

GICHD Insights

“HUMANITARIAN MINE ACTION” OR “MINE ACTION”? WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

Since the 1980s, mine action has become a well-established component of the postconflict toolkit and is increasingly carried out in situations of ongoing conflict.

Supported by a coherent global legal framework, established technical standards and operational practices, and more than four decades of accumulated expertise, the mine action sector has consistently delivered measurable results.

Mine action is rooted in the rules and principles of international humanitarian law and the weapon-specific obligations established by the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. It is guided by the International Mine Action Standards and national standards and guidelines. It thus operates within clear rules and according to defined responsibilities and recognized methodologies. Its immediate results are tangible: the number of casualties goes down; survivors and other victims receive support for their rehabilitation and their full and equal reintegration into society; land is released for productive use; explosive ordnance is destroyed; and risks to civilians are reduced thanks to risk education. Through these activities, mine action has contributed tangibly to protecting countless individuals, to recovery and stabilization in post-conflict situations, and to broader peacebuilding and sustainable development efforts.

Because mine action is already grounded in international humanitarian law, with the central aim of protecting civilians from the effects of armed conflict, and because it is closely linked to post-conflict recovery and stabilization, the growing use of the term “humanitarian mine action” deserves closer reflection.

At first glance, the addition of the term “humanitarian” sounds positive. Especially when mine action is conducted during an ongoing conflict, the word “humanitarian” clearly signals to the parties to the conflict the objective and underlying rationale of the mine action. That said, the sector has evolved, and the reference to “humanitarian mine action” could obscure the contribution of mine action to the achieve-

ment of long-term objectives. This in turn could complicate its positioning within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and lead people to understand its role as being narrower than it really is.

The *Guide for the Application and Development of the International Mine Action Standards*¹ recognizes that mine action activities can overlap with humanitarian and development programmes and with peace operations. As such, the humanitarian dimension is already built into the concept of “mine action”, making the “humanitarian” in “humanitarian mine action” potentially redundant.

There is also a historical dimension. When the field of mine action first began to take shape, the prevailing vocabulary was still that of “demining” or “clearance,” which are terms that originated in military doctrine and were closely associated with the activities conducted by armed forces to secure routes, enable manoeuvres, and protect personnel during military operations. In that context, the emergence of the term “humanitarian demining”, in the late 1980s, served to distinguish activities that aimed to protect civilians and enable recovery from those related to military mine clearance. What have been known since 2001 as the International Mine Action Standards were first called the International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations when they were developed in 1997. That distinction mattered, and arguably still matters, for mine action activities that take place in situations of ongoing conflict.²

The notion of “mine action”, however, captures an approach that is broader than just demining. Mine action is a five-pillar framework comprising clearance, risk education, victim assistance, stockpile destruction, and advocacy, supported by components such as information and quality management that extend well beyond the scope of military demining. Because “mine action” has no corresponding military concept, the qualifier “humanitarian” no longer serves the same distinguishing purpose.

BEYOND SAVING LIVES: THE WIDER CONTRIBUTION OF MINE ACTION

Today's aid landscape, with growing needs and diminishing resources, demonstrates the need for concerted and cost-effective interventions by the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors. Mine action sits naturally at the intersection of the three. The clearance of explosive ordnance from a village is not only an act of immediate protection but also a visible peace dividend. It shows that the authorities are able to restore safety and that the conflict is receding. The removal of mines from farmland enables food production. The clearance of urban neighbourhoods allows reconstruction. The destruction of stockpiles reduces the risk of renewed violence.

In Colombia, for example, demining was built into the 2016 peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP).³ It was a confidence-building and reconciliation measure, with former members of the FARC and government actors contributing to the clearance of contaminated areas.⁴ In Cyprus, clearance along the Green Line helped create space for practical cooperation between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities; mixed teams worked together on mine clearance under the facilitation of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus.⁵ Mine action has become a component of peacebuilding and reconciliation in other contexts too, through the employment and reintegration of demobilized ex-combatants, for example in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, and Mozambique.⁶ The framing of mine action as "humanitarian" can unintentionally lead to the perception that its relevance is limited to situations of humanitarian crisis and emergency. It may suggest that, once immediate life-saving needs subside, the sector's relevance decreases. Mine action, however, underpins recovery and sustainable development in ways that go far beyond crisis response. In many contexts, mine action activities continue for decades after a conflict has ended, supporting communities in moving beyond conflict to stabilization and assisted development and in coping with residual risks.

While mine action should never lose sight of its humanitarian objectives, it can also have a significant, transformative impact by enabling and accelerating sustainable development. Depending on the context, this could be through the restoration of productive agricultural land and essential infrastructure; by enabling people to move around safely; or by making sure people have inclusive access to basic services. In Mosul, Iraq, for instance, where agricultural production and food security are of significant economic and social concern, the restoration of the Al-Jazeera Dam would not have been possible without the land release activities that cleared the way for the repair of irrigation and canal systems.⁷

Mine action is therefore not simply a precursor to development; it is often the necessary step that makes development possible.

LET THE NOUN DO THE WORK

Funding channels for mine action are becoming increasingly diverse. A significant share of contributions comes from development budgets, with additional funding coming from UN peacekeeping budgets, national reconstruction and infrastructure programmes, and, in some contexts, commercial companies.

The funding patterns that are regularly reported by the Landmine Monitor of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines⁸ reveal a reactive rather than sustained approach: global funding for mine action consistently spikes in response to acute humanitarian crises, especially those driven by conflict, while many of the national contexts dealing with legacy contamination face declining support. For example, the USD 308 million allocated to Ukraine in 2023 drove the record USD 1.03 billion global total that year, whereas Afghanistan and Yemen experienced significant funding decreases, despite persistent contamination. From 2019 to 2023, 75 per cent of all international funding went to just six States (Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Cambodia, and Yemen), while six others (Chad, Ethiopia, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal) received less than 1 per cent combined. In previous years, funding was similarly concentrated on Iraq and Syria during the peak of their respective crises. Iraq was the top recipient from 2016 to 2021 and absorbed 18 per cent of all international support in 2020.

The continued use of the term "humanitarian mine action" may thus reinforce the prevailing tendency to focus on emergency contexts, while narrowing the perceived scope of the sector, particularly among development banks, peace missions, and national authorities, which often view "humanitarian" engagement as temporary or crisis driven.

The GICHD intends to use the term "mine action", which is already internationally recognized. It is broad enough to cover both a field operator clearing a hazardous area and a national authority drafting a regulatory framework. It speaks to safety, governance, recovery, and peace without needing further qualification. There is no non-humanitarian mine action, meaning there is no military mine action.

Allowing the noun to stand on its own recognizes that mine action is not only about responding to emergencies. It is about creating the physical and institutional foundations on which lasting peace and sustainable development depend.

ENDNOTES

- 1 International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), *IMAS 01.10: Guide for the Application and Development of International Mine Action Standards (IMAS)*, second edition, 1 January 2003, amendment 12, 16 May 2025, accessed 28 July 2026, https://www.mineactionstandards.org/fileadmin/uploads/imas/Standards/English/IMAS_01.10_Ed.2_Am.12.pdf.
- 2 Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), *A Study of Manual Mine Clearance: 1. History, Summary and Conclusions of a Study of Manual Mine Clearance* (Geneva, Switzerland: GICHD, 2005), accessed 28 July 2026, https://www.gichd.org/fileadmin/uploads/gichd/Media/GICHD-resources/info-documents/Manual-mine-clearance-Aug2005/Manual_Mine_Clearance_Book1.pdf.
- 3 Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARCEP), *Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace*, 24 November 2016, accessed 28 July 2026, https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag1845_593e97bdd6f32.pdf.
- 4 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, "Mine clearance creates spaces for reconciliation", 11 April 2024, accessed 28 July 2026, <https://www.deza.eda.admin.ch/en/mine-clearance-creates-spaces-for-reconciliation>.
- 5 United Nations Mine Action Service, *Annual Report 2009*, accessed 28 July 2026, https://www.unmas.org/sites/default/files/un_ar_09_small_0.pdf.
- 6 GICHD, *Linking Mine Action and Development. Guidelines for Policy and Programme Development: Official Development Cooperation Agencies*, 2008, accessed 28 July 2026, <https://www.gichd.org/fileadmin/uploads/gichd/Publications/Guidelines-LMAD-OfficialDevCoop-Apr2009.pdf>.
- 7 GICHD and United Nations Development Programme, *The Sustainable Development Outcomes of Mine Action in Iraq*, 2023, accessed 28 July 2026, https://www.gichd.org/fileadmin/user_upload/SDG_Iraq_v17_web_2.pdf.
- 8 International Campaign to Ban Landmines, *Landmine Monitor 2025* and "Previous reports", accessed 28 July 2026, <https://the-monitor.org/reports/landmine-monitor>.

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The GICHD works to reduce risks to communities stemming from explosive ordnance, with a focus on landmines, cluster munitions, explosive remnants of war, and unsafely and insecurely managed conventional ammunition. As an internationally recognized centre of expertise and knowledge, the GICHD helps national authorities, international and regional organizations, NGOs and operators in around 40 affected countries and territories to develop and professionalize mine action and ammunition management.

Through its work, the GICHD strives for the fulfilment of international obligations, for national targets to be reached, and communities' protection from and resilience to explosive harm to be enhanced. These efforts support sustainable livelihoods, gender equality and inclusion. They save lives, facilitate the safe return of displaced populations, and promote peace and sustainable development.