

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 14
Issue 2 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 20

July 2010

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Recommended Citation

Orozco, Carlos (2010) "Micro-projects Help Socioeconomic Recovery of Cleared Areas," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol14/iss2/20>

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Micro-projects Help Socioeconomic Recovery of Cleared Areas

The Organization of American States' recent experiences in Nicaragua and Colombia have shown that, in addition to large projects, micro-projects—such as building farms or gardens—are a necessary step in the rehabilitation of cleared lands. Because of the extensive amount of vulnerable area in these mine-affected countries, the continual support of micro-projects not only facilitates development activities, but also lays the groundwork for reaching the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

by Carlos J. Orozco [Organization of American States]

Landmine removal and post-conflict recovery are necessary conditions in order to provide prosperity to communities that were affected. Generally, additional funds are needed to implement small socioeconomic initiatives, or micro-projects, that can provide a first step to a community's recovery after clearance.

Nevertheless, some claim mine-action programs should remain separate from development activities. As the Organization of American States demonstrates, however, mine-action programs routinely provide an effective and expedited route to sustainable national development. By creating these programs around micro-projects, the OAS has been able to assist national development efforts in fostering security and promoting socioeconomic improvements.

Objectives of Mine Action

The subject of linking mine action and development has been a topic of frequent discussion. *IMAS 04.10 Glossary of Terms* defines *mine action* as the “activities which aim to reduce the social, economic and environmental **impact of mines** and **ERW** [explosive remnants of war] including **cluster munitions**.”¹ It also notes that “mine action is not just about demining; it is also about people and societies, and how they are affected by landmine and ERW contamination. The objective of mine action is to reduce the risk from landmines and

ERW to a level where people can live safely; in which economic, social and health development can occur free from the constraints imposed by landmine and ERW contamination, and in which the victims' different needs can be addressed.”¹

Following the IMAS line of thinking, the objectives of mine action go beyond security issues and into supporting national development



In spite of the danger, inhabitants in Bajo Grande, Colombia, cultivate land next to an area in the process of being cleared.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF AICMA-CO



Carmen Galindo looks over her planted plot in El Porvenir, Jalapa, Nicaragua.

efforts as well. Consequently, it is widely accepted that the best indicator of results achieved from the resources invested in mine-clearance operations no longer comes directly from the count of destroyed mines or cleared areas. Instead, most results are now measured by the increase in well-being provided to families, communities and the other beneficiaries of the cleared land.

The above premise has been widely accepted and recognized in international instruments such as United Nations resolutions and *Ending the Suffering Caused by Anti-personnel Mines: Nairobi Action Plan 2005–2009*, which invites states, as well as national and international agencies, to integrate mine action with wider development aid programs. These international instruments also recognize that mine action is indis-

pensable in reaching the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.³ Many organizations, including the OAS, seek diverse socioeconomic solutions and recognize the importance of lending continuing support for the socioeconomic recovery of cleared land.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua's reconstruction phase prioritized the use of cleared areas with infrastructure such as bridges, communication towers and electrical power pylons. However, the OAS mine-action program in Nicaragua estimates that 54 percent of cleared area is predominantly rural, situated next to international borders and has great agricultural potential. Consequently, a 2007 impact study on the effects of demining operations in Nicaragua concluded that it

is necessary to develop financial and technical aid initiatives for landmine and ERW-cleared communities so that their lands may be more efficiently utilized. The same impact study surveyed 297 minefields that had been cleared and found 64 percent of the cleared land was agricultural in nature or had productive potential for agricultural products.⁴ Years later, the amount of cleared area remained relatively the same, and so it became imperative to channel financial and technical aid toward the rehabilitation of areas with productive potential.

Taking into account that Nicaragua is one of the most impoverished countries in the Western Hemisphere, the optimal use of cleared areas, particularly those with agricultural potential, has had its limits. The inefficient use of cleared land is



At Las Cochas, Colombia, an area is cleared and beneficiaries receive aid through AICMA-CO.

due largely to the insufficient financial and technical aid provided for its socioeconomic rehabilitation.

Colombia

In Colombia, mine action is conducted to assist communities; however, some communities were abandoned during armed conflict. Therefore, the clearance process is developed taking into account the physical, psychological and economic conditions of the returning civilians.

Once clearance is complete, the permanent return of displaced civilians is facilitated through two mechanisms:

1. Support by the central or local governments, development agencies and other entities to establish basic infrastructure such as electricity, water, roads, education and health

2. Assistance from the OAS and aid organizations through micro-projects that involve the planting of basic grains and pastures, and other initiatives leading to the rehabilitation of cleared areas

In one instance, the OAS program was working in El Chocó in the municipality of San Carlos, Antioquia department. During the initial survey, personnel discovered that the community school needed a garden for the school activities to return to normal. Therefore, the OAS program incorporated a small project to bring seeds, fertilizer and some tools to plant vegetables in the school garden.

The Influence of Micro-projects

Based on U.N. resolutions, The Nairobi Action Plan 2005–2009, and numerous national and international agencies, there is a growing desire

to rehabilitate cleared areas through socioeconomic development. This development is sponsored and supported by the central and local governments, development agencies, and other organizations predominantly through national development plans. The OAS experiences in Colombia and Nicaragua have proven that the need to support modest initiatives in the process of rehabilitating of cleared areas is vital. In Colombia, this support is crucial for the returning populations' survival. In Nicaragua, this support is necessary to strengthen poverty-eradication strategies.

While national processes of socioeconomic development are ambitious, they are not enough to cover the numerous vulnerable areas in countries like Nicaragua. Therefore, it becomes necessary to develop other initiatives,

which, in spite of being small and modest, have a profound impact on these communities. The activities included in the national development plans usually take a long time to reach the affected communities.

Recently in Nicaragua, the OAS initiated 15 individual and 10 community micro-projects, thanks to a contribution by the Netherlands. The projects directly benefited 634 families, 17 communities and three municipalities in the Nueva Segovia department. The micro-projects included support to the activities in Table 1 distributed among individual projects oriented toward women proprietors of small cleared parcels and community projects for the benefit of all members of various communities. The projects focus on reducing poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality, and providing environmental sustainability. In doing so, the projects bring national governments closer to the Millennium Development Goals.

Land Rehabilitation

The OAS experience in supporting the rehabilitation of cleared land in Nicaragua has identified the two phases described below as necessary for success.

Diagnosis Phase: Throughout this phase, three fundamental aspects are developed:

No.	Type of Productive Micro-projects	Projects
1	Construction of children's dining areas	4
2	Construction of bridge supports	1
3	Construction of a community hall	1
4	Construction of a communal home	2
5	Reforestation of fruit trees	2
6	Planting of basic grains	4
7	Coffee planting and improvement	4
8	Planting of sugar cane	1
9	Livestock breeding	5
10	Planting of pastures	1

Table 1: Micro-projects initiated in Nicaragua during 2009.

ALL TABLES AND FIGURES COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

1. Identification of potential mined areas: Tools such as the Information Management System for Mine Action are of great assistance in this preliminary phase.
2. Verification of the areas: Activities include developing field information, conducting consultations with potential beneficiaries and analyzing the information.
3. Technical Orientation: This aspect consists of prioritization of the identified objectives, decision-making, proposal elaboration and aid mechanisms.

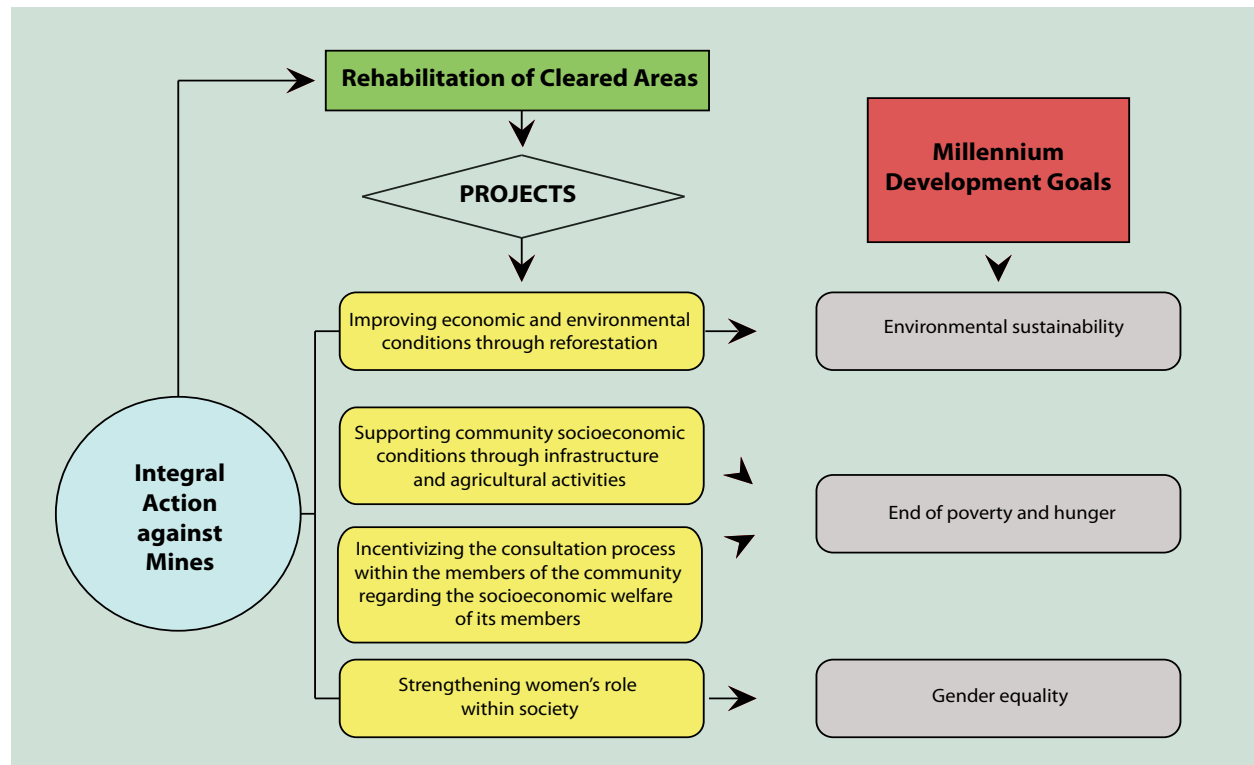


Figure 1: OAS micro-projects and their contribution to development.

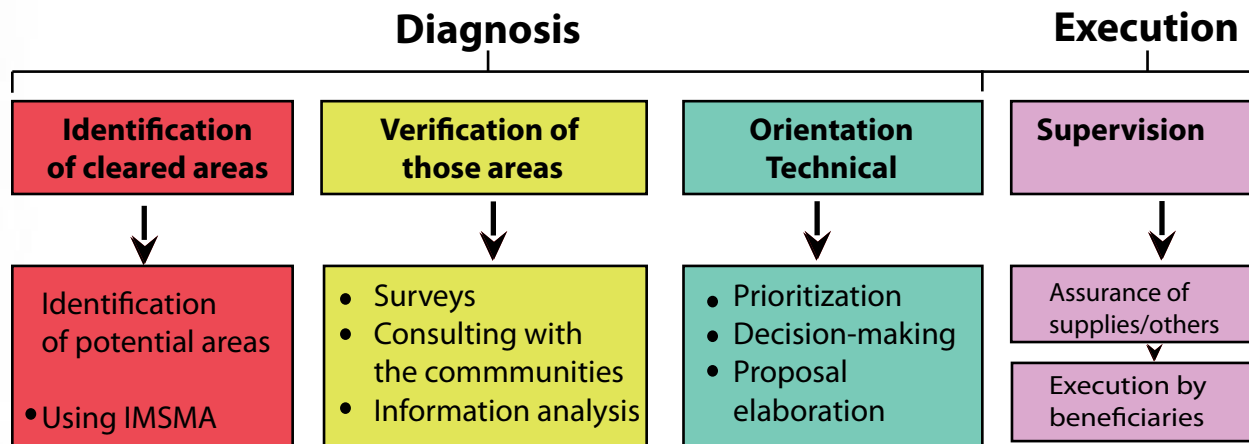


Figure 1: OAS mine-action process for returning cleared lands to productivity.

The Diagnosis Phase is of particular importance because it has been shown to be a determinant for the level of success in clearing mined areas.

Execution Phase: During the execution phase, aid mechanisms that were agreed to during the technical orientation are adopted. The beneficiaries directly execute the project under supervision of the entity or entities in charge of the technical orientation.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that macro-projects within national plans are fundamental to promoting community development. However, it is equally important to develop parallel micro-projects as they serve to secure full participation of the beneficiaries by promoting decision-making, decrease or eliminate frustration levels within affected communities, and allow beneficiaries to execute their own projects. Furthermore, the micro-projects are developed within the community, allowing for cost-effective, direct impact that improves the country’s development and promotes the Millennium Development Goals.

It is evident that small projects do not merely facilitate certain development activities, but make their implementation possible. These projects have a positive and substantial domino effect on landmine-affected communities. The results of these small initiatives can be measured by the help they provide to affected communities.

Mine action is not only confined to security-related measures of the communities at risk, but also aims to support national development efforts with the ultimate goal of reaching a full and speedy recovery. Continuing support and lending financial and technical aid to those communities that have been cleared is a common denominator that must always be present to implement diverse socioeconomic resolutions. These resolutions that support the return of cleared lands to productivity also serve to bolster poverty-eradication strategies.

The OAS welcomes contributions from all donors, no matter how modest, as donors are the engines that propel national governments toward reaching the Millennium Development Goals. Donor contributions

help reduce poverty and hunger, promote gender equality, and provide environmental awareness. All of these efforts, coupled with the rest of the OAS mine-action program, have proven to be integral and necessary in clearing the path for a brighter and safer future for these countries. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 82



Carlos José Orozco is the Regional Coordinator of the Organization of American States Mine Action Program for Central America. In 1998, he began as National Coordinator of the program in Nicaragua. Currently he coordinates mine-action assistance to Nicaragua; a regional effort to assist the recovery of survivors and their communities in economically sustainable ways; and regional projects to address destruction of obsolete munitions and explosive remnants of war.

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