

CONFLICT-RELATED TRAUMA AND OPERATIONAL SAFETY IN UKRAINE'S MINE ACTION RESPONSE

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A CHANGING WORKFORCE

Ukraine's mine action sector is expanding rapidly in response to widespread explosive ordnance contamination and the demands of national recovery. At the same time, its workforce continues to evolve, shaped by the realities of ongoing conflict. The sector includes veterans transitioning into civilian life, people affected by injury, trauma, or displacement, and civilians with direct experience of conflict. In this context, mine action serves not only as a humanitarian and recovery priority, but also as a pathway for socio-economic reintegration and civilian employment.¹

The evolving composition of the workforce has increased the importance for better understanding of how conflict-related trauma affects veteran reintegration.

PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLICT

The scale of veteran reintegration needs in Ukraine remains significant. As the number of veterans returning to civilian life continues to grow, many face challenges related to employment, physical recovery, social adaptation, and psychological well-being.

Physical injuries remain one of the most visible consequences of the war. Recent studies found that 71 per cent of surveyed veterans reported physical injuries, with many indicating

that these injuries significantly affected daily functioning and adaptation to civilian life. These injuries can create long-term barriers to employment, mobility, and participation in civilian life, highlighting the need for accessible and supportive employment pathways, including within the mine action sector.²

At the same time, the psychological impacts of war have created growing mental health needs among veterans and conflict-affected populations. Exposure to combat trauma, persistent insecurity, and prolonged aerial threats associated with drone warfare³ may contribute to chronic stress, hypervigilance, anxiety, sleep disruption, and other trauma-related psychological conditions.⁴ International estimates suggest that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develop in approximately 12–20 per cent of service members exposed to combat trauma who do not receive psychological support.⁵

Emerging evidence from Ukraine shows that PTSD symptoms are more common among veterans who have witnessed death or experienced injuries, with moderate to severe impacts on daily life.⁶ Data from the National Health Service of Ukraine indicates a significant increase in PTSD diagnoses over the past two years,⁷ while other studies indicate that at least one third of veterans self-report PTSD symptoms.⁸

These physical and psychological impacts have important implications for veterans' socio-economic integration, including through employment in the mine action sector.



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BARRIERS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION FOR VETERANS

For many veterans, the transition from military to civilian life is compounded by difficulties securing stable employment and rebuilding social connections. Research by the UN Development Programme found that up to 41 per cent of veteran men under 60 experienced difficulties acquiring and maintaining employment.⁹ This highlights the importance of creating accessible, supportive, and sustainable pathways into civilian work for veterans, alongside measures to sustain and expand women's employment in mine action, ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Evidence from Ukraine further indicates that professional reintegration involves supporting veterans' return to work in ways that promote both effective job performance and sustainable workplace relationships.¹⁰ In practice, however, reintegration may be affected by social stigma, limited access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), as well as challenges adapting to civilian workplaces and new professional environments.¹¹

Many veterans require long-term psychological support, although stigma—particularly among men—continues to discourage help-seeking.¹² These challenges are often reinforced by negative perceptions surrounding trauma and psychological well-being. In Ukraine, veterans frequently encounter stereotypes, social stigma, fear, and misunderstanding,¹³ while evidence shows that assumptions that veterans affected by trauma or conflict-related injuries are less capable of working effectively in mine action can inadvertently reinforce stigma and compound barriers to employment.¹⁴ Such stigma may affect workplace adaptation, social relationships, quality of life, and willingness to seek support.¹⁵

The importance of rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and social inclusion is also reflected in International Mine Action Standard (IMAS) 13.10 Victim assistance in mine action, which highlights support needs among individuals affected by explosive ordnance and conflict-related trauma.¹⁶

LEGAL AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS

Ukrainian legislation provides a strong framework for the employment, social protection, and socio-economic integration of veterans. This includes the Law of Ukraine 'On the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of Their Social Protection', labour legislation, and disability protection frameworks.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Law of Ukraine 'On Labour Protection' defines occupational safety as a system of legal, socio-economic, organizational, and preventive measures aimed at preserving workers' health and working capacity, providing a basis for integrating psychosocial risks and mental health considerations into occupational health and safety systems.¹⁸

These national protections are reinforced by IMAS 10.10 Occupational health and safety – general requirements, which emphasizes duty of care, safe working conditions, and occupational health management systems that systematically identify and reduce risks. IMAS 10.10 further recognizes that mine action organizations have legal obligations, and also a broader responsibility to support personnel operating in conflict-affected environments.¹⁹

These frameworks provide an important basis for integrating psychosocial well-being and occupational safety into mine action operations. In practice, this requires recognizing how conflict-related trauma may directly affect human performance and operational risk within mine action settings.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND OPERATIONAL SAFETY

Although the relationship between conflict-related trauma and operational safety in mine action has not been extensively studied, emerging evidence suggests that potential risks may include:

- cumulative trauma and chronic stress, which may affect concentration, cognitive load, and decision-making²⁰
- reintegration stress among veterans, including adjustment to civilian roles and new operational environments²¹
- hypervigilance, anxiety, and sleep disruption associated with prolonged exposure to insecurity
- stigma, which can prevent individuals from seeking support before problems escalate
- re-traumatization, where aspects of survey and clearance operations—such as drone use or detonations—may trigger psychological responses.²²

In mine action, operational safety depends on sustained human performance and consistent adherence to safety procedures, both of which require the ability to maintain concentration, situational awareness, and sound decision-making. Conflict-related trauma therefore represents not only

KEY INSIGHTS & IMPLICATIONS

individual challenges, but risks that must be systematically managed.²³ Psychological strain, fatigue, and unresolved trauma may undermine these capabilities and increase operational risks.

INTEGRATING MHPSS INTO MINE ACTION SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES

Lessons from Ukraine indicate that employment decisions should be based on a candidate's ability to perform the essential functions of the role, rather than assumptions and stereotypes regarding their capabilities.²⁴ Consistent with national guidance on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mine action, operators should adopt a personalized case-management approach that provides reasonable adjustments tailored to each employee's circumstances.²⁵

Research on veteran reintegration further highlights the importance of a supportive and inclusive work environment in facilitating successful transition to civilian life.²⁶ For some veterans, employment may provide not only financial stability, but also routine, social connection, structure, and a sense of purpose during reintegration. Developing accessible and trauma-informed employment pathways may therefore strengthen both workforce participation and longer-term socio-economic inclusion.²⁷

There is increasing recognition that MHPSS should be integrated into workplace and operational systems as part of broader duty-of-care and risk-management responsibilities. Within Ukraine's mine action sector, some operators are beginning to incorporate psychosocial considerations into personnel management and operational support structures.²⁸ This includes:

- trauma-informed supervision and leadership practices
- access to mental health and psychosocial support for personnel
- strengthened staff well-being and duty-of-care approaches²⁹
- clear referral pathways for specialized psychological support where needed.

The case of Ukraine highlights the importance of considering psychosocial well-being and conflict-related trauma as part of broader operational safety and workforce management systems and practices in mine action. While operational safety depends on many factors, conflict-related trauma may represent an increasingly important consideration in contexts affected by prolonged conflict and large-scale veteran reintegration.

This has several important implications:

- ▶ MHPSS should be integrated into core safety and duty-of-care systems, while ensuring access to specialized external services where needed.
- ▶ Supporting conflict-affected personnel requires structured, accessible support mechanisms, including referral pathways and community-based services.³⁰
- ▶ Reducing stigma associated with mental health and strengthening organizational awareness and support systems that contribute to the well-being of personnel is necessary.
- ▶ Reintegration programmes should recognize psychosocial well-being as a component of operational readiness and workforce sustainability.
- ▶ Managers and supervisors require training in trauma-informed and veteran-sensitive workplace practices.

More broadly, this remains an underexplored area within mine action and one which warrants further research, particularly in contexts affected by protracted conflict and extensive veteran reintegration.



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ENDNOTES

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