POLICY BRIEF

Mine action in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover: Mine Action Imperatives in 2021 and Beyond

17 November, 2021

A HALO Trust vehicle leading researchers conducting an impact assessment of abandoned improvised mines in Nangarhar, 2020

The HALO Trust and other Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) partners have continued their work to address explosive ordnance in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover of the country in August, 2021. This work is taking place during a time of uncertainty in Afghanistan, but also at a time when there are: 1) amplified, urgent humanitarian needs; as well as 2) an opportunity for increasing mine action access *and* impact.

Mine action is also taking place in a context where aid policy-makers are aiming to *preclude emergencies from happening in the first place*, rather than constantly responding to them. Donors, policy-makers, and mine action stakeholders can increase principled support to humanitarian mine action. By doing so collectively, they can address pressing mine action imperatives and improve people's lives in Afghanistan, as well as across conflict and post-conflict settings globally.

Policy Brief Summary

Samuel Hall conducted empirical field research on mine action in Afghanistan in June 2021, two months before the Taliban took over the country. The research involved primary data collection in two rural villages, in order to explore changes at the *community level* that occurred subsequent to HALO Trust landmine clearance. In addition to this, Samuel Hall has conducted four prior studies and evaluations on mine action in Afghanistan from 2019-2021. The policy brief is an outcome of this combined research, outlining:

1. The changed political context but enduring humanitarian needs in Afghanistan
2. Mine action in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover: Humanitarian action, displacement, & IEDs
3. Policy implications and recommendations regarding principled mine action support in Afghanistan and globally

Overview: Samuel Hall Afghanistan mine action research

Mine action in Afghanistan in 2021 - and beyond

New *de facto* government, continued (and heightened) needs

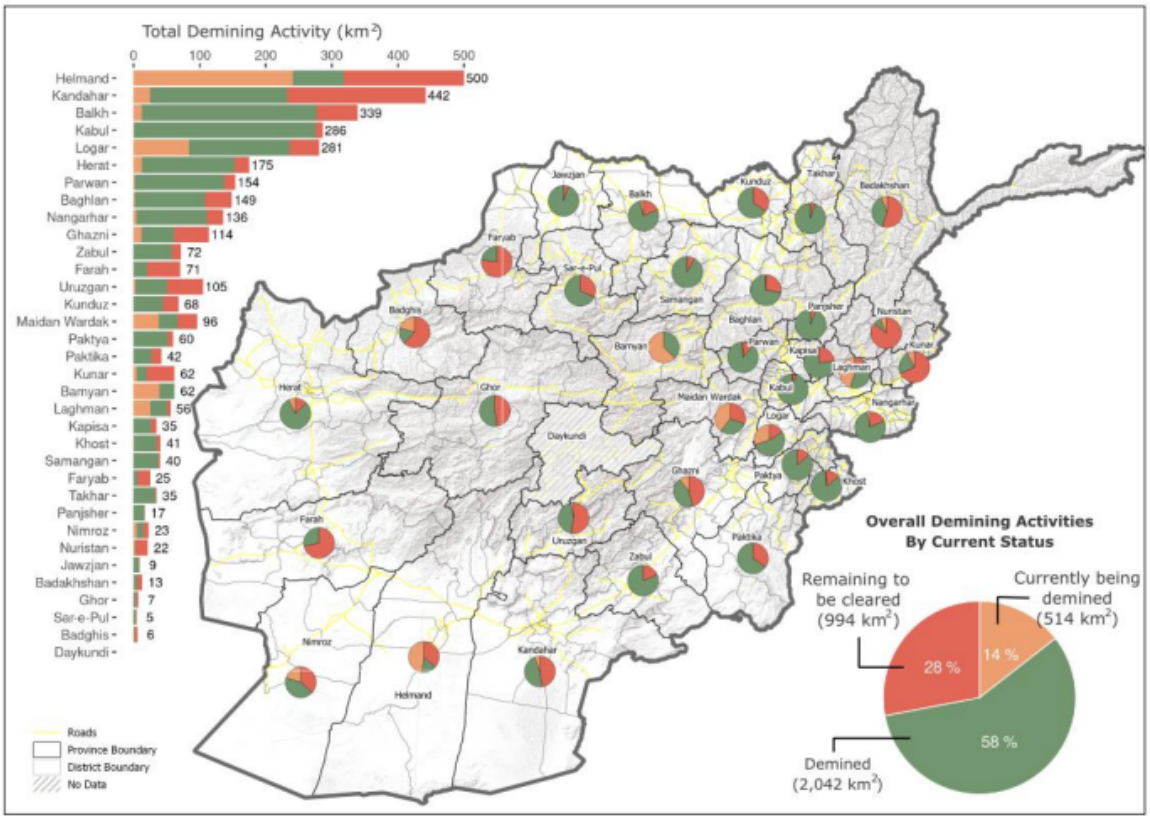
The international community watched in shock at the rapid Taliban takeover, government collapse, and accompanying images of the Kabul evacuation. As international governments and organisations (re)calibrate their response to Afghanistan, mine action continues apace in areas across much of the country.

Mine action forms a key part of the humanitarian response, neutral and desired by different sides of the conflict. Up until the Taliban takeover in August, there were already almost 800 recorded civilian casualties of explosive ordnance across the year - just under half of whom were children. These victims, Afghan men, women, boys, and girls who have been killed or maimed, come after more than 27,000 civilian casualties recorded in the country since 2001. Landmines and explosive remnants of war strike fear into people who know they lie nearby, making life miserable. The mental health burdens are significant. In a 2020 Samuel Hall and HALO Trust study of anti-vehicle mines and abandoned improvised mines (or improvised explosive devices) in Afghanistan, women in the east of the country described both the physical and mental trauma resulting from landmines and conflict in their village: *"Landmines forced our people into depression and mental problems. One day, when a landmine exploded behind our house, my daughter was in the yard and she went into mental shock."*

Explosive ordnance also inhibits access to houses, infrastructure, roads, and children's schools. They render large tracts of land unusable (or extremely dangerous to use). This prevents productive agriculture, livestock herding, livelihoods, and wider economic activity. Approximately 1,500 Afghan communities remain proximate to minefields or other explosive ordnance. With both the immediate acute dangers they pose, as well as the wider costs they impose, the problem of explosive ordnance compounds wider problems in Afghanistan, with the economy collapsing and over half the country's population needing humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian and mine action needs were already high prior to the Taliban takeover, and are amplified by a confluence of issues afterwards

Progress to a mine-free Afghanistan. Afghanistan National Mine Action Database, 2021



Afghanistan mine action imperatives

Paradoxically to the turmoil Afghanistan has experienced through the middle of 2021, the mine action sector has actually seen the removal of major access and security constraints - one of the major inhibiting factors for mine action in the past. Mine action organisations no longer have to deal with shifting frontlines of fighting. Communities and the Taliban accept and even request mine action activities across Afghanistan.

However, uncertainty amongst mine action donors remains. This is understandable in some circumstances - with the international community calling for principled humanitarian engagement, the protection of rights, and for inclusivity of women, girls, and ethnic minorities. The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA) has previously worked for gender mainstreaming in mine action, recognising the broad benefits for the sector and for wider society when women are meaningfully included in policies and practice. This includes mine action planning, prioritisation, community liaison, and risk education.

The new mine action coordination mechanism being established by the United Nations will have a role in addressing these concerns, alongside the daily work of mine action organisations such as the HALO Trust. As part of this coordination, mine action implementation is expected to continue - and even expand - past 2021, pursuing the goal of a mine-free Afghanistan. Three major, immediate areas for mine action are in humanitarian first response, safe return from displacement, and addressing improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

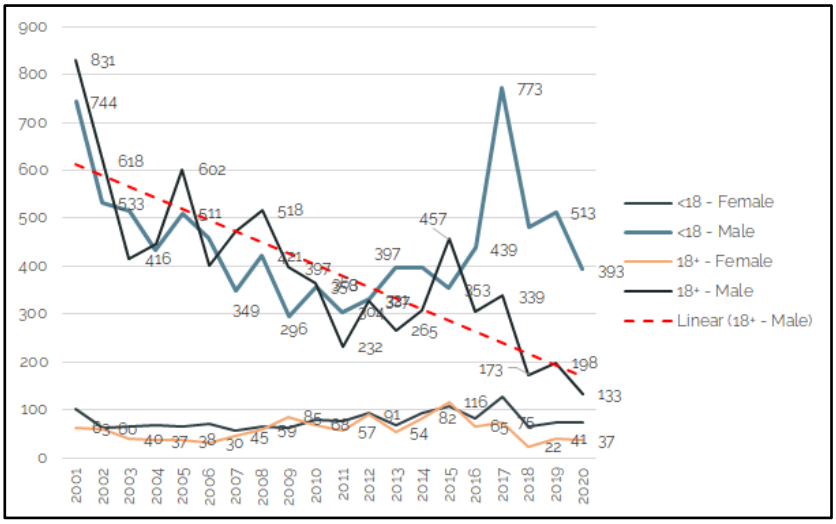
Addressing the "new killers": IEDs

As intense conflict ceases in many rural areas, the HALO Trust and United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) report that many communities are now requesting clearance of IEDs. There was a pronounced surge in the use of IEDs beginning in 2010, accompanied by devastating tolls on civilians. 8,117 innocent Afghans were recorded either killed or injured from 2010 to 2020. Furthermore, IEDs have been responsible for over half of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan since 2014.

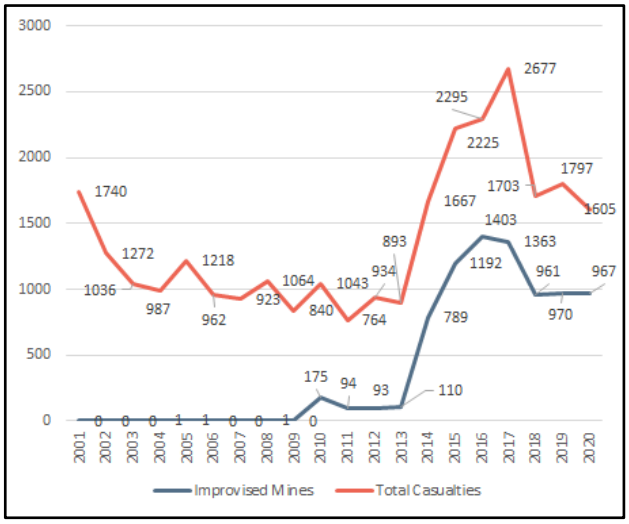
The HALO Trust commenced clearing abandoned improvised mines in 2018, expanding this unique type of surveying and clearance to different provinces in the following years. They remain the only organisation in Afghanistan capable of clearing AIM, and are playing a leading role in expanding capacity amongst other MAPA partners, in order to better tackle the expansive number of IEDs that need removal.

Previously, the HALO Trust and MAPA had to ensure that IEDs were not part of the active conflict, whereby their removal would be perceived to impinge on humanitarian neutrality. The MAPA settled on the label "abandoned improvised mines" to signify the nature of this clearance. Now that much of the conflict has ceased and there is a strong desire from different levels of society to address explosive ordnance of all kinds, clearing IEDs is high on the mine action and humanitarian agenda. The need to do so can be seen in analysis from the national database on casualties. The trendline for casualties from explosive ordnance outside of IEDs is down as a result of the work of the MAPA (below left). Yet the sharp rise in the number of casualties overall is driven by improvised mines, which urgently need addressing (below right).

Afghanistan explosive ordnance civilian casualties 2001-2021. Afghanistan National Database, 2021.



Civilian casualties from improvised mines and from all explosive ordnance categories, 2021.



Mine action in safe return from displacement

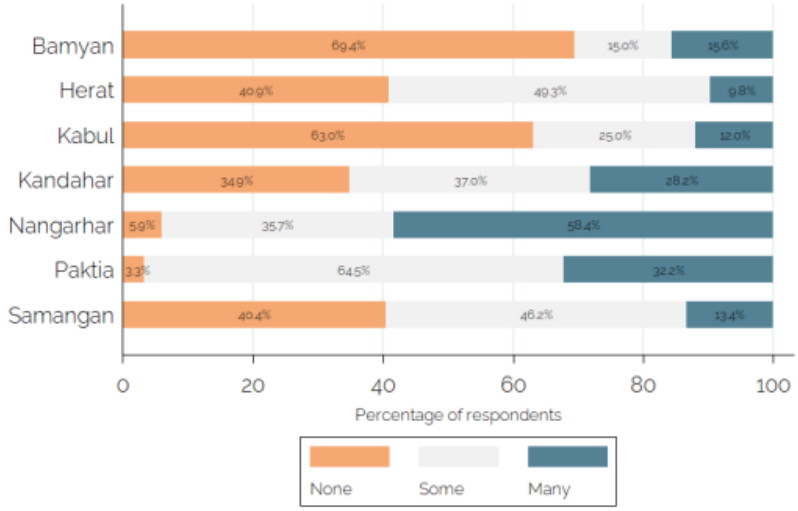
The HALO Trust is also conducting further humanitarian mine action to support the safe passage for internally displaced people (IDPs) returning to their homes. This remains distinct from the return of Afghan nationals from abroad, with many governments banning the forcible return of Afghans to a situation of danger, and a need for a global commitment to safe passage.

On the move in Samangan, 2018

But for people within Afghanistan who choose to return to areas where fighting has ceased, mine action has been and will continue to be of paramount importance. The conflict that led to people fleeing their homes usually left a variety of explosive ordnance that present grave risks to lives, limbs, and livelihoods for people when they return.

In a 2020 study with the Asia Displacement Solution Platform (ADSP) on Afghan IDPs returning to their original homes, research participants identified hazards both on the journey home (such as IEDs on roads and paths), as well as upon their return (where landmines, explosive remnants of war, and unexploded ordnance litter homes, schools, clinics, and fields). With many IDPs beginning their journeys back to their areas of origins, mine action for safe return from displacement will remain a major area of focus in the months and years ahead.

1,963 households across 21 communities in 7 provinces were surveyed as part of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) Evaluation (2020-2021). "How many people have returned to this community because landmines were cleared? By province."



Mine action as first responder

Mine action has long been considered a "first responder", removing dangerous explosive devices which then means other humanitarian and development organisations can perform their vital work. In June 2021, research participants noted that it was only after the village and surrounding areas were cleared of landmines, that organisations could dig wells, conduct literacy courses, implement vocational training, and build vital infrastructure. One man said: *"Elders are the witness that for the first time, electricity was provided to our area. Electricity is light. If there were landmines, [engineers] would not be able to work freely and we would not have access to electricity."* With the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the major extant explosive ordnance, the humanitarian role that mine action plays is as important as ever. Mine action is an integral part of a humanitarian corridor, to "stay and deliver" in partnership with the many Afghans facing precarity.

Policy options and recommendations

1. Continue and expand funding for mine action in Afghanistan

Donors and international policy-makers should maintain funding and support for mine action in Afghanistan. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Taliban takeover, improved access and security for mine action presents an opportunity to address the major imperatives of first response, safe displacement return, and removing IEDs - as part of the work towards a mine-free Afghanistan. Support for mine action in Afghanistan includes the domains of funding, partnerships, engagement, and monitoring. This renewed support maintains attention on the situation in Afghanistan and the needs of the tens of millions of Afghans long after the last military evacuation flights leave and the gaze of international media turns elsewhere.

2. Continue principled humanitarian mine action

Crucially, funding and support from donors and the international community must be principled and uphold the rights of all Afghans. Alongside the United Nations, including the updated mechanism for mine action coordination (the United Nations Emergency Mine Action Coordination Center for Afghanistan or UN-EMACCA), mine action stakeholders should maintain the Joint Operating Principles for Ensuring the Delivery of Principled Humanitarian Assistance.

Mine action stakeholders should protect the important gains in gender mainstreaming that have been made in Afghanistan. This includes continuing to work with the Taliban to demonstrate that women are central to humanitarian mine action, through women's involvement in risk education, community liaison, monitoring, evaluation, and other mine action activities, which ensures protection and safety for all people.

The HALO Trust began mine action in Afghanistan in 1988, and together with the United Nations, along with other mine action agencies, have continued humanitarian operations since then. Mine action stakeholders, supported by the international community, should continue to uphold humanitarian principles and be supported in conducting its lifesaving work.

3. Support mine action for its multifaceted impacts

The HALO Trust initiated a project in 2021 *"From landmines to crops: Cultivating Peace"* in Somaliland. Partnering with a local Somali organisation Candlelight, the HALO Trust are addressing desertification and the degradation of demined land with the broader goal of tackling climate security risks and the underlying drivers of conflict. The project was based in part upon Samuel Hall findings of multifaceted changes that result from mine action from research in partnership with the HALO Trust.

Mine action is humanitarian in the strict sense of preventing indiscriminate deaths and injuries to innocent people. Samuel Hall has found through its research that changes occur beyond this, and are both pronounced and profound across many aspects of people's lives. Mine action allows local communities to increase food production, safely herd livestock, construct infrastructure and buildings, live more cohesively, and access markets. These impacts are also humanitarian: they are intrinsically connected to access to land, food, water, education, and livelihoods.

Policymakers and donors have an important opportunity to support mine action that protects lives and limbs directly, alongside the multifaceted positive impacts it creates in people's lives, in Afghanistan and beyond.

This Samuel Hall Policy Brief was based on research collaboration with the HALO Trust

ABOUT SAMUEL HALL

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and designs policies in contexts of migration and displacement. Our approach is ethical, academically rigorous, and based on first-hand experience of complex and fragile settings.

Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Germany, Kenya, Tunisia, and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study. For more information, please visit www.samuelhall.org.

www.samuelhall.org
development@samuelhall.org
@Samuel_Hall_