort against landmines with new ideas and yet unexploited knowledge - very much in line with Thomas Kuhn's findings.

### Humanitarian Demining at a Crossroads

By the end of this year, five years after the entry into force of the Convention Banning Anti-personnel mines, the First Review Conference will take place in Nairobi. At the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-free World the States Parties will look at the functioning of the Convention, they will certainly strongly reaffirm their political commitment to eradicate the world of anti-personnel-mines, and they will agree on an action plan for the time after Nairobi.

The general assessment of the past five years will be without any doubt positive. The Convention entered rapidly into force, compliance is good. Some important states are still absent, but the strong stigmatisation of

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Dahinden, The Response to the Humanitarian Crisis Created by Landmines, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Vol.15, No.1, April 2002, pp. 65-74

<sup>8</sup> Implementation Support for the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-personnel Mines (APLC/MSP.3/2001/L.6)

anti-personnel mines has even changed the behaviour of those absent. Huge stockpiles have been destroyed; anti-personnel mine trade virtually disappeared; clearance is well under way. However, the end of the tragedy is not here any time soon. It will remain a hard task for generations to support action against landmines, particular to support landmine victims. It will also be important to keep the issue on the political agenda and to maintain high public attention. The Geneva Centre will commit itself to further strengthen professionalism in humanitarian demining, and to promote local ownership and capacity building.

There are two issues that will probably be less in the headlines that I find particularly important for the times to come. One is the relation between humanitarian demining and the broader development cooperation; the other is the potential of humanitarian demining for peace-building. Both are intricate and important issues - and very vulnerable to simplistic views.

### Mainstreaming and the Mainstream Trap

A decade ago the landmine problem was, with success, defined as a humanitarian problem. Today the worldwide number of accidents is much less and mines are often a socio-economic rather than an immediate humanitarian concern. Despite this being generally recognised, the integration of humanitarian demining in broader development schemes is not well advanced. Some among you are aware of the work the Geneva Centre did in the past together with UNDP in this area.<sup>9</sup>

The foreseeable shift of humanitarian demining towards development cooperation, however, is risky. If not managed carefully it could do harm to humanitarian demining. It could harm the strong community spirit and the culture of co-operation in humanitarian demining that is still

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<sup>9</sup> see chapter on socio-economic approaches to mine action, in A Guide to Mine Action, GICHD, Geneva 2004, p. 125-134; Study of Socio-Economic Approaches to Mine Action, GICHD/UNDP, Geneva, 2001; Socio-Economic Approaches to Mine Action – An Operational Handbook, GICHD/UNDP, Geneva, 2002.

important to carry the issue forward. If not handled well, mainstreaming could lead to administering the problem rather than directly involving people.

If demining projects come under scrutiny in a broader development cooperation perspective, criteria different from those used now would be applied to select and implement projects. Article 6 of the Convention banning anti-personnel mines that calls states parties to cooperate in demining, would have a less prominent role, which would weaken the humanitarian promise of the Convention.

But the most important challenge is the possible change of donor behaviour. In humanitarian and development affairs donors are much driven by public opinion and parliaments. From these results the permanent cascade in aid from one topic to the other, from one geographical focus to the next, as there is normally no additional money to cover newly emerging needs. During the past decade humanitarian demining was fortunate and suffered only little from such shifts because the public attention on the landmine issue remained important. If public attention weakens one day, which is very likely, mainstreaming could become a camouflage for the reduction of funding.

For the sake of the victims it is important to be vigilant!

### Benefits for Peace-building

The question on whether peace-building can benefit from humanitarian demining is an important, fascinating and complex one. It will remain subject of lively debates in the years ahead. The Geneva Centre will surely remain involved in the conceptual discussion, but also with deliverables of practical benefit.

Peace-building might follow humanitarian objectives but peace-building is fundamentally political in its character. Peace-building defines usually an end state to be achieved in a society, between countries or both. To

achieve this objective, neutrality and impartiality need at times to be abandoned. All who are dwelling on the contribution of humanitarian demining to peace-building should be aware of this fundamental incompatibility, and be reminded of the fundamental importance of the humanitarian orientation for humanitarian demining.<sup>10</sup> It is important not to obscure this.

It is also of the utmost importance to be aware that war-torn societies are a complex phenomenon, of which we have always too much information and in the same time not enough knowledge. I am frequently puzzled by the unshakable self-confidence many have in advocating – mainly western type – solutions to help others in their pursuit of happiness. Reading Berkeley, Hume, Kant or more modern texts on constructivism could perhaps help.

Despite those sceptical remarks I truly believe in the potential of humanitarian demining for peace-building. I see the role of humanitarian demining threefold: firstly, as a means to achieve transparency; secondly, as a tool to build confidence; and thirdly, as a framework to engage foes in co-operative endeavours with a conciliatory effect.

Creating transparency by sharing information is in almost any political process a helpful initial step. Interestingly, the management of information plays a decisive role in humanitarian demining. In many countries the information on hazardous areas reflects not only important information for demining operations but furthermore very often the conflict history. Today more than 80 per cent of the field programmes use the information management tools the Geneva Centre is providing. I am very optimistic that ways and means can be found that allow mine affected countries to

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<sup>10</sup> Kristian Berg Harpviken and Bernt A Skara, *Humanitarian mine action and peace building: exploring the relationship*, Third World Quarterly, Vol 24, No 5, pp 809-822, 2003

use such information in a peace-building context as well; two of my colleagues have started to develop ideas in this direction.<sup>11</sup>

Transparency is confidence building as it avoids harmful action on the basis of wrong assumption. But there are many other activities in humanitarian demining that have the potential to build confidence among former enemies. A successful model is the regional cooperation in South-Eastern Europe. Exchange of personnel, sharing experience, exchanging equipment, granting mutual access to facilities, have not only benefited the programs but helped to change perceptions and attitudes between those involved.

Most attractive to donors are usually projects particularly designed to have a conciliatory effect. This is the most intricate area where caution is commendable. One reason is the long history of negative experience with political engineering in peace-building. If such projects are not skilfully managed they could hamper the credibility of demining. The second reason for caution is the tendency to neglect safety, efficiency and sometimes even humanitarian need, in such projects.

Therefore, even when designing demining projects for a peace-building purpose it remains important that the humanitarian imperative, impartiality and neutrality are carefully respected throughout the project, but also quality and safety standards.<sup>12</sup>

### Farewell

Humanitarian demining is at a crossroads, and the next five years are probably more difficult to predict than the ones that followed immediately the entry into force of the Convention.

At this juncture

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<sup>11</sup> Ananda S. Millard and Alan Arnold, *Post-Conflict Transformative Reconstruction and Reconciliation: The Role of Information Management*, (Geneva 2004)

- I wish strongly that humanitarian demining remains fundamentally humanitarian and continues to resist politically motivated influence;
- I wish also that the network and culture that have been created among deminers are preserved and strengthened in order to achieve the ambitious humanitarian objectives; and
- I wish that you all remain committed against landmines. The “broken chair” that will apparently stay even after the Place des Nations is rebuilt will serve as a reminder.
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These were the admittedly very condensed thoughts I wanted to share with you before leaving Geneva and returning to the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Berne.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to all of you for the particularly rewarding time my family and I were able to spend in Geneva, particularly to

- President Sommaruga, who played and still plays an outstanding role in the efforts against landmines and from whose great experience and support I have benefited a lot;
- my colleagues and friends from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining; it is hard to leave a team so devoted to its work, and with so interesting biographies and ideas as well;
- the governments, international and non-governmental organisations and their representatives, who have supported our work;
- the many old and new friends that made the life pleasant beyond work;

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<sup>12</sup> *A Guide to the International Mine Action Standards*, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, Geneva, 2004

- and, finally, I would like to thank my wife Anita who had to bear with me when I worked too long, or was walking somewhere far away in the minefields, reflecting on the specie that left these scaring remnants behind.

Thank you so much!

#### Literature

- *A Guide to Mine Action*, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, Geneva, 2004 (also available in French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic)
- *Landmine Monitor*, International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Washington, annually since 1999