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The Role of Mine Action in Curbing the Small Arms Threat

by **Albert Souza Mülli and Sharmala Naidoo [GICHD]** - [view pdf](#)

This article's purpose is to share concrete examples of how mine-action organizations are playing an increasingly visible role in curbing the threat of small arms and armed violence more broadly, and to examine the reasons behind this trend.¹

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development defines armed violence as “the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death or psychosocial harm, which undermines development.”³ In this article, we refer to **armed violence reduction** as an umbrella term to refer to activities that contribute to a reduction in armed violence, such as peace building; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration; community safety; small arms and light weapons control, ammunition disposal and stockpile management; and security system reform.

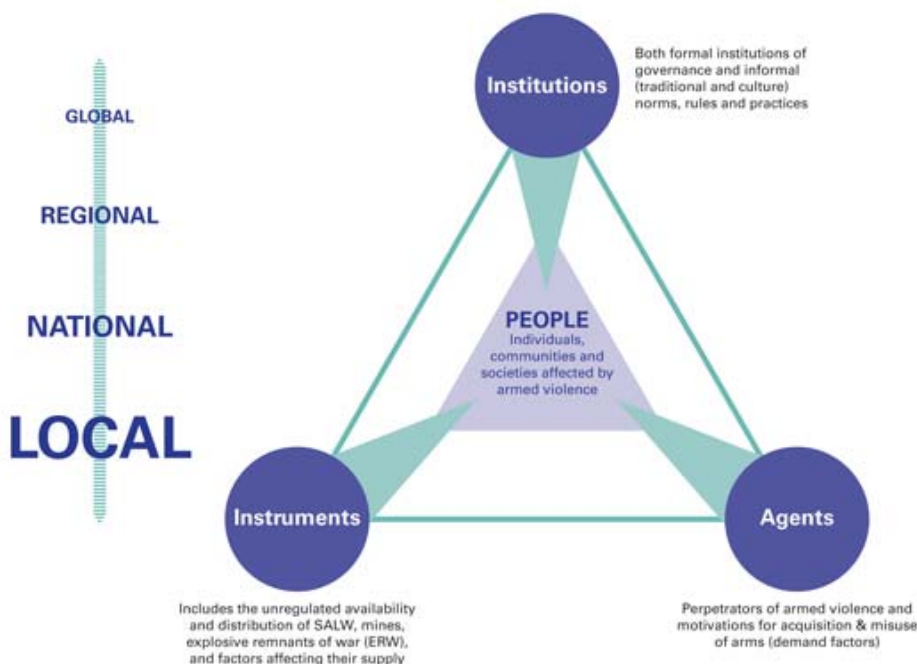


Figure 1. AVR lens
OECD DAC, *Armed Violence Reduction: Enabling Development*, OECD, Paris, 2009.

Mine/ERW operators often encounter SA/LW and ammunition caches during survey and clearance operations. If these operators find SA/LW, they collect and destroy them (separately from mines and other explosive remnants of war), hand them over to appropriate authorities or inform the relevant government entities. However, in recent years, several organizations have started to expand the scope of their activities to include programs more explicitly focused on controlling the misuse and spread of SA/LW (and ammunition), and support broader armed-violence reduction activities.

Several mine /ERW operators have produced AVR-related policies and guidelines, and some have introduced new programs that, for example, involve working with fragile communities to develop community-based plans that identify community safety concerns along with measures to address these concerns.^{1,4,5,6} Whether it be by explicitly tackling the issue of SA/LW or by engaging in AVR more widely, mine /ERW operators are using their existing mine-action capacity, and acquiring new expertise, to address a wider range of security threats.

The OECD's Armed Violence Lens provides a useful framework for understanding how different mine/ERW operators engage in AVR. The Armed Violence Lens captures the different levels in which armed violence occurs—local, national and global—as well as the main elements shaping armed violence: the instruments, the affected people, the agents and the institutions. The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining's preliminary research on the involvement of mine/ERW operators in AVR indicates that, due to mine action's more technical nature, most operators tend to focus on one aspect of the Armed Violence Lens—the instruments of armed violence. Interventions include, for example, collecting and destroying excess and unsafe SA/LW and ammunition, promoting the physical security of arms and ammunition stores, and strengthening stockpile-management capacity.

However, some operators are beginning to focus their interventions on the other elements of the Armed Violence Lens, namely affected communities, the agents of violence and the wider institutional and cultural environment. Examples include the delivery of awareness-raising sessions for civilians on the dangers of SA/LW proliferation and misuse, research on the impact of armed violence on disability and support to survivors, and facilitating improved communication between conflict-affected communities and their security providers. The following is a brief overview of different interventions employed by mine-action organizations.

Addressing the Instruments of Armed Violence

In some conflict-affected countries, different munitions in police and military possession are stored in insecure locations and are improperly managed and monitored. While the lack of security in arms and ammunition storage depots may lead to theft, corrupt officials may sell or rent arms and ammunition for extra cash.⁷ In post-conflict environments, this uncontrolled proliferation of arms and ammunition can not only increase the incidence of violent crime, but also potentially re-ignite armed conflict.

The improper storage and management of munitions can also lead to unplanned explosions. For example, in some countries, ammunition stores often exceed full capacity and include degraded and unsafe explosives. In addition, much of the ammunition is susceptible to adverse environmental conditions such as heat and humidity, poor storage conditions and lack of training in proper handling of ordnance, all of which can place the ammunition at risk. The poor condition in which these explosive munitions are stored puts security providers and civilians at risk of a potential explosion. In such contexts securing arms and ammunition stores is not just a security, but also a safety priority, especially in highly volatile areas where accidents are commonplace. An increasing number of mine/ERW operators are responding to these threats by working with national-security providers on physical security and stockpile management.

Since 2009, The HALO Trust has worked with the police in Somaliland on a Weapons and Ammunition Disposal program, which aims to rehabilitate police armories and train the police on armory and SA/LW management to prevent theft, misuse and accidents. For example, HALO focuses on improving armory security by blocking windows to ensure single entrances and exits and installing strong-room doors, fences, motion detectors, lights and metal-mesh ceilings to reinforce roof security. The organization also installs wooden gun racks and separate arms and ammunition storage areas. To facilitate this process, it developed an armory-rehabilitation handbook, which is based on OSCE standards and experiences from HALO's WAD program in Mozambique. HALO is also implementing WAD programs in Afghanistan, Angola and Cote D'Ivoire.⁸

MAG (Mines Advisory Group) is equally active in the area of PSSM as part of its wider AVR work. In 2009, the organization initiated a PSSM program in Burundi with the *Police Nationale du Burundi*. MAG carried out an initial survey of 206 police stations and found that security was inadequate and that unauthorized access to SA/LW was probable. Therefore, the initial purpose of its PSSM program was to reduce the vulnerability of the PNB's SA/LW stockpiles to prevent theft and trafficking. Once MAG realized the humanitarian risk posed by the volatile state of the stockpiles they surveyed—due to both their poor condition and their proximity to communities—reducing the risk of unplanned explosions also became a priority.⁹ MAG carried out similar work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a significant amount of arms and ammunition in unsafe conditions are poorly stored in various areas of the country. MAG works with the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* to destroy surplus weapons stocks and strengthen PSSM. MAG is supporting the FARDC to create national PSSM standards and it is assessing ammunition stockpiles and refurbishing ammunition stores. The organization also implements conventional weapons management and disposal activities in other countries including Iraq, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan and Sudan.¹⁰



Explosive ordnance and ammunition awaiting destruction by MAG (Mines Advisory Group) outside a destruction site in Bubanza province, Burundi.
Photos courtesy of Sharmala Naidoo/GICHD.



A member of the MAG Burundi team cuts an assault weapon during a weapon-cutting workshop outside of Bujumbura, Burundi.
Photos courtesy of Sharmala Naidoo/GICHD.

In Mauritania, large amounts of unusable, obsolete ammunition (including mortars, grenades, etc.) in military storage sites not only led to sporadic unplanned explosions that killed members of nearby communities, but were also believed to be highly susceptible to raids by extremist armed groups active in the country. In response, the Government of Mauritania, together with NATO's Maintenance and Supply Agency (now NATO's Support Agency), approached Handicap International for support. As a result, HI has worked with the Mauritanian National Army since March 2011 to develop national standards on ammunition destruction, identify equipment for ammunition destruction and select appropriate destruction processes. Although not directly involved in ammunition destruction, HI is strengthening the Mauritanian Army's capacity in stockpile management and ammunition destruction, thereby contributing to improving safety and security.

Beyond Just Weapons

Danish Demining Group initiated a significant programming shift in 2008, with the implementation of its first Community Safety program in Somaliland. The program's design is based on the findings of several assessments, which indicated that: SA/LW were a significant problem resulting in far higher deaths and injuries compared to landmines; many SA/LW-related accidents were the result of irresponsible behavior, e.g., unsafe storage of arms and ammunition; and the lack of safe storage left weapons vulnerable to theft, with 16 per cent of firearms owners

claiming to have experienced theft of their small arms over a one-year period, potentially arming more than 90,000 criminals with weapons and facilitating armed violence.¹¹ In fact, the wide availability of SA/LW in Somaliland has altered the nature of interpersonal and inter-communal relationships; disputes easily escalate into armed confrontation.¹² But, given the traditional role of small arms as a means of self-protection and autonomy in Somaliland, the assessment findings indicated that any intervention should aim at behavioral and attitudinal change rather than disarmament.¹³

DDG's Community Safety program targets all aspects of the Armed Violence Lens, i.e., the instruments, agents and institutions. As part of the program, DDG distributes and installs safe storage devices to households in target communities to deter theft and promote safe SA/LW storage and handling, which not only avoids accidental shots being fired, but also adds a physical and psychological barrier to the arms, which can avoid the escalation of arguments into armed disputes. However, the Community Safety program features several other components that focus on changing attitudes and behavior. These include the delivery of conflict-management education, which seeks to strengthen the capacity of communities to manage interpersonal conflicts before they escalate into wider and more intractable conflicts; the delivery of firearms safety education which raises awareness about the different types of SA/LW and their risks; the participatory development of community safety plans with community representatives, security providers and local leaders; and the establishment of community-police partnerships to strengthen coordination and build trust between the police and communities. Based on the program's innovative approach and success in Somaliland, DDG is implementing adapted versions in Uganda's conflict-prone Karamoja region and in South Sudan's Eastern Equatoria and Northern Bahr el Ghazal regions.



DDG Community Safety program in Somaliland.
Photo courtesy of Pete Muller.

Similar to DDG's Firearms Safety Education sessions in Somaliland, other mine/ERW operators are branching out from providing mine-risk education to also raise awareness about the risks of SA/LW. For example, HI has worked alongside UNICEF in Libya to help reduce the risks posed by the unchecked proliferation of SA/LW. SA/LW have become readily available to civilians following the recent conflict to oust Libya's former dictator, Moammar Gaddafi. Initially involved in MRE, HI's field teams focused on unexploded ordnance and noticed that SA/LW was a more pressing and potentially destabilizing issue. Since September 2011, HI has led a campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of SA/LW, and has taught safe SA/LW usage and storage practices in Benghazi, Ajdabiya, and Tripoli.¹⁴

In early 2012, DanChurchAid also began working in Libya to address the growing threat of small-arms availability and misuse

through a SA/LW awareness program.¹⁵ Apart from working in close consultation with HI, DCA has designed its program in line with the experience it gained supporting a national civilian disarmament campaign in Burundi from 2007 to 2009. The SA/LW risk education implemented by both organizations focuses on reducing the risk of accidents and encouraging a change in civilian attitudes toward gun ownership and use. In a country like Libya, where the country's security apparatus is still being rebuilt, preventing the proliferation of arms will prove paramount to helping build a strong state.¹⁶

Rationale Behind the Shift

Mine/ERW operators are undertaking a broadening range of activities, which is partly attributed to policy shifts and funding from key donors. In a recent GICHD-conducted donor survey, donors indicated that mine-action support would likely decrease beyond the next five years, after which funding will be increasingly unpredictable.¹⁷ Trends also indicate that fewer than 10 mine-affected countries receive the majority of mine-action funding awarded—Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon and Sudan. As restrictions on available mine-action funding increase, organizations are increasingly targeting new funding channels while widening the scope of their activities.¹⁷ For example, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) has a Conventional Weapons Destruction program which promotes PSSM and funds activities that combat the proliferation of conventional weapons, SA/LW and man-portable air-defense systems. However, funding is only one aspect of this shift.¹⁸


Mine/ERW operators have started developing more holistic responses to security threats incorporating the threats posed by weapons, ammunition and explosives. This is based in part on the recognition that 740,000 people die annually as a result of armed violence including in non-conflict affected countries, as compared to the 1,155 people killed by mines and other ERW.¹⁹ In Somaliland, DDG shifted from mine clearance to community safety, arguing that "there are simply better ways to spend money in order to improve the lives of communities and individuals... than by clearing minefields."¹⁴ Similarly in Libya, HI also noticed a few months after beginning mine-risk education that SA/LW

were a greater and far more pressing security issue than landmines or UXO, and subsequently included SA/LW education into programs where only MRE had existed previously. Likewise, HALO established a dedicated Weapons and Ammunition Disposal program in response to the challenges encountered in Afghanistan post-2001, where significant quantities of ammunition needed destruction.³

Organizations realize that, as an integral part of this broader engagement with the wider security sector, they are well-positioned to engage in AVR. Access and familiarity with local communities, national authorities and security providers make mine/ERW operators ideal for this role, as does their technical expertise with mines, UXO and other ERW, and ability to work with mine and ERW survivors. With the exception of certain militaries, few organizations are on the ground in conflict-affected countries with the capacity, logistical experience and resources to undertake field-level operations in SA/LW collection and destruction. Therefore, mine-action operators are able to fill this gap and gain valuable experience and expertise along the way.

GICHD's Role

The new GICHD strategy focuses on key institutions and capabilities of national mine-action programs: land release and stockpile-destruction methods and techniques; laws and standards; and strategic, quality and information management. The strategy also indicates that GICHD supports the transfer of knowledge and capacities from mine action to the broader field of AVR and it will respond to evolving trends.

In 2011, GICHD initiated a study on how mine action contributes to AVR at an operational level. Using case studies, GICHD is documenting the work of different national mine-action programs and mine/ERW operators in SA/LW control, community safety and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, PSSM and stockpile destruction to better understand the nature of their programs and identify good practice. The case studies will be published in 2012 along with a policy brief. 

Biographies



Albert S. Mülli is employed in a one-year position as Junior Programme Officer in GICHD's Strategic Management section. He holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Latin American Studies from Vassar College in the United States and a master's degree in International Affairs from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Prior to joining GICHD, Albert completed internships at the Kofi Annan Foundation, CARE International, the Zurich-based International Relations and Security Network, and the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations in Geneva.



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Endnotes

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