

The UN...

A personal experience



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[What follows is the text of a talk I gave to give to a group of Post Graduate University students in early 2010. The students had already discussed the UN as an international organisation, identifying problems with member country's conflicting interests and with weak leadership. The main failings they had identified were of permanent country members using their veto in support of national self-interest and of unaccountable delays in decision making by the Secretary General. These "global" observations required the observers to be at a great distance and so gain a general overview without being distracted by the detail. I was asked to talk about the UN as seen from the other end of the telescope – as I had experienced it in the field – and so provide a personal perspective.]

I first encountered the UN via its country offices and projects in places that were either recovering from conflict or still pursuing conflict and where I was working in the clearance of mines and other explosive debris. I understood that the presence of the UN was intended to provide a stabilising influence and seek to limit human suffering. As a UN supported activity, landmine clearance can be a stabilising influence and limit human suffering: it shows that the international community cares, it employs former soldiers as deminers, returns contaminated land to the community and removes explosive devices that may injure if left where they are. That sounds simple and laudable, but even a simple goal gets far more complicated when overlaid with the complexities and paradoxes of politics.

I am an independent in the landmine community – and saw my first landmine in 1995. At that time, I looked up to the UN Country Office as THE Authority – and I presumed that I could not be correct when I saw what seemed to be inactivity and incompetence. I coveted a blue UN passport, believing that it would attract respect and make it easier for me to get my work done.

Time passed and I have now worked at every level in what is known as Humanitarian Mine Action. I started and still keep the only database of demining accidents – and am

a technical specialist on mines and their safe removal. I develop protective equipment, produce training materials and help to write the International Standards for Mine Action. The fact that I do most of this unpaid reflects my impatience – I could be paid for some of this if I were prepared to wait years for funding. But everyone needs to earn money and over the last fifteen years I have also worked with the UN, with international charities (NGOs) and Commercial companies. Even today, I occasionally work with the UN – training and drafting national standards in various countries. I once took a post as the UN Chief Technical Advisor for demining in a country, and then got my first glimpse of the inside of the UN’s bureaucratic pyramid. The Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) for demining is the Country Manager for the demining effort – but because you are not a career bureaucrat, you are so far down the control pyramid that your aims and goals hardly count.

In the countries where I have worked, there has usually been a UN Country Office. That office is staffed with internationals from all over the world – a deliberate policy that leads to cross-cultural sharing of goals and achievements. Their success is monitored and managed from New York using specialist computer systems that rely on endless data-entry in the field.

UN agencies come under the command of their own bureaucracy and related UN commissions, programmes, offices, services or bureaus. Big names include UNICEF, UNDP, UNOPS, UNESCO, UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organisation. These, and many others, may have projects that are run by a Country Office. Some will report weekly, others will have all of their office work done in the Country Office. In my limited experience, small or national projects tend to be obliged to let the Country Office undertake much of their management.

Taking Humanitarian Mine Action on its own, because it is the only one that I have personal knowledge of, the Chief Technical Advisor is appointed by the UN Country Office. Of course, no one in the Country Office necessarily knows anything about mines and explosives, so in the early days the appointment was based entirely on a person’s knowledge of munitions and explosives. This led to the recruitment of senior retired military officers in the belief that all soldiers understand explosives. Appointments were made in this way throughout the 1990s – and the number of well qualified military applicants for all Mine Action positions was high because of the reduction of Western military personnel following the downsizing of NATO armies after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Serving and retired army officers were often “gifted” to mine action programmes by their governments as part of their UN contribution. So, the military came to dominate the UN’s humanitarian mine action capability from top to bottom, with ex-British and Commonwealth forces outnumbering other nationalities.

The selection of CTAs based on their past membership of a military force did not work. Although retired officers do tend to know something about organisation and man management, they rarely have relevant hands on explosives experience and they tend to rely on a hierarchal management system that depends on all staff having a common background and training. Also, ex-military men do not necessarily understand anything about mine clearance (demining), never mind development, post-conflict reconstruction, empowering nationals, women’s rights or the need for cultural sensitivity. The failings of UN senior management in Mine Action throughout the

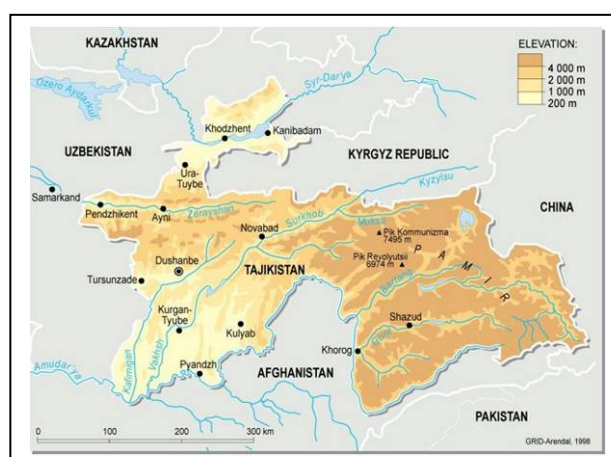
1990s were legion – but they held every post and have been very resistant to change. Even today, the top UN Mine Action posts in the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) are dominated by ex-military officers imposing a disciplined lack of initiative that is counter-productive. However, at the country level, failure to achieve much of the real work meant that a change in the leadership selection process had to occur. The UN recruitment criteria evolved and merely being an old-soldier is no longer enough to guarantee a senior management position.

The job description for Chief Technical Advisors changed and now requires a post-graduate qualification. Since 2000, many of the managers have taken a year out to get an MA in Post-conflict studies or a similar topic. It is worth noting that many of them do not have a first degree, but if they are willing to pay, they are readily accepted by respected universities for one year MA courses. Studying at this level has introduced many of them to a non-military way of thinking and is a positive step forward – although it excludes some of the best who are successful in the field but are terrified by the requirement to re-enter formal education. This requirement does not necessarily exclude candidates from emerging economies who could not afford the costs involved in studying in the West – because an MA from a university in an emerging economy is theoretically of the same recruitment value as an MA from the top Western universities.

Today, the top posts in Mine Action are still effectively sinecures for ex-officers who do not understand the first thing about actually clearing mines from the ground – and who see no need to do so. The incumbents recruit their successors, so I can see little chance of change at that level. But the middle managers have begun to understand how humanitarian demining fits into the broader development and peace-building picture. This shows that the UN system can be responsive, albeit slowly.

Even when a country has a Chief Technical Advisor who knows what needs to be done and how to do it, the UN system and the political context can prevent the work getting done.

I was employed in Tajikistan in 2007 as the UN’s Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) for Mine Action. For those who don’t know – Tajikistan borders Afghanistan (to the South), China (to the East), Uzbekistan (to the West) and Kyrgyzstan (to the North). It is an ex-Soviet satellite country in a very politically sensitive position.



Technically employed by the UN Country Office, I answered to UNDP, BCPR and to the UN’s Resident Representative in Tajikistan, but also to every level of bureaucracy in the UN Country Office – which included an unfortunately arrogant “Project officer”. At the same time, the Tajik government had appointed a National manager for their Mine Action Centre – who was a nice man but entirely uninterested in removing mines. He was content to

work on completing an MA by correspondence while enjoying his UN salary. Following good development principles I could not do anything without first eliciting his agreement.



This picture shows the Mine Action Centre staff. Apart from the National Manager, all of them really wanted to do a good job and supported my efforts, but we were all dependent on a UN Country Office support which was not in evidence.

It was very easy for me to come up with a fast and cost-effective plan to remove all the mines and Explosive Remnants of War from Tajikistan, where the known problem was small. I could even find donors prepared to finance the work. But unexpected aspects of my plan were “undiplomatic”. My desire to clear the border with Afghanistan was “political” because the Tajik economy relies heavily on smuggling through a border. Since the Soviet Union left, almost all of Tajikistan’s economy has relied on aid and the smuggling of drugs out of Afghanistan and arms and equipment for the insurgency into Afghanistan. The authorities *say* that they want to patrol the Afghan border, but in fact they should add the codicil, “one day”. In the meantime, they are happy to pretend that the old minefields stop illicit border crossings. In fact, the only people who know how to cross the safely cross the minefields are the smugglers, so the minefields prevent the pursuit of smugglers, not the act of smuggling. The presence of minefields prevents effective border patrols rather than preventing illicit crossings.

Further, my desire to assess the use of mines on the Chinese border was considered dangerously radical. No one had ever assessed the problem on the border with China despite the probability that a former front line between the Soviet Union and China would have been mined. No one wanted me to go there to find out because the removal of Tajik minefields might have encouraged Chinese expansion if Tajikistan were to revert to civil-war – with a consequent superpower reaction that could be catastrophic for the world. Despite paying lip service to a “mine-free” goal, the politicians always allow covert exceptions “for the greater good”.

Within the UN system, Mine Action is not only about clearing the explosive remnants of conflict. A CTA has many other tasks. In addition to actual demining, Mine Action requires the CTA to engage in advocacy (for the anti-personnel mine ban and other treaties), victim assistance, mine-risk education and stockpile destruction. At all times, the CTA must bear in mind the UN’s Millennium Development Goals – which are supposed to be achieved by 2015.

Millennium Development Goals
End Poverty and Hunger
Universal Education
Gender Equality
Child Health
Maternal Health
Combat HIV/AIDS
Environmental Sustainability

Of these, Gender Equality and Environmental Sustainability are frequently linked with Mine Action. The need to combat HIV/AIDS is also of direct relevance because, in many countries, deminers are relatively well off and mobile and – frequently HIV positive.

The CTA may also be asked to report appropriately on varied UN “themes”.

UN “Themes”

- Peacemaking and Preventative Action
- Disarmament and small arms reduction
- Women, Peace and Security
- Cluster munition contamination

If lifting landmines were the only issue, life would have been simple. I was well motivated and genuinely understood the procedures involved in clearing up after war, but getting all of the work done without political guidance and in the face of obstruction from the UN’s Country Office was an impossible task. Many CTAs would have sat back and done it all *except* clear the mines – but those are the career UN people, not me.

Wherever the UN works, the national context dictates what it does and how it does it. In Tajikistan, civil war had broken out after the Soviet withdrawal. The rural people opposed rule from the urban centres – and the self-proclaimed government brought in the Uzbekistan air-force to “subdue” the people in the mountains. The mountain people used old Russian stockpiles to mine their defences – while the “government” cluster bombed their villages and sent old Russian tanks up the rocky mountain paths. The tanks are still there – testament to the fact that the rural people did not lose. Eventually, and with UN assistance, an accord was reached that made the country a “Federation”, with the mountain people still nominally autonomous.

In Cambodia when I first went there in 1996, the Khmer Rouge still had a lot of support in rural areas and access was very insecure. All UN Mine Action staff were seconded from foreign armies (largely Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and were not allowed into large areas where the Khmer Rouge were active. In Angola, Savimbi and his UNITA supporters controlled the diamond rich north and opposed the oil-enriched government forces elsewhere. There was a fragile UN brokered peace initiative in Angola between 1994-1998 and then war resumed – because both sides

had the money to keep buying weapons and both had their eyes on the resources held by the other. In Bosnia, the break up of the former Yugoslavia led 500 year old ethnic conflicts to suddenly re-emerge. The UN did not dare enter Serb areas when I was there in 1998, but eventually the peace did hold, for now. In Afghanistan, the UN effort was based in Pakistan from 96-2000. They could not be inside Afghanistan because the US funded Taliban government had not been recognised by the UN and because the internal conflict made security a huge issue - *outside* the Taliban controlled areas. In Sri Lanka, the Norwegian brokered ceasefire between the Tamils and the Sinhalese lasted from 2002 to 2006 but was never complete with incursions and human rights abuses rife. When war returned, I saw government forces shoot Tamil civilians in what became – in my opinion – perilously close to a genocidal conflict.

It may be difficult to understand from outside that in none of these conflicts was there a good and a bad side. Terrible things were done by both sides – with the use of mines being the least of the atrocities –and no one could avoid involvement. Ordinary people, school teachers and nurses, mechanics, traders, builders, shepherds and farmers – were all on one side or the other because neutrality was not an option.

We should not sit in judgement on them from our position of comfort – and neither should the UN. Conflict has a dehumanising effect, and a dynamic that resists resolution as the leaders accrue more and more atrocities committed in the name of their goal. The foot soldiers, from children to pensioners have also been sold a political line and have thrown aside humanitarian values in pursuit of it. After a while they cannot afford to doubt that the goal will be worth the cost to their integrity as human beings. This is as true of an American airman laughing as he mistakenly guns down a TV crew in Iraq as it is of a Khmer Rouge boy soldier deliberately shooting a schoolteacher because he is educated and so must be dedicated to the old system – a feudal autocracy that treated the ordinary people as virtual slaves. When the UN is operating during any conflict, it should not openly take a side – if it does it will become a target for the other sides (and there are usually several factions). The UN cannot show any overt political “leadership” – but should continue to promote its goals. Unfortunately, those goals include the promotion of human rights that may be considered “political” and frequently rely on a 21st Century Western worldview that often appears to have little or no relevance in a country that does not have a Western historical background of piecemeal social change over protracted periods of peace.

In Tajikistan, for example, it was rather hard to prioritise women’s rights. The mined areas were rural – remote because of they are the Himalayan mountains – and the people Muslim.





Despite several generations under the Soviet regime, people in the mountain areas retained a medieval worldview. Friendly and hospitable but largely without cars, telephones and consumer goods, they lived indoors with their livestock for six months of the year because of the snow. Russian influence had prevented the spread of fundamentalist extremism from Afghanistan and the Burkha had never caught on - but old traditions take time to erode. Change cannot be imposed. If you try, the results may be the opposite of those you want. For example, after the UN set up a peacekeeping mission in Tajikistan during 1994, they established an office in a rural centre called Gharm. Following their gender-positive policies, they staffed it with local women. The office closed after a couple of years. When I went to Gharm, some of the same women asked me to employ them because, by having worked with Western men in the temporary UN office, they had become tainted and untouchable. They could not marry and no one would employ them. A well intentioned policy had blighted their lives because it could not be sustained. If I had employed women to work as deminers in the remote mined areas, the work would not have been done. Days away from roads and services, deminers rely heavily on support from local people. Women would have been spurned – more by the rural women than the men. The fact that this is absurd would not have been changed by my saying so.

When the US and the UK invaded Afghanistan you were told that women's rights were a major issue. It was not that simple. I worked briefly in Afghanistan each year from 1996 to 2000. In rural areas, women supported the Taliban because they had imposed a set of rules and non-violence that saved them from the excesses of the warlords after the Soviet withdrawal. The Talib were their local religious leaders, and were seen as imposing peace and morality. In the cities, the few educated men and women tended to withdraw or go abroad, but for almost all Afghans, women and men, the Taliban were the lesser of two evils. They took Afghanistan back to the pre-Soviet era where there were no schools for women – but also no bars and brothels, no gang-rapes and murder, no obsession with material goods and personal power. A simple and familiar 13th Century lifestyle was resumed. When the BBC began broadcasting from Afghanistan after the US/UK invasion, they could not find pictures of women not wearing the Burkha. They showed images of Kutchi nomad women instead – who are not Moslem and had never worn the Burkha. Even today, most Moslem women in Afghanistan remain covered up - they always have been and value the familiar traditions in an unpredictable world. Plus, they usually do not have access to Western style fashionable alternatives.

Within ten days of the first British troops arriving in Afghanistan, the first brothel opened in Kabul. We imposed Western values to improve women's rights? I really do not think so.

The UN Mine Action Centre Afghanistan (UNMACA) is well funded but frequently unable to work effectively because it is seen as being on one side of the conflict – funded and staffed by countries with a vested interest in maintaining a government made up of old warlords – people who had been shooting UN supported deminers during the years that I worked there. [For an understanding of the rise of the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, read “Taliban”, Ahmed Rashid, 2001, Pan Books.]

In conclusion, as seen from my perspective, the UN is flawed by human errors and by political contradictions.

It is a bureaucracy employing people from many countries, most of whom could not command anything like the same income and lifestyle anywhere else. The preservation of their jobs comes first – not necessarily because they are selfish. Many will be supporting dozens of relatives at home. When I presented a Mine Action plan that would have cleared the problem in Tajikistan within two years, the national manager went to the UN Country Office and told them that he did not need a CTA any more. The national manager had future plans that depended on his having a long-term income. The UN Country office scores points, kudos and income depending on how many projects they control. They did not see any great advantage in supporting a plan that would bring a project to an end. The other main player in Tajikistan was the OSCE – far bigger than the UN in Tajikistan, this is the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Never heard of it? The Tajiks called it the “European CIA”, and it certainly has a gross budget and an entirely political and manipulative agenda (not in any way humanitarian). OSCE did not want me to clear the mines either. Because very few people were being injured by the remaining mines and ERW, I recognised that my plan was politically untenable. More important, it might have reduced the prospects for long-term peace because there is no doubt that a UN presence puts humanitarian concerns on the agenda and gives hope to those who want peace. Mine clearance being my area of expertise and being unprepared to waste my time achieving nothing, I moved on. But the demining effort continues in Tajikistan and will do so, completely unnecessarily, for many years.

The second major human flaw is seen in us. We have an idealised view of Western values – including what we define as “humanitarian” values – and think we have the right to impose them on other cultures. The imposition of what a call “Coca-Cola” freedoms on relatively unsophisticated but sustainable communities causes disruption, dissatisfaction and increased hardship. It is the relative prosperity of our lives that allows us to pursue humanitarian ideals – and the value we place on them depends on our prosperity (see “*Maslow's hierarchy of needs*”). This is evident from the changes in UK in my own lifetime.

I have a working class background and my mother, with five children, was a rural housewife. She made a few pounds each year picking primroses for sale as buttonholes in Covent Garden, sold a few free-range eggs, grew the family vegetables, and was fiercely proud of the fact that her children were clean, literate and well fed. This was less than fifty years ago. If someone had told her she needed a

university education or a job behind the Woolworth's sales counter in order to feel valuable, she would have been insulted. She was a partner to my father – and an educator to her children, and achieved the impossible by ensuring that we all had enough. Fifty years on, I see her reflection in rural areas wherever I work – and I do not encourage these women to be dissatisfied with their lot. I do not encourage that of the men either. It really is not obvious to me that Western consumerism, with its invented needs – from flat-screen TVs to on-tap pornography – is better than what they have. I am afraid that I consider it a hypocrisy for us to pretend to be concerned about the provision of clean water for everyone in the world when the cost of the male cosmetics and deodorants sold in Britain in a year would achieve that for a huge part of the world – a part that has not yet realised that men need to pamper their bodies because they're also “worth it”.

When the UN fails to impose our values on things like gender issues, but its presence does promote peace and introduces the possibility of an alternative worldview, it may be achieving all we could ask – and all that we should want.

The third major flaw is that the UN's goals do not reflect those of its most powerful member states.

Member states put self-interest first and invariably believe that the lives of their own citizens are of greater value than those of “foreigners”. In historical terms, we are living through a period of economic colonialism based on the “greatest force”. Funding for humanitarian concerns, such as Humanitarian Demining, is largely made available by donor countries – and often depends on their own self-interest. When the US wanted to maintain good relations with the Sri Lankan government it was partly interested in the deepwater port of Trincomalee and its potential as a fuelling base for its fleet. They gave money to the government for demining, money spent on training its soldiers – but it would not give the Sri Lankan government the arms it wanted in order to wipe out the Tamils. Australia, seeing Sri Lanka as being inside its sphere of interest, gave money to demining NGOs – but would not pay for demining in the Tamil held areas. Japan, seeing Sri Lanka as definitely a part of its sphere of interest, gave money to demining NGOs working as directed by the Sri Lankan government. The UK, as always, tried to help an ex-colony by funding UK based NGOs – working in areas approved by the Sri Lankan government. Norway funded the main Norwegian NGO (working largely in Tamil areas) and also the emergent Indian NGOs (working on both sides of the ceasefire line). Switzerland was the only other donor that funded work on both sides of the line. India, knowing that Sri Lanka was actually in its sphere of interests and that the Tamil problem extended to the mainland, had to be cautious because it had once supplied a peacekeeping force that had become too engaged in the fighting.... It funded no one until the Sri Lankan government had wiped out the Tamil resistance, then funded the Indian NGOs to clear the areas once controlled by the Tamils. Most mines used in Sri Lanka, incidentally, were used by the Sinhalese government forces. The blockaded Tamils had to make most of theirs.

Perhaps coincidentally, after oil was discovered in Sri Lankan waters, the Chinese extended loans to the government in Sri Lanka that allowed them to rearm and re-engage the Tamils in a war that could never be won without the extermination of one

side. I sat through extensive artillery barrages aimed at civilian areas that the government denied were happening and about which the UN kept silent.

All through this, and the Tsunami, the UN had a presence and many of its agencies operated. In Mine Action, the government came to insist that there was no CTA and contrived to prevent the appointment of senior Technical Advisors. This was partly because demining tends to reveal mass graves and the government wanted its activities unrecorded. Even when atrocities were recorded, they were not publicised by the UN because it could not do that without considering all of the political ramifications....

None the less, the UN were involved in supporting mine clearance throughout - and it has happened, albeit far too slowly and often without reference to the International Standards that are intended to guarantee the quality of the work. The UN was also very active in keeping thousands of the Tamils held in internment camps alive.

The fact that the UN can achieve anything at all in this kind of context is remarkable, and is why I believe that it is our best hope for a sustainable and fairer world. Far from perfect, its projects are staffed by people who are largely doing their best – and who sometimes achieve something. Its flaws have to be addressed, and that is a real challenge. I believe that the UN must be revised in a way that renders the self-interest of its member states less important, and that reforms a bureaucracy which must not rock the political boat but can never see the whole picture – and so has a vested interest in keeping busy with its bureaucracy rather than the intended activities. In Mine Action, that revision might include removing the entire UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) level of “management”. UNDP, UNOPS and UNICEF (main Mine Action players) do not accept its authority because UNMAS has never done anything to make them want to. Even the International Mine Action Standards, which it might have claimed as a success, have been a success in spite of the UNMAS input rather than because of it. UNMAS even fails to be a media attracting PR body – and a few volunteer celebrity UN Ambassadors could achieve far more. As evidence of this, how many people who do not work in Mine Action have ever heard of UNMAS? Yet one of its main purposes is PR?

In all likelihood, anyone with inside knowledge of other development activities could suggest similar reform requirements for all of the UN’s activities – including its peace-keeping efforts. It is staffed by people a little like me – trying their best. But often they are hooked by fat salaries and constrained by being required not to risk causing trouble. Being unable to confidently predict the consequences of actions, it is often safest to do nothing.

What could make the most difference is for intelligent Westerners to stop believing the comfortable half-truths promulgated by a popular media that has a vested interest in retaining the divisions evident in our world, start seeing what is really happening, and then demanding publicly that the UN take appropriate action. Don’t ask them what is appropriate, tell them. With the growth of the internet, it is possible to hear all sides and begin to see the big picture. But it is never comfortable.