

STRENGTHENING EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH SAFEGUARDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SOUTH SUDAN

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PROTECTION RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES IN SOUTH SUDAN

South Sudan faces high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Entrenched gender inequalities, weak institutions and legal systems, discriminatory social norms, and limited access to healthcare and justice services continue to drive SGBV, particularly against women and girls. Ongoing conflict, displacement, and economic instability further increase vulnerabilities.¹ Prevention and response efforts are also constrained by limited services, stigma surrounding reporting, and low awareness of available support mechanisms.²

AN EVOLVING OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

These protection challenges shape the operating environment for mine action in South Sudan. Operations take place in a fragile and conflict-affected context marked by widespread explosive ordnance contamination, limited infrastructure, and difficult access. Survey, clearance, and explosive ordnance risk education activities are often carried out in remote and hard-to-reach areas.³

The mine action workforce reflects this complexity, including national staff from conflict-affected communities, internally displaced persons, and individuals exposed to heightened protection risks. Teams work closely with vulnerable populations, where power imbalances can increase the risk of sexual exploitation, abuse, and gender-based violence.⁴

In this setting, safeguarding and accountability are essential to maintaining community trust, protecting affected populations and staff, and ensuring safe and effective mine action operations.

SAFEGUARDING RISKS AND THEIR OPERATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Mine action depends on community trust and cooperation. Loss of community trust due to safeguarding concerns can have direct operational consequences. When communities do not trust operators, they may be less likely to share detailed and reliable information on contamination or support operational access. This weakens the evidence base used for prioritization and planning, increasing the risk that scarce and high-cost technical assets are deployed based on incomplete or inaccurate information. In practice, this can reduce operational efficiency and effectiveness by directing resources towards lower-priority areas while higher-risk contamination remains unaddressed.⁵

Weak safeguarding and accountability systems can also affect operations in other ways, including:

- reduced cooperation and limited access to information on contaminated areas⁶
- increased security risks, leading to restricted movement, delays, or suspension of operations⁷
- reduced team cohesion, affecting communication, concentration, and safe performance.

These factors directly undermine operational safety, efficiency, and effectiveness.

INTEGRATING SAFEGUARDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY INTO OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS

Operators in South Sudan are increasingly building safeguarding and accountability into the way operations are run, as part of duty of care and risk management.

This includes:

- Adoption of a Technical Note for Mine Action on safeguarding, alongside requirements for all operators to develop and implement safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) policies with a zero-tolerance approach.⁸
- Training staff on expected behaviour and reporting responsibilities.
- Holding staff, partners, and contractors accountable for safeguarding standards.
- Monitoring whether safeguarding systems are in place and working.⁹

Together, these measures move safeguarding from a reactive response to a routine part of operations.

While many of these measures are still relatively new and their long-term impact will take time to assess, some stakeholders have reported increased use of complaint mechanisms and improved confidence in reporting systems. There are also indications that these measures are contributing to stronger perceptions of safety and trust within operations and affected communities.¹⁰

Strong accountability processes—based on transparency and timely action—help teams identify and address problems early. When reporting systems are trusted, staff are more likely to raise concerns, and communities are more willing to engage.

National policy reinforces this approach, recognizing that gender and diversity shape exposure to risk and requiring protection from harm, including SGBV and discrimination.¹¹ At the same time, operators play an important role in upholding minimum safeguarding standards and ensuring their consistent application.

KEY INSIGHTS & IMPLICATIONS

In South Sudan, safeguarding and accountability are integral to operational safety and effectiveness.

This has several important implications:

- ▶ Community trust is essential for safe access, efficient and effective operations.
- ▶ Safeguarding and PSEA must be recognized as essential prerequisites to community trust and integrated into core operational and safety systems, not treated as standalone compliance functions.
- ▶ Accountability mechanisms are critical for identifying and addressing risks early.
- ▶ Community engagement and transparency are critical to both protection outcomes and operational effectiveness.
- ▶ Gender and diversity considerations are essential to identifying risk and reducing vulnerability.
- ▶ A system-wide approach – covering staff, partners, and communities – is needed in complex environments.

ENDNOTES

- 1 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Protecting the most vulnerable in South Sudan,” UNHCR Dataviz platform, 18 June 2025, [Protecting the most vulnerable in South Sudan](#).
- 2 UN Population Fund (UNFPA), “Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey on Gender-based Violence in South Sudan – Final Report (January 2025),” [Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey on Gender-based Violence in South Sudan - Final Report](#).
- 3 Mine Action Review (2025), “Clearing the Mines 2025 – South Sudan,” [Clearing the Mines 2025 - South Sudan](#).
- 4 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2025), “[South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#)”.
- 5 Mine Action Review (2025), “Clearing the Mines 2025 – Sudan,” [Clearing the Mines 2025 - Sudan](#).
- 6 GICHD and UN Development Programme (UNDP) (2023), “[The Sustainable Development Outcomes of Mine Action in South Sudan](#)”.
- 7 Fiona Terry, Jean-Philippe Kiehl, Robert Whelan, and Tamás Szenderák, [Debunking Acceptance: A View from the ICRC](#) (London: Global Interagency Security Forum, 2021).
- 8 Republic of South Sudan, The Republic of South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025–2030, [South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025-2030](#).
- 9 Republic of South Sudan, The Republic of South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025–2030, [South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025-2030](#).
- 10 E-mail communication with stakeholders in South Sudan.
- 11 Republic of South Sudan, The Republic of South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025–2030, [South Sudan National Mine Action Gender Equality and Diversity Policy 2025-2030](#).