Mine Action and Human Mobility

Ensuring safety and dignity for people on the move

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Executive summary

The intersection of explosive ordnance (EO) contamination and human mobility presents one of the most pressing challenges in humanitarian action today. As displacement becomes increasingly prolonged and complex, EO contamination continues to pose a barrier to safe movement, limiting humanitarian access, delaying reconstruction, and undermining the achievement of durable and dignified solutions for many communities worldwide.

Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) is crucial in addressing these challenges. Through activities such as surveying and clearing contaminated areas, providing explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), and engaging with local communities, HMA facilitates safe, voluntary, and dignified movement. It protects and promotes long-term recovery by enabling humanitarian access, restoring access to essential services, and contributing to peacebuilding and sustainable development.

This report emphasises that addressing human mobility challenges in areas contaminated by EO, landmines, and other explosive ordnance necessitates a comprehensive approach. It advocates for integrating mobility-sensitive planning within HMA strategies and calls for stronger coordination across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors[1]. Recognising the complex nature of displacement and mobility patterns in the community we serve—whether voluntary or forced, short-term or long-term—the report highlights the need for inclusive, context-specific interventions that empower affected communities and ensure their active participation.

A human mobility perspective acknowledges that movement is fluid, multidirectional, involves multiple actors and is shaped by a variety of factors beyond immediate crisis-driven displacement. This has significant implications for HMA, which must evolve to address the diverse mobility challenges that people face—not only in their return home but also in transit, in search of safety and livelihood opportunities, or while integrating into new communities.

Finally, to be effective, HMA must be integrated into broader frameworks for national capacity development, focusing on sustainability, local ownership, and adequate funding. The report concludes with recommendations to enhance displaced and conflict-affected populations' protection, mobility, and resilience through comprehensive mine action efforts.

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[1] It is acknowledged that efforts to bridging the gaps between human mobility, protection and mine action are not inexistent. However, preliminary research indicates that more coordination, especially in the field, is necessary.

About Mines Advisory Group

Mines Advisory Group (MAG) is a humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organisation that limits the causes and addresses the consequences, both immediate and long-term, of conflict and armed violence, established in 1989. Since then, MAG has worked in more than 70 countries globally, including in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific region, Southern, Western, and Eastern Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. There are currently +30 active MAG programmes.

Acknowledgments

Research Team

The project is part of a collaborative effort across different MAG departments and programmes. It was primarily born from the observation that displacement and mobility challenges are salient features in the communities we serve. The design and conceptualisation of the research have been a joint endeavour led by the Policy and Advocacy Team in MAG, with support from the Middle East Programme.

The leading researcher of this preliminary phase of an ongoing research project and author of this report was Andreina Carrillo, International Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at MAG. The report was edited by Riccardo Labianco, International Policy Manager.

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Introduction

The dramatic increase in the number of displaced people and the significant impact of explosive ordnance (EO) contamination on the lives, livelihood and rights of most of those people urgently require a deeper integration between humanitarian mine action (HMA) and human mobility interventions, namely actions to protect the different people on the move.

Explosive ordnance (EO), including mines, both industrially made and improvised ones, cluster munitions remnants (CMR) and explosive remnants of war (ERW), is one of the deadliest threats to the life and livelihood of millions of people around the world. People moving within, across or towards EO-contaminated areas are those that run the highest risk and often pay the highest price. When people move, they are often unaware of dangers and often cross borders and other heavily contaminated areas. When they reach their homes or their destination, they often have to deal with the problems caused by EO contamination: from the risk of death and life-changing injuries, lack of socio-economic opportunities, and social tensions caused by the presence of EO. Finally, their movement expose them to multiple threats which are often multiplied by physical, legal and political issues related to their profile of people on the move.

The dangerous and threatening interaction between the challenges related to human mobility, including the lack of the possibility to move at all to meet essential needs or to return to their own home, and the contamination from EO, including mines and cluster munitions remnants (CMR), is not unknown. The very 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) refer to that dangerous interaction themselves and the intention of States Parties to

> *"to put an end to the suffering and casualties caused by anti-personnel mines, that ... obstruct ... reconstruction, inhibit the repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons"[2]*

These challenges are multifaced and occur both during or right immediately after conflicts and armed violence and long-time after the end of the hostilities. EO, for example, 'obstruct' reconstruction in numerous ways, depriving people of their right to go back to their home. Those who returns can then find roads and fields contaminated by EO, preventing them from their right to produce and procure food and, more generally, to live a dignified life.

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[2] Preamble of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention with omissions

The Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) sector has already experience in supporting people on the move, but both the specific needs of these people and the current political landscape require a holistic approach that is based on the broader concept of human mobility and considers the different contributions that HMA can provide to meet the needs of people on the move throughout the whole triple nexus, on aspects related to humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actions.

Context

Forced displacement remains a defining and serious feature of humanitarian crises worldwide. The number of displaced people worldwide has increased dramatically in the last decade mainly because of conflict, but also due to environmental causes. In 2023 alone, at least 27.2 million people were forced to flee conflict, with one in four crossing an international border[i]. Between 2021 and 2023, 27.8 million people were forcibly displaced annually, nearly doubling the long-term average of the last twenty-five years and highlighting the intensifying severity of recent conflicts[ii]. According to UNHCR more than 120 million people are currently displaced, this is equivalent to Japan's population. [iii] The following section presents key data on displacement, illustrating the extent and complexity of the issue.

Facts and Figures on Displacement

Over the last decade, the number of people fleeing conflict, violence, and human rights violations has reached unprecedented levels. According to UNHHCR's 2024 mid-year report, 122.6 million people were displaced globally, including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and other categories of people in need of international protection. From this total, 32 million people were refugees, and 72.1 million were IPDs[iv].

Over three-quarters of refugees, 71%, resided in low- and middle-income countries. 69% of refugees are hosted by neighbouring countries including Türkiye (3.5 million), Lebanon (814,700) and Jordan (660,900)[v]. However, as illustrated by the figures above, most people forced to flee their homes do not cross an international border. They become internally displaced in their own countries.

Long-Term Displacement and Durable and Dignified Solutions

Displacement is no longer a short-term phenomenon; it has become increasingly protracted. According to the European Commission, "displacement lasts 20 years on average for refugees and more than 10 years for most IDPs."[vi] Efforts to achieve durable and dignified solutions in the case of refugees remain insufficient due to persistent conflicts, political instability, legal and administrative barriers, and limited access to livelihood opportunities in both host countries and countries of origin. The presence of landmines and other EO adds another level of complexity to a dire situation, limiting the achievement of durable solutions, and hampering reconstructions efforts in affected communities.[vii]

Explosive Ordnance and Human Mobility

Figures on human mobility and EO contamination confirm how the combination of the two phenomena creates a complex form of insecurity. EO contamination is in fact both a cause of and obstacle to cross-border human mobility.

Three in four refugees (73%) come from just five countries: Afghanistan, Venezuela, Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan.[3] In the case of IDPs, as of mid-2024, the 75% of them was in just 10 countries: Sudan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Colombia, Yemen, Somalia, Ukraine, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. All these countries – including those from where refugees are from and those hosting refugees and IDPs – are significantly affected by EO contamination, making many communities uninhabitable or dangerous to live in (see Table 1).

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[3] All these origin countries are confirmed or suspected to be affected by EO contamination to some extent.

Country/ territory	Number of IDPs of concern to UNHCR (2024)	Extend of contamination (Landmine monitor 2024)
Sudan	10, 540, 215	Medium
Syrian Arab Republic	7,414,806	Unknown – extensive contamination recorded across the country
Dem. Rep. of Congo	7,008,290	Small
Colombia	6,976,227	Small
Yemen	4,516,341	Medium
Somalia	3,861,634	Small
Ukraine	3,669,000	Massive
Nigeria	3,313,601	Unknown – prominently consisting of improvised mines
Ethiopia	3,245,484	Massive
Afghanistan	3,221,286	Massive
Total	**53,766,884**	

In addition to refugees and IDPs, EO contamination also affects other groups considered "at-risk"[4] given their mobility patterns, such as nomads, hunters, herders, shepherds, and agricultural workers whose needs are often overlooked.

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[4] Based on our recent findings and extensive experience in other contexts, MAG now believes Syria to be the most heavily impacted country in the world.

EO also is a major factor creating immobility, particularly for persons with disabilities and the elderly, who confront severe mobility challenges in contaminated areas, making them one of the most vulnerable groups in the context of conflict. EO has also been used as containment tool in contexts such as Colombia,[viii] [ix] and Mozambique[x], just to name a few.

Moreover, the presence or threat of EO contamination pose a significant barrier to the provision of humanitarian aid. For these reasons, there is a need to mainstream HMA efforts into the wider humanitarian, development, and protection sectors, and to embed it in national capacity-building initiatives.

Beyond Displacement: Integrating a Human Mobility Perspective into HMA Operations

Traditionally, displacement has been viewed through a static lens—focused primarily on people forced to flee due to conflict, violence, or disasters, often categorised as refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), or asylum seekers. This approach tends to emphasise the need for immediate humanitarian aid. While the provision of immediate humanitarian aid—such as shelter, food, and health services—is essential, it should be complemented by a broader understanding of human mobility. Recognising movement as a complex, multidirectional, and often protracted process shaped by both voluntary and forced factors allows for a more comprehensive and responsive approach that addresses both urgent needs and long-term dynamics.

Human mobility is defined as the "capability to move which includes both, the freedom to move, or to stay in one's preferred location"[xi]. It simultaneously addresses the absence or limitations of movement and the factors that play in an individual or group immobility[xii]. Such a conception covers all the diverse realities that can be found on the field: displacement, transhumance[5], "trapped populations"[xiii] as well as patterns of mobility of other categories or groups of people, including humanitarian workers, humanitarian convoys, and armed groups,[6] just to name a few.

A human mobility perspective acknowledges that movement is fluid, multidirectional, involves multiple actors and is shaped by a variety of factors beyond immediate crisis-driven displacement. This has significant implications for HMA, which must evolve to address the diverse mobility challenges that people face—not only in their return home but also in transit, in search of safety and livelihood opportunities, or while integrating into new communities.

Voluntary, Safe and Dignified Returns

There is no universal legal definition of return. However, voluntary return in safety and with dignity has long been a fundamental pillar of the international refugee regime and can be associated to numerous universal human rights. Over the years the international community has developed and implemented a series of principles on return and reintegration, recognising the importance of complying with "international human rights law and standards"[xiv]

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[5] Transhumance has become an important topic due to the consequences of climate change which can aggravate conflict around resources/lands in certain communities – particularly in the Sahel and East-Africa.
[6] Understanding the pattern mobilities of armed groups is important to define areas where active hostilities have ceased, thus HMA can start provided access is granted by relevant stakeholders.

Voluntary return means that refugees and IDPs are able to make informed decisions, free of physical or psychological pressure[xv]. For instance, under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulementguarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.[7] This principle applies to all migrants at all times, irrespective of migration status.

Safe return means that individual's physical safety and security are met in transit and on reaching their place of origin, and that those returning are safe from -among other factors- persecution, violence and the remnants of war, such as landmines in their places of origin. Finally, the concept of dignified return is based on respecting and protecting individual's human rights and dignity, including their right to self-determination, privacy, and freedom from discrimination, even when these are on the move.[xvi]

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[7] The principle of non-refoulement is a fundamental principle of international law. It has its origins in international refugee law as found in Article 33 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Humanitarian Mine Action and Human Mobility

The preamble of both the APMBC and CCM is a reminder of how instrumental humanitarian mine action (HMA) is to the protection of the life and the rights of people on the move. With its five pillars,[8] HMA not only paves the way to safe and dignified movements of people, but it is also fit to adapt to the different needs of people on the move along the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus.

Explosive Ordnance Risk Education and Community Liaison

EORE, including social and behavioural change (SBC) approaches for both the immediate and long-term needs of the population,[xvii] constitute the main lifeline for people on the move and at risk, especially in those situations where clearance is not yet possible, including in time of active hostilities or when no political agreement has been reached to proceed with clearance. Complementing EORE, community liaison is indispensable in anchoring mine action within affected populations' lived realities and priorities. As a participatory mechanism, community liaison fosters communication between mine action operators and local communities, facilitates trust-building, and enhances the relevance and effectiveness of interventions through the co-identification of priority areas and support for data collection during non-technical surveys. Far from a technical or ancillary activity, it is a central pillar of risk mitigation and resilience-building in EO-affected settings.

The link between EORE and displacement has received much attention in recent years. This was made especially clear in the 2023 Stakeholder Survey[xviii], where the top emerging need identified was "EORE for internally displaced persons and refugees". In addition, the 2024 GICHD mapping report on EORE highlights how displacement both internal and cross-border presents challenges and opportunities for the safe delivery of EORE. In fact, refugees and IDPs are among the most vulnerable to EO contamination, as they are often forced to traverse contaminated areas that are unfamiliar to them, which increases their risk of death and serious injuries. In addition, their exposure to risk is frequently exacerbated by the socio-economic imperatives of survival, which may necessitate engagement in hazardous activities such as subsistence farming on unsafe land or travelling through high-risk areas in search of livelihoods.

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[8] HMA's five pillars are: clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance, advocacy, and stockpile destruction.

Moreover, the nexus between EO contamination and displacement is not restricted to conventional conflict scenarios, which often requires the adaptation of EORE and community liaison activities to the reality of people on the move. Broader patterns of forced migration and mobility highlight recurring challenges, such as inconsistent awareness-raising for transient populations, inadequate cross-border coordination, and the absence of clearly delineated safe pathways[xix].

The cross-border nature of many modern conflicts (e.g., Syria, Ukraine, Sahel) reveals a clear challenge: where EO risks and diverse impacts on displaced and host populations extend across neighbouring countries or territories. Currently, sector coordination, including national authorities, funding governance in most cases do not facilitate cross-border or regional EORE strategies and information exchange, leading to predominantly localised EORE coverage and interventions for refugees and people on the move.[xx] Access to consistent and relevant lifesaving information for displaced and mobile populations is hence compromised, and EORE resources cannot be optimised.

Efforts in the EORE sector, including those integrated in broader HMA programmes or as stand-alone interventions into wider humanitarian efforts are going towards the right direction. EORE considerations where integrated into the IOM'S Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in 2020, EORE module was included into UNHCR's emergency Toolkit, and they are also present in relation to Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) related activities. All these are steps in the right direction concerning the protection and needs of people on the move.

EORE can also be a vital component of the immediate assistance provided by Rapid Response Mechanisms (RRMs) in displaced populations, as it can help to ensure their safety in potentially hazardous areas. However, it is important to note that a short-term, reactive approach is insufficient for returnees and in protracted displacement situations. Instead, sustained and iterative engagement is required to ensure immediate protection and longer-term risk reduction. In Lebanon, MAG is in discussion with several stakeholders, including governmental and non-governmental organisation to extend the reach of safe messaging, particularly in schools. More generally, it is not uncommon for other humanitarian organisations to warn about the risk related to EO by leaving leaflets in areas along paths and routes of mobility. These are all relevant example of initiatives conducive to achieve long-term impact of EORE initiatives.

Survey, Land Release and Clearance

> **"**
>
> We have a lot of instances of people telling us that they are waiting for us to clear the land so they can start rebuilding or living in that area.
>
> *Hiba Ghandour, Programme Manager, Lebanon*
>
> **"**

Successful land release and clearance can enable voluntary, safe and dignified return of displaced populations, the resumption of productive activities such as agriculture and grazing and the rebuilding of vital infrastructure such as road, schools and hospitals.[xxi] Clearance works at the intersection of development priorities by focusing on improving safety and security, clearing and releasing land, rebuilding infrastructure and improving access to services—all of which are key factors in reducing migration driven by conflict, insecurity or economic factors, and creating conditions that can enable voluntary, safe and dignified return, as well as safe mobility.

In particular, survey and clearance are critical to:
- establish humanitarian access and space
- re-establish the safety of critical infrastructure and essential services (e.g. roads, bridges, hospitals, schools)
- release land to support food security, reconstruction and sustainable development.
- support peacebuilding efforts safely access and transit through other contaminated areas (e.g. border areas).

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Establish Humanitarian Access and Space

> **"** From our experience working on the ground, many organisations and humanitarian agencies are not able to provide any assistance or to enter any community if it's contaminated so they need mine action organisations to start working in an area, then humanitarian and development organisations can follow.
>
> *Fatima Abdi, Community Liaison Manager, Syria* **"**

The presence or threat of EO contamination causes immobility. As noted by Fatima, one of its most pernicious effects is that it creates a barrier to provide humanitarian assistance to entire communities. It can hinder the ability of humanitarian teams to carry out assessments, as well as creating an atmosphere of persistent insecurity for staff – both in operational areas and along access routes.[xxii]

As noted by MAGs team in Syria and Lebanon this has meant that organisations working in sectors such as health, educations, agriculture, shelter and sanitation need to postpone their activities stalling recovery and reconstruction efforts until clearance starts.

Reflecting on the point above, Najwa Aljanada, Programme Development Manager in Syria noted that the lack of integration with other sectors often means that rehabilitation projects are delayed or interrupted because of contamination so she asked, "to prioritise mine action emergency response". Indeed, contamination not only blocks access but also undermines the restoration of essential services needed to guarantee safe and dignified returns. Survey and clearance operations, including Explosive Hazard Assessments (EHA) and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) tasks,[9] are vital to ensure the safety of the humanitarian convoy, humanitarian access and the maintenance of the safety of the humanitarian space. They mitigate the threats posed by landmines and other EO, thus enabling conditions so humanitarian aid reaches and continues to reach those in need and create the spaces so re-building can start.

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[9] Explosive Hazard Assessments (EHAs) are activities to appreciate the presence and level of risks related to the actual or suspected presence of explosive ordnance. It is not uncommon for EHAs to be triggered by a request from humanitarian and development organisations. EHAs are then undertaken by mine action or EOD specialists, including HMA operators.

Critical Infrastructure and Essential Services

> " In Syria, we are supporting people to access essential services, we realised there was this need, and we have a referral system. However, in some villages there is not support available, in other cases [the extent] of contamination means that hospitals, schools are unreachable, so clearance is a priority.
>
> *Najwa Aljanada, Programme Development Manager, Syria*

Critical infrastructure and essential services are relevant to the experience, needs, and rights of people on the move in at least two ways. First, it is fundamental that people are able to move along their path, with safe roads, paths, and transportation infrastructure and with the confidence that essential services, such as healthcare, sanitation, and shelter are available along their route. Such infrastructure and essential services are also critical when it comes to countries where people on the move are being hosted or transiting.

Secondly, people on the move should be confident that those critical infrastructure and essential services are safely available at the places of origin, integration, or resettlement.[xxiii] Such confidence can be affected by the knowledge or fear that EO contaminates critical infrastructure and essential services. As suggested by the Global Protection Cluster, people on the move should not only provided with 'adequate, reliable, and up-to-date information' on the conditions of the placed of 'origin, integration, or resettlement', they should also be made aware of the 'forms of assistance available' to them.[xxiv]

Both in hosting or transit countries and in the places of final destination, HMA operations play a critical role in protecting life and contributing to dignified living conditions.

Through both technical and non-technical forms of survey, HMA operators gather critical data on the conditions of the areas of transit, hosting or of final destination. Through marking and EORE activities, HMA operators also contribute to the broader protection efforts aimed at minimising the risk to life and the impacts on livelihood contacted to EO.

Community liaison activities, including non-technical surveys, also contribute to the gathering of the needs and views of the people, which can inform the prioritisation of HMA clearance tasks. Finally, land release and clearance remove both the EO physically and one of the causes of danger and fear among the population.

Reconstruction and Sustainable Development

> Our communities want to go back to their land and support their families, but contamination is a big barrier for them… It has been nice to see people returning after the ceasefire, but then you have people having to leave again because they cannot live in their areas or villages.
>
> *Hiba Ghandour, Programme Manager, Lebanon*

As illustrated by Hiba's account regarding Lebanon, EO contamination does not only present an immediate physical danger—it has enduring consequences that hinder the possibility of safe return and long-term economic recovery.

For instance, after the end of the war in Kosovo, mine-related accidents among returning Kosovars rose as people resumed working in the fields and gathering firewood in preparation for winter. According to UNMAS, nearly 70% of the mine victims were younger than 24 years old[xxv]. As a result of the risks posed by EO, communities living amidst or returning to contaminated areas often face fear, trauma, loss of livelihoods, restricted access to land and services, and protracted displacement. In addition, reconstruction efforts might be delayed because as pointed out by a report on Syria by Humanity and Inclusion (HI): "even after EO has been removed local contractors and staff understandably fear the presence of additional EO and work more slowly and cautiously". [xxvi]

Economically, the inability to safely access agricultural land, markets, schools, or health facilities delays reconstruction efforts and prolongs dependency on humanitarian aid. It can also increase the likelihood of "failed returns", potentially leading to secondary migration.

In the short term, it often means that populations engage in unsafe behaviours as noted by Hiba Ghandour, MAG'S Programme Manager in Lebanon: "People want to rebuild their lives, this sometimes means that they may take risks... They tell us 'We want to come back home, bring our families. This is my only livelihood, what can I do'". The extract underlines the importance of HMA interventions to allow safer and dignified returns/movement.

Communities often have to grapple with the loss of labour due to displacement, but as noted on MAG's report on food security, at the same time, EO contamination is a major driver of economic migration, particular from rural to urban areas. "In addition, lack of properly paid employment, limited welfare facilities, including healthcare and education, were highlighted as a driver to relocate".[xxvii]

The clearance of roads, farmland, and key services significantly contributes to the re-establishment of livelihoods and community cohesion.[xxviii] Furthermore, clearance can also prevent, and/or revert the effects environmental migration. EO can contaminate agricultural land, water sources, and essential infrastructure, leading to economic instability. Clearing these areas supports local economies and establishes conditions for sustainable living, which can help prevent displacement[xxix].

For instance, in northern Iraq, MAG's clearance operations have restored access to natural resources, enabling communities reliant on agriculture and livestock to resume their livelihoods. Following clearance, there was a reported increase in food production and livestock numbers, with one village noting an increase from 100 to 2,000 animals. Improved livelihood opportunities in farming have also attracted families to return.[xxx]

In Lebanon, clearance of contaminated land increased feelings of safety and contributed to addressing negative psychological effects of food insecurity and the legacy of conflict. It also enabled greater freedom of movement[10] by removing impediments to safe access experienced by farmers, shepherds, and other agricultural workers.[xxxi]

The examples above show that mine clearance is not just a technical task but a catalyst for economic development, food security, and community resilience.

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[10] In human rights law, a human right comprising three basic elements: freedom of movement within the territory of a country and to choose one's residence, the right to leave any country and the right to return to one's own country. Note: Under human rights law the right to freedom of movement does not entail a right to enter and to remain in a State which is not the individual's own country, except when the State has an obligation to admit the person under international law (e.g. in application of the principle of non-refoulement) - Key Migration Terms, Migration Glossary | IOM, UN Migration

By restoring access to land, services, and opportunities, mine clearance creates conditions that enable displaced populations to return, rebuild, and thrive. However, for these interventions to be effective, they must be integrated into broader reconstruction and development strategies that prioritise local needs, support economic reintegration, and address the interconnected challenges of displacement, poverty, and insecurity[xxxii]. Furthermore, the literature and MAG's experience in the field strongly suggests that coordination with national authorities is a pre-condition to maximise the desired impact.

Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

As noted in a recent evaluation carried about by MAG in three of its programmes in Guinea Bissau, Iraq and South Sudan "the impact of living with the threat of EO… contributes to social fragmentation and weakens the fabric of communities[xxxiii]. Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) plays a crucial role in promoting peace and social cohesion[xxxiv]. By clearing explosive ordnance (EO), mine action interventions enable safe mobility, restores access to land and livelihoods and decreases the likelihood of renewed conflict—all of which are essential for long-term stability. However, for HMA to effectively contribute to peace, it needs to be planned and implemented in a conflict-sensitive and inclusive manner.

A major and often recurring issue related to human mobility and people on the move concerns housing, land and property rights (HLP) of those who return home. Drawn from international humanitarian and human rights law, HLP rights entitle displaced people to having a safe home, free from the fear of forced eviction, a place that offers safety, and the ability to seek livelihood opportunities[xxxv]. HLP rights are interdependent and include not only the right to adequate housing but also statutory and customary rights to land, and the broader right to security of tenure in their property arrangements[xxxvi]. Understanding and protecting these rights is particularly crucial in contexts of conflict, where HLP issues often lie at the heart of both the causes and consequences of instability.

Conflict not only displaces populations, but also disrupts livelihoods and access to land—creating iterative cycles that perpetuate instability and precarity. Conversely, livelihood insecurity and unresolved land disputes can drive further migration and, in some cases, reignite violence[xxxvii]. The presence of EO hinders access to HLP rights, particularly land. For example, in post-conflict Angola, due to contamination only 30% of the areas for return were considered adequate for resettlement by the UN[xxxviii]. HMA operations, and clearance are key interventions to restore access to these rights. However, land release must account not only for safety, but also for the socio-political dynamics of land ownership. Importantly, ensuring that mine clearance does not inadvertently exacerbate land conflicts or create new ones is a core principle of responsible and conflict-sensitive interventions.

Disputes over housing, land, and property (HLP) rights are common in post-conflict settings, particularly where informal occupation or customary tenure complicates legal frameworks[xxxix].

Displacement adds another layer of complexity, as returnees may find their homes or farmland occupied or inaccessible. A report by NRC on HLP rights in Sinjar, noted that: "Destruction, secondary occupation or inadequate dispute resolution options" were among the issues highlighted as impacting negatively voluntary return and "the achievement of durable solutions"[xl]. Moreover, "depending on the size of the displaced population, and the duration of displacement and conflict, these issues can quickly become one of the primary features of a post-war phase" [xli]. Failure to address these issues can have the unintended consequence of fuelling conflict. Integrating HMA with displacement-focused sectors, such as those working on land tenure and HLP, is thus crucial.

The re-establishment of secure land rights is essential not only for rebuilding livelihoods but also to achieve social-cohesion and broader national recovery. In Ukraine, for instance, 5,000,000 people are estimated to own a damaged or destroyed home as consequence of the current war. IDPs are disproportionally affected (54%), compared to returnees (27%) and non-displaced individuals (9%)[xlii]. In this context, access to HLP rights is "both an urgent humanitarian priority and a cornerstone of Ukraine's longer-term recovery and resilience"[xliii]. The case of Ukraine is far from unique, in most conflict-ridden contexts, IDPs are among the most affected population by the loss of these rights[xliv]. The issue is compounded by other intersecting factors such as age, gender, and disability, with women, children and the disabled being disproportionally affected.

When HLP rights access are denied or disrupted, displacement often becomes prolonged, increasing vulnerability to eviction, homelessness, and exclusion from essential services[xlv]. In Cambodia, for example, although UNHCR repatriated over 330,000 refugees without a single mine-related casualty, landmine contamination severely impacted the resettlement process. Initially, each family was to receive two hectares of land, but by 1992, the land was available for only 5,500 families—just 8% of the returnee population. In the end, fewer than 2,750 families received land, while over 85% depended on cash and food assistance for more than a year[xlvi]. This example illustrates how the absence of safe, accessible, and adequately planned HLP arrangements can undermine the achievement of durable solutions. When individuals do not have secure access to land, they are left in a state of precarity, unable to rebuild their livelihoods, integrate into communities, and fully exercise their rights. In addition, this situation puts additional strain on already overwhelmed humanitarian systems and may lead to tensions over limited resources. Therefore, access to HLP is not only a legal right but also it necessarily becomes a crucial element for sustainable recovery and social cohesion in post-conflict settings.

Land clearance and subsequent release[xlvii] also play a critical role in conflict prevention. This is particularly important in regions where land is scarce or contested, such as pastoralist areas or environments under ecological stress. For instance, in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, conflict between farmers and pastoralists over scarce natural resources has trapped communities in a cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment[xlviii]. In such contexts, access denial to arable land and pasture, unresolved claims, overlapping tenure, and competition for limited resources can escalate tensions, driving displacement. Therefore, ensuring transparent, inclusive and conflict-sensitive land clearance and release, may enable communities reduce grievances, support socio-economic development and reintegration efforts, and restore mobility to transient populations, ultimately laying the groundwork for longer-term stability.

HMA across borders

The clearance of border areas is a complex endeavour for geographical[11], security, political, legal reasons, and socio-economic dynamics unique to these spaces.[xlvix] In many cases, the presence of EO is due to active conflict or political instability or for national security reasons – for example, to deter smuggling and non-state actors. Regardless of intent, EO contamination undermines civilian safety, disrupts cross-border mobility, hinders the provision of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations and prevents the resettlement of displaced communities. Pastoralist populations, and returnees are especially at risk, as they often rely on cross-border routes and rural land for their livelihoods. The inability to access or safely use these areas can perpetuate food insecurity, poverty, and displacement. For these reasons, states are legally obligated to fulfil clearance responsibilities in their border areas under the APMBC[l] and CCM. In practical terms, however, as suggested by MAG, where immediate clearance is not possible, access to EORE can be lifesaving[li].

Crossing a border can place individuals at heightened risk as they might be unaware of possible EO contamination. The Gambia – a mine-free status country-, for instance reported mine accidents among Gambian residents crossing to and from Senegal[lii]. This localised example is part of a wider pattern seen in many regions where EO contamination intersects with cross-border movement and displacement. Illustrating this, a recent publication by GICHD noted that 37 state and territories reported confirmed EO contamination in their border regions, with 18 indicating potential contamination[liii]. This provides a picture of the scale of the issue at hand, underlining the importance of appropriate interventions.

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[11] The precise definition of borders can be unclear, especially on the ground where extensive borders cannot always be demarcated.

Although the full extent of EO contamination across borders remains unknown, as displacement becomes increasingly transnational, mine action should also transcend borders.

A coordinated, conflict-sensitive approach to border clearance can help mitigate these risks, reduce harm to vulnerable populations, and contribute to regional recovery and reconciliation. Clearance of contaminated border areas has tangible benefits for human mobility and protection. It can enable children to access education by allowing safe passage to schools across borders or allow agricultural workers to reach farmland and grazing areas essential to their livelihoods—thereby promoting the rights to education, work, and an adequate standard of living. In areas where borders are frequently crossed for economic reasons, survival or necessity, clearance activities are vital to safeguarding rights and restoring freedom of movement[liv].Additionally, the demining of bordering areas can foster opportunities to build trust and cooperation between neighbouring states supporting broader processes of peace and reconciliation in regions affected by conflict.[lv]

Victim Assistance

> **In an Islamic Relief prosthetics and rehabilitation centre in Idlib (Syria), staff say their waiting list of 500 is growing every day because of the rising levels of injuries from UXO and landmines.**
>
> *(Syria: A New Landmine Emergency (2025)*
> *– MAG Publication)*

Victim assistance (VA) as one of the five pillars of HMA grounded in the recognition that those injured by EO face long-term, physical, psychological and socio-economic impacts.[lvi] Victims of landmines and other EO are one of the most impacted and vulnerable groups in communities affected by EO due to the nature of their injuries which often result in permanent disability. They face the devastating and long-term consequences of the use of explosive ordnance daily.

EO survivors, along with other people with disabilities, face immobility challenges due to their wounds, rendering them unable to seek adequate safety during active hostilities which in many cases makes them part of "trapped populations".

Beyond the direct injuries, mines and EO contamination can make entire regions inaccessible, cutting off survivors and their families from life-saving services such as medical treatment, rehabilitation, psychosocial care, and socioeconomic reintegration. The right to assistance, enshrined in international law—including the APMBC[lvii]—mandates that states provide adequate support to survivors.

However, when humanitarian actors cannot reach contaminated zones, and survivors cannot safely leave their communities, these rights remain unrealised. Ensuring mobility is not just a logistical issue; it is a foundational requirement for fulfilling the rights of survivors to safety, dignity, and full participation in society.

Sustainable National Capacity Development

The development of sustainable national capacity is not limited to technical training. It encompasses institutional strengthening, strategic planning, coordination mechanisms, and the integration of mine action into broader development and displacement frameworks. Capacity developments is also about states' ability to address the humanitarian and socio-economic implications of EO contamination, one of which is related to tackling mobility challenges caused by such contamination.

In conflict-affected areas, the mobility of individuals and communities—whether forced displacement, spontaneous return, seasonal migration, or resettlement—requires mine action actors to adapt their strategies in real time. Capacity development must, therefore, equip institutions, local stakeholders, and governments at all levels to detect and clear contamination and anticipate and respond to the risks emerging along mobility corridors, temporary settlements, and return locations. Effective mine action in such contexts requires more than technical expertise in clearance and EORE. As noted by some of our own staff, it is vital to support coordination among operators, humanitarian, development, and government actors (usually, but not limited to, NMAAs and NMACs as coordinators of a country's mine action strategy and response) to ensure free, safe and sustainable mobility.

National and local mine action capacities should be strengthened to analyse population movement trends and integrate mobility-sensitive risk assessments into planning.

This includes training in using mobility data (e.g. displacement tracking, returnee monitoring) to prioritise survey, clearance, and risk education areas. [lviii] Interagency coordination—especially between mine action centres, humanitarian protection actors, and displacement monitoring agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)—is essential to ensure that mine action keeps pace with evolving displacement dynamics and supports safe and dignified movement in affected communities.

At the community level, capacity building should empower displaced people and returnees as recipients of mine action services and active contributors to HMA interventions themselves.[lix]

Displaced and mobile populations can play pivotal roles in disseminating EORE, mapping hazardous areas, and communicating the changing risks faced during transit and return. For example, in Nigeria, MAG employed Remote Contamination Baseline Assessments (RCBA) to gather data from areas that were inaccessible. This involved conducting individual and group discussions with recent arrivals at IDP camps, all of whom came from the same villages.

Participants provided both qualitative and quantitative information, including drawing maps indicating areas they believed to be contaminated. The findings were shared with Nigerian authorities to support strategic planning by the newly established NMAC, but also with other relevant stakeholder to raise awareness of possible contamination.[lx]

Similarly, in most programmes - MAG conducts NTS among displaced populations which have been key in the planning of appropriate interventions. This is an example of the benefits of programs that build on local knowledge and lived mobility experience, which can help tailor mine action to actual movement patterns and enhance its effectiveness.

In addition, this can foster national and local ownership and build trust in the response process. Such inclusion may also help to restore agency after protracted displacement.

> *IDPs and returnees are part of the process from the beginning to the end... They take part in risk education, we train them... They can also act a community focal point, people who can call us if they see any contamination in the area... [They can also] inform us that we have more people [arriving].*
>
> *Fatima Abdi, Community Liaison Manager, Syria*

Adequate Funding and Localisation

A deeper integration of HMA and human mobility that allows voluntary and dignified returns, along with Long-term, sustainable solutions are only achievable if the right funding is available, which has not been the case in some contexts.

Compounding this issue is the systemic underfunding of local actors—who are often better situated to attend to emergent and sudden population needs during crisis. For instance, the latest issue of the Landmine Monitor indicates that "international assistance provided directly to national non-profit organisations accounted for less than 1% of total international funding"[lxi]. The lack of funding undermines local ownership and the long-term sustainability of HMA initiatives.

Having said this, it is important to understand the contexts where such assistance is needed, for instance in some countries there might be only a small number of local organisations in nascent stages.

In those instances, it is important to provide long-term support through different regional and international actors, including regional and international HMA operators, to build the capacities that local organisations require to meet the needs of affected population safely, this in turn call for long-term support and funding.

Conclusion

Millions of people on the move are currently running risks related to EO contamination or are very likely to do so on their paths towards their destination.

The humanitarian imperative and the recognition of their fundamental rights require to address the specific needs of refugees, displaced people, migrants, and all the other categories of people on the move. These people's needs and rights are better protected from EO contamination when the focus of HMA operators and other stakeholders is on their act of moving, their human mobility.

Whilst HMA has been historically linked to people on the move, the operationalisation of the focus on protecting people on the move from EO contamination has increased in the recent years. As it happens in all the instances of integration of two or more sectors, challenges but also opportunities exist. This policy paper aimed at outlining arguments in favour for HMA stakeholders to focus on human mobility, as well as presenting how the different pillars of HMA contribute to the protection of the lives and rights of people on the move.

Addressing the complex dynamics between EO contamination and mobility is a humanitarian imperative and a prerequisite for enabling individuals to reclaim their rights, restore their dignity, and rebuild their lives safely. Integrating HMA more systematically into broader humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding strategies is essential.

This integration enhances the effectiveness of actions, reinforces protection efforts, supports livelihoods, and strengthens social cohesion. Achieving this requires greater investment in mobility-sensitive planning, sustainable national capacity building, and stronger collaboration with the wider humanitarian sector, particularly with those working on displacement and mobility pattern of population in need of assistance.

Recommendations

1. Integrate a Human Mobility Lens into Mine Action Strategies
- Ensure that HMA planning, and prioritisations explicitly consider displacement dynamics, including the specific needs of IDPs, refugees, returnees, and other categories of people on the move.
- Adapt survey and land release approaches to include mobility-sensitive data, including population flows, seasonal migration, and spontaneous returns.

2. Support Voluntary, Safe, and Dignified Returns through HMA
- Prioritise clearance of areas identified for return, reintegration, or resettlement based on community consultations and protection needs.
- Coordinate clearance and land release with restoring basic services—such as healthcare, education, and WASH—to enable sustainable returns and reduce the risk of secondary displacement.
- Ensure clearance operations are conflict-sensitive and do not exacerbate land disputes or exclusion.

3. Strengthen Cross-Sectoral and Cross-Border Coordination
- Establish joint planning frameworks between HMA actors and stakeholders in shelter, food security, house, land and property (HLP) rights, protection, and early recovery.
- Promote regional coordination on EORE and clearance in cross-border zones, especially where displacement involves repeated or circular movement.
- Engage with border management and migration actors to mitigate risk in border areas affected by EO.

4. Embed Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) Considerations in Land Release
- Integrate land tenure analysis into land release and clearance planning to avoid reinforcing inequities or fuelling land-related tensions.
- Collaborate with HLP actors to address disputes and ensure fair, transparent access to cleared land for returnees and host communities.

5. Invest in Sustainable National and Local Mine Action Capacities
- Provide long-term, predictable funding for clearance, coordination, planning, and data management for national authorities and local organisations.
- Build the capacity of mine action stakeholders to use mobility data and work across sectors (For instance, through joint training with displacement and protection actors).

- Ensure the meaningful participation of displaced persons and returnees in surveys, EORE, and planning processes, leveraging their knowledge and lived experiences.

6. Secure Predictable and Flexible Funding for Mobility-Aware Mine Action
- Advocate for donor strategies that link HMA to displacement, protection, and resilience outcomes.
- Promote funding modalities that allow HMA actors to respond quickly to shifting mobility patterns, spontaneous returns, or newly accessible areas.

Annex I
Abbreviations

CLT	Community Laison Team
EORE	Explosive Ordnance Risk Education
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
GICHD	Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining
HMA	Humanitarian Mine Action
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IMAS	International Mine Action Standards
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
LAF	Lebanon Armed Forces
LMAC	Lebanon Mine Action Centre
MAG	Mines Advisory Group
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

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