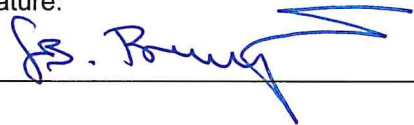


# Final Report



<b>Contract Number: 2843-00/2019</b>
<b>Title of the Intervention:</b> Explosive Hazards Clearance and Mine Risk Education in North East Syria
Project Period: 1 October 2019 – 30 April 2020. Extended until 31 May 2021.

**Reporting period:**

Reporting period: 1 October 2019 – 31 May 2021.	Report submitted on (date): 30 June 2021
Due date: 30 June 2021	
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## List of Abbreviations

<b>BAC</b>	Battle Area Clearance
<b>CF</b>	Coalition Forces
<b>CFP</b>	Community Focal Point
<b>CFS</b>	Child Friendly Space
<b>CL</b>	Community Liaison
<b>DCA</b>	DanChurchAid
<b>EO</b>	Explosive Ordnance
<b>EOD</b>	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
<b>ERW</b>	Explosive Remnants of War
<b>GIS</b>	Geographic Information System
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>HAO</b>	Humanitarian Affairs Office
<b>HRP</b>	Humanitarian Response Plan
<b>IED</b>	Improvised Explosive Devices
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IMAS</b>	International Mine Action Standards
<b>IMSMA</b>	Information Management System for Mine Action
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>ITF</b>	ITF Enhancing Human Security
<b>KAP</b>	Knowledge, Attitude and Practices
<b>KRG</b>	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
<b>MAO</b>	Mine Action Office
<b>MASC</b>	Mine Action Sub-Cluster
<b>MAWG</b>	Mine Action Working Group
<b>MRE</b>	Mine risk education
<b>NES</b>	Northeast Syria
<b>NMAA</b>	National Mine Action Authority
<b>NTS</b>	Non-technical Survey
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>RE</b>	Risk education
<b>TAF</b>	Turkish Armed Forces
<b>SAG</b>	Saratoga Advisors Group
<b>SDC</b>	Syrian Democratic Council
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>TOT</b>	Training of Trainers
<b>UNMAS</b>	United Nations Mine Action Service
<b>VBIED</b>	Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WOS</b>	Whole of Syria

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## Summary of the intervention

This final report provides an overview of activities, achievements and challenges encountered during the project, entailing explosive hazards clearance and survey in Al Hasakah Governorate, and mine risk education (MRE) in Ar Raqqa, both in Northeast Syria (NES). The project formally started on 1 October 2019 and was extended four times due to various reasons that will be elaborated on below; the last extension pushed the period of performance to 31 May 2021 for purposes of maintaining procured equipment safely stored in NES. Overall, the project achieved – and even exceeded – the initially set outcomes, outputs and corresponding indicators (please see Annex 1 for a full overview).

The project was faced with external challenges from the outset. The initial two months of the project were planned to include deployment and logistical preparations for the start of both clearance and survey as well as MRE operations. This was intended to include reconnaissance of areas of operations for clearance, hiring and (re)training of clearance and survey staff in Al Hasakah, as well as the recruitment and training of new risk education (RE) teams in Ar Raqqa. On 9 October 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and allied non-state armed groups launched military operations in NES, triggering widespread displacement from Al Hasakah and Ar Raqqa Governorates, damaging vital civilian infrastructure and causing large numbers of casualties. While these armed clashes have been life-changing for approximately 250,000 people affected, they have also compounded pre-existing needs and underlying vulnerabilities.

Due to the unpredictability and deterioration of the security situation and the real threat of a full-blown conflict, by 12 October 2019 all international organizations operating in NES evacuated their international staff, protected their national staff, paused their activities, and hibernated their office spaces. Low-key life-saving activities implemented by national staff re-started by early November 2019, with only limited and occasional presence of international staff until end of 2019, mostly for purposes of carrying out initial security assessments. At the time, the risk education partner DCA re-started their pre-deployment activities. The clearance/survey partner SAG, on the other hand, carried out an assessment mission at this critical time by reaching out to all relevant mine action and security/logistic partners in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG), serving as the hub for NES operations. Due to continued destabilization in NES, only an initial assessment was carried out in KRG during November 2019 (please see Annex 2 for an Initial Assessment Report), with a follow-on assessment planned in December 2019.

During the initial assessment it has become evident that, in light of the changed conditions on the ground, ITF will need to pursue registration in KRG as a non-profit organization in order to be able to operate in NES with its partners. Immediately after New Year and Christmas closure, in January 2020, ITF has begun the process by taking a number of steps (e.g. collection and translation of relevant documentation, certification at the Iraqi Embassy in Vienna, certification at the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Baghdad and at several relevant ministries in Erbil) to get registered as a non-profit organization in KRG. At that time, DCA deployed one RE team in Ar Raqqa Governorate, home to one of the most contaminated cities in NES and the world, with an unprecedented level of explosive hazards – landmines, conventional explosive remnants of war, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The mixed-gender RE team, comprised of one Team Leader and two team members, provided life-saving RE to at-risk internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities in urban and rural settings; in Raqqa city, villages, informal settlements and the newly opened Tel Abyad official camp.

ITF and SAG team implemented a Slovenia-funded assessment mission in Al Hasakah area in Northeast Syria (NES) in February 2020 (please see Assessment Report attached as Annex 3), as soon as border crossing permission were obtained. This provided vital information that fed into the launch of clearance operations, and was crucial to developing meaningful relations with local authorities, civil councils etc. in support of ITF's operations.<sup>1</sup> The SAG/ITF international Technical Advisor was deployed in KRG since late December 2019 to implement the assessment mission, lay foundations for the start of clearance operations and support the registration process. This was further backed by a visit to Erbil by ITF Project Manager that took place in February 2020 (please see ITF Field Trip Report in Annex 4). The visit entailed consultations with ITF Legal Adviser, selection of ITF office space to serve as ITF's registered address in KRG, as well as planning sessions with SAG and ITF field personnel, IMMAP as the NES mine action coordinating organization, and other mine action operators active in NES and the region.

As ITF began making headway in terms of registration that was expected to last a few weeks, the project was affected by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a lockdowns introduced internationally, and locally in KRG and NES in mid-March 2020 (including all land border closures and restrictions on all flights). RE activities in NES were suspended from 16 March until 20 April 2020, when a temporary ban on this type of humanitarian activities has been lifted. After the suspension, all RE activities were resumed through various modalities adapted to the Covid-19 risks and restrictions. Due to restricted international mobility, some international staff continued supporting or monitoring RE and pre-deployment activities for clearance/survey from home office.

Given the global lack of experience with pandemics of this magnitude, initial assessments as to the impact of Covid-19 were underestimating the trajectory and length of its impacts. In KRG and in NES, lockdown has been lifted and re-introduced several times; relevant ministries, offices and other institutions in KRG opened only occasionally and at a lower (25%) capacity, effectively leading to a major build-up of issues to resolved. Throughout the period when most economic activity has been stopped, staff at KRG institutions were mostly furloughed without pay, which had long-term implications on the staff's willingness to push processes forward. With perseverance of ITF's Legal Advisor and local ITF Regional Manager, ITF obtained official registration in KRG from the NGO Directorate on 6 September 2020 (please see KRG Registration Certificate as Annex 5). According to information, shared by local counterparts, ITF was the only non-profit organization to be able to gain registration in KRG and NES until September 2020. Based on the information shared within the Mine Action Working Group by other similar organizations, ITF was the first to (re)start effective clearance operations in NES during the ongoing pandemic. This is considered a major achievement, especially in light of the fact that ITF was starting up operations.

With a previously rented office space in Erbil that continues to serve as ITF's official address, accommodation and equipment storage for ITF and its clearance/survey partner, and established communication and coordination with the relevant authorities and community representatives in NES, the clearance/survey team was able to deploy on a very short notice. During lockdowns SAG was developing training programs, liaising remotely with the local community representatives on the parameters for locating the precise areas to be cleared, following the ADA social standards, as well as on the pre-selection of potential clearance staff for training. Mobilization of international staff and equipment was possible in mere 3.5 weeks. By early October 2020, registration has been granted by the NES Humanitarian Affairs Office (please see NES Registration Certificate as Annex 6), ap-

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of staff safety and security, the project was implemented with zero or near-zero visibility in-country; NES clearance/survey operations were implemented under the ITF umbrella.

provals from local authorities for staff movement (staff vetting by security forces, vehicle permissions, security equipment permits etc.) have been gained, and a functioning compound serving as the training and accommodation base has been set up, with local staff screened, vetted and hired, refresher training carried out, and initial non-technical survey assignments already done.

At the same time, until 30 September 2020, all project targets for the RE component were successfully achieved in Ar Raqqa Governorate, despite challenges tied to the fast-spreading pandemic. As a result, a total of 6,934 individuals have increased knowledge and skills about the dangers and safe behaviours related to explosive hazards, and are better able to protect themselves, their families and peers from these threats. Following several weeks of refresher training and equipment familiarization sessions, on 21 October 2020, live explosive hazards clearance and survey operations started by 3 mixed-gender battle area clearance (BAC) teams. Since then, no further major setbacks have been encountered, and progress has been steady throughout the reporting period with positive impact on the local communities in NES, including communities of religious and ethnic minorities and those previously targeted by ISIS.

Towards the end of the project period of performance, the project was marked by a great deal of uncertainty as the initially extended period until 15 December 2020 was nearing an end; one international staff then decided not to renew their contract due to the short extension period, which was possible mainly due to the economic use of funds and due to the changed local legislative framework and consequently incurred savings. This only left two remaining international staff for the rest of the operational period until 31 March 2021. Coupled with protracted border crossing procedures and quarantine requirements in light of Covid-19, this left international staff – and remaining national staff – very much stretched and reaching their limits (e.g. for safety reasons, both international staff have to be present on site with no additional expert to cover anyone's absence) for the benefit of the project. This, however, has been taken on with good spirit and was possible due to the short remaining timeline of the project. In such high-risk activities, this is not a recommended model for longer-term engagements as it significantly increases the risk of accidents. Nonetheless, the teams released 3,645,605 sq. meters of mostly former agricultural land back to the safe use by local communities; they removed over 50 explosive hazards, most of them improvised explosive devices (IEDs) laid by ISIS. 420kg of net explosive quantity and 266kg of explosive ordnance scrap has been removed from the environment, and handed over to relevant local authorities for safe destruction.

Despite the project start coinciding with a major destabilization in NES, and the project taking place during the pandemic, which posed a number of additional challenges, the project achieved its objectives and outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, during the project period, the teams were able to build genuine relations with the local communities and representatives of all population groups in target areas. This was mainly due to the dedication of the project team and the capacities and agility of both national and international staff engaged. Some of the shortcomings of the project, for example, not being able to better monitor free, informed and meaningful participation of the local communities were mainly due to the external circumstances, which required more efforts overall and prioritization to maintain minimum safety and security standards. The shortcomings are being evaluated and the teams will aim to redress them and improve action in future projects and programs. Overall, the project's successful completion was also largely due to the flexibility on part of the donors, who demonstrated an understanding of the extreme challenges endured in NES during 2019/2020.

# Background/context

## Operational Challenges

During the project, there have been two significant changes in the operational environment that had a major impact on the context in which the project was taking place.

1. The first one was the **October 2019 Turkish military action dubbed operation Peace Spring**, which hampered access for international staff in NES and caused the shift to a remote management model for most of the humanitarian actors. It further triggered a delay in the implementation of necessary assessments and reconnaissance missions. With the military operation, the Turkish military effectively established control over a territorial belt along the Turkish-Syrian border, reaching over 30 kilometers into the Syrian territory. By January 2020, however, the security situation settled to a status quo and had stabilized to the extent that DCA was able to start RE activities. The new territorial control meant additional awareness had to be built on which areas are accessible. As of February 2020, DCA had secured new coordination offices, serving both as offices and guesthouses, in Al Hasakah and Derik. These locations are the main hubs for their international staff, with national staff travelling from Raqqa to Al Hasakah and Derik on a regular basis, for training and mentoring by their international line managers. Simultaneously, SAG attended a two-day kick-off meeting held in Ljubljana at ITF premises in January 2020 in order to support a detailed conflict analysis, work out specific concepts of operations, security protocols, and ensure the practical application of humanitarian principles in the field. SAG were then able to deploy for an assessment mission in early February 2020 (please see Assessment Report attached as Annex 3). The mission has proven a great need for the clearance and subsequent revival of agricultural land in Al Hasakah, and the willingness of local civil council, heads of local communities, as well as local authorities, including the Humanitarian Affairs Office, to work with ITF/SAG on this project. The logistics behind the mission has confirmed the great tightening of the rules on the KRG side, from where it is practically impossible to cross the border into NES without working for a registered organization. ITF and SAG immediately acted upon this information, and while the paperwork was submitted in spring 2020, the registration was completed in September 2020. The expectation was it would be concluded much sooner, but that was not possible due to the second challenge affecting the project.

The deterioration of security situation was foreseen as a potential risk for the project by ITF and both its partners. Scenarios and contingencies were planned in terms of hibernating operations, suspending operations temporarily or operating in a limited capacity and with zero visibility. A mix of all mitigation measures was applied in the project so that the risk was absorbed to the greatest extent possible. Experience of project staff in similar contexts and uncertainties has proven to be the key in such planning and decision-making; it is difficult to suspend or delay lifesaving work, but well-versed managerial-level staff were able to react to the shifting security situation in NES in time – not prematurely, but also not too late.

2. In mid-March 2020, the second significant shift in the operational environment took place with the onset of the **Covid-19 pandemic**, and the ensuing regional outbreak. The risk of such a change was unexpected, not only for this project, but for the organizations and the operating environment overall, especially as it has been and continues to be impossible to foresee the pandemic's trajectory. Local authorities both in NES and in KRG imposed curfews, restrictions and for several weeks a full lockdown throughout the area. The border crossing point Fishkapour, most commonly used for crossing between KRG and NES, was temporarily closed (with occasional crossing for humanitarian staff, especially of health-focused NGOs). The pandemic had a major impact on the operations that has been mitigated through the introduction of various measures, detailed below.

### **Impact on Risk education**

DCA paused its RE activities between 16 March 2020, when NES curfew was introduced, until 20 April 2020. As part of Duty of Care towards national staff, the DCA Syria programme has provided all staff with training on the Covid-19, including prevention, treatment and myth busting. Extra guidance and cleaning materials have been provided to cleaners, to ensure often-touched surfaces in DCA premises in NES and KRG are cleaned correctly and regularly. Also, personal protective equipment items were purchased and distributed to all staff, including gloves, masks and alcohol gel/spray, with instructions and guidelines when and how to use these items, and when not to use them (following WHO guidelines). DCA programme management continued with the current temporary remote management model from KRG. The RE department prepared new SOPs for conducting RE during a pandemic, including new ways of sharing messages and using RE teams to include in their messaging Covid-19 messages. This new approach was utilized from 20 April 2020 onwards, when RE sessions were restarted by the DCA team, but the messaging was joined by Covid-19 awareness.

### **Impact on Clearance**

The progress of the clearance component of the project was initially also halted due to the pandemic, and the full closure of institutions in KRG. Fortunately, lockdown was lifted (but re-introduced) several times between mid-March and end of June 2020, which allowed ITF and SAG to continue background planning, and development of policies, including an Environmental Policy, Concept of Operations, training plans, clearance staff candidates pre-screening and pre-selection. Importantly, ITF and SAG took every opportunity of a few-day opening of institutions to ensure that the registration paperwork has been reviewed and certified by all of the numerous institutions in KRG and Federal Iraq, and handed over to the NGO Directorate in the KRG end of June 2020. Similarly, the team also managed to successfully procure all of the necessary demining equipment locally in KRG (with the exception of drones required for GIS mapping that can only be purchased post-registration), and was working on the staff and equipment transportation processes during the lockdowns. A full list of equipment inventory is attached as Annex 4).

### **Covid-19 Response**

For a relatively long period of time, the number of Covid-19 cases in NES remained remarkably low, mainly due to the strict border controls and no travelling of humanitarian personnel. All curfews throughout NES were lifted by end of June, while KRG and Federal Iraq at the time maintained most of the lockdown measures. Partial lockdowns were re-introduced again in fall and over winter 2020/2021. Fishkapour border crossing between KRG and NES started slowly reopening (including for humanitarian staff wanting to enter NES), but closed again several times. The Erbil International Airport only re-opened in August 2020. In order to mitigate against the unknown trajectory, the Covid-19 pandemic can take, both DCA and SAG were planning for a light, fluid and agile international staff footprint in NES, but still sufficient for the successful and safe completion of the programs.

Project partners continued to attend inter-sector Covid-19 meetings throughout the reporting period on a regular basis and regular feedback was shared with all departments regarding updates and guidelines related to providing essential humanitarian assistance to at risk communities following principles of Do No Harm and in line with WHO guidelines. Project partners also attended several Covid-19 trainings in order to be able to best adapt the operations to the new reality. Based on these trainings, both partners were able to determine that by implementing the necessary Covid-19 containment measures (use of face masks, social distancing, use of personal testing kits etc.), both RE and clearance operations can continue to be implemented safely for the project team and for the beneficiaries.



## Security Situation

The security situation remained largely stable throughout NES since early 2020, even though following the Turkish military action there has been an increased presence of Government of Syria (GoS) and Russian troops on the ground. Individual incidents flared sporadically with, for example, either of the side's troops venturing into an area outside of their control, so vigilance and close security monitoring was required at all times of project implementation. Some destabilization was also caused by the announced pull of US-led Coalition Forces (CF) from NES; their role and presence has been put under question several times during the reporting period, which can potentially lead to renewed eruption of violence with the CF acting as *de facto* guarantors of peace and SDF control in NES. Significant security shifts are therefore still possible, which is illustrated by numerous security incidents, involving GoS, Russian and Turkish Forces, CF patrols, SDF, as well as occasional ISIS sleeper cell attacks, including vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks. The latter are often carried out on motorbikes, which has led the NES Autonomous Administration to ban the use of motorbikes for a while.

Security situation was more tense around the Al Hole camp, where thousands of IDPs with former ISIS ties are being held; security incidents, such as murder, human trafficking, robbery, are relatively common inside the camp, with tensions occasionally also heightened around the camp. This calls for more caution and additional route planning when implementing project activities in the area; clearance activities, for example, had to be suspended for a few days in early 2021 due to active demonstrations near the camp, which caused road-closure and inaccessibility of the area. The area is also in proximity to the border with Iraq, which has always been porous and repeated attempts on both sides to secure this area have been unsuccessful. Bribery, threats, and the sheer size of this geographic area have hampered efforts on both sides. The teams had no untoward encounters or recorded evidence of ISIS activity in the area. However, this remains a constant threat that needs to be managed appropriately.

Overall, NES has seen a sharp rise in criminality (especially petty crime), as well as sporadic attacks against NGO staff (especially theft, attacks on medical NGO workers and clashes during food deliveries) occasioned by the deteriorating economic situation. Both SAG and DCA maintained contingency planning for potential staff targeting. All staff have been instructed how to react in cases of security threats and limiting contacts that could pose a security concern. Reporting mechanisms within organizations exist so all staff can report any untoward events to their line managers immediately. Thanks to locally recruited staff and the informal intelligence that can be obtained from people with local knowledge, both partners were able to operate relatively safely and without any security incidents. This was mainly due to the strategic locations, away from the Turkish border and the frontline along the so-called Peace Spring area, but not too far from the KRG border that would prevent potential evacuation.

## Economic Situation

The spiraling economy in NES, which is partly because of the international sanctions introduced on the GoS, but mostly because of the lockdown measures introduced to contain Covid-19, makes the value of the project all the greater. In addition to providing invaluable income to RE and BAC team members, the projects maintain its focus on the clearance of arable land to be selected in consultation and with participation of the local community and after performing land rights due diligence. ITF with its partners continues to plan follow-on activities for the revival and support of agriculture in the area to further improve the livelihoods of local communities. This would multiply the effects of the current project in the next phase. Even though KRG is not the intended area of operations, this project also has an important spillover effect on KRG as the base of its operations. In addition to

both partners maintaining office spaces and guesthouses there, all of their staff need to possess KRG residence and can spend weeks at a time in KRG. ITF alone is for now employing two staff members in KRG, with partners employing many more. The clearance partner purchased all of its equipment in KRG. All of these actions are benefiting the economy in KRG that has been severely affected by the pandemic with estimated 4.5 million people at risk of falling below the poverty line as its result. Against this backdrop, it is important to note that while this intervention is primarily targeting NES, it has an important regional impact. This, however, does not go without saying that the project in NES is also sensitive to any political issues between KRG and NES with KRG largely controlling who and how can operate cross border between KRG and NES.

Another layer of sensitivity was added in 2021, when Syria marked the 10th anniversary since the start of the war. With an increasing number of contested areas, especially in the Northwest as well as in the Northeast following the Turkish military action, a downward spiral in security and economics was witnessed throughout these areas. While drawing attention to the compounding humanitarian needs of the Syrian population and the need for stabilization of the country, the international community over the past few years demonstrated fatigue with the conflict and the shifting of interest to other, new crises. The situation for a majority of Syrians and their everyday lives remains depressing nonetheless, regardless of their social status. In light of this macabre situation in NES, overall political and institutional support for ITF and the project remained in place. General support was expressed by the relevant NES institutions during project preparation phase, during deployment preparations, and was maintained throughout the whole duration of the project. The relevant Civil Councils, HAO, SDF/SDC, local communities all expressed a lot of interest in the initiative and were willing to provide relevant support whenever requested. What particularly drew attention during numerous discussions was the primary focus on the clearance of agricultural lands, and the plan to build upon clearance work by backing agricultural revival. This was mentioned as a unique approach that our interlocutors appreciated very much due to the value added of providing agricultural support.

### **Mine Action Coordination in NES**

In NES, there is currently no functioning mine action authority that would coordinate, direct, prioritize or task mine action operations. A part of this role has been undertaken by IMMAP, an international NGO that provides information management services to humanitarian and development organizations. On the basis of a Memorandum of Understanding, which is typically signed between IMMAP and an organization operating in NES, operators report on their mine action (survey and clearance activities, MRE, victim assistance) to IMMAP for purposes of consolidating data, informing needs assessments and primarily avoiding a duplication of efforts. Every week, RE, clearance reports or survey reports with accurate GIS data and other specific information are shared with IMMAP in order to keep the database up-to-date. An example of IMSMA (Information Management System for Mine Action) weekly report shared with IMMAP is enclosed as Annex 7, and an example of an IMSMA completion report is enclosed as Annex 8.

IMMAP is currently the chair of the NES Mine Action Working Group (MAWG), and as such also supports coordination with up-to-date information management and IT solutions (please see Annex 9 for more on IMMAP's coordination in NES). On a monthly basis, IMMAP would produce mapping on activities implemented by various mine action operators. Mapping produced by IMMAP for purposes of NES mine action coordination can be found in Annex 11. They feed information collected in NES through IMSMA reports to the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach; mine action area of responsibility within WoS is led by UNMAS. UNMAS, however, is based in Damascus and due to the sensitivities in light of the lack of GoS control of NES, the information shared with UNMAS directly is

usually redacted for security purposes. ITF did not report on the project to WoS/UNMAS directly as the project was not part of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) due to the mismatch in project planning and HRP submission deadlines.

It has to be emphasized, though, that coordination on all levels – NES or WoS – is entirely voluntary and only done in good faith. During project implementation it has become clear that constant communication channels must be open with all organizations in order to facilitate genuine cooperation and information-sharing in NES. During the NES MAWG regular meetings as well as during bilateral requests for information on the work of other operators with purposes of avoiding duplication, all mine action actors have experienced that certain larger organizations with longer presence in NES have been unwilling to share data and mapping citing them as proprietary. However, such information and mapping was required first and foremost to avoid duplication of efforts, and to ensure the efforts were appropriate, relevant, and complementary, as well as to be able to operate safely. This has rendered deconfliction difficult at times; ITF and its partners in the field have therefore invested a lot of efforts in building cooperative relationships with other mine action organizations in NES and their representatives at HQ level, as well as with external stakeholders, such as the MAWG and the NES NGO Forum. Solutions are currently being sought to address this issue long-term and in a concerted effort with the support of the NES NGO Forum and MAWG. Challenges in effective deconfliction of areas of operation were seen as a potential project risk during planning phase; Team ITF responded to this challenge by performing due diligence at all times, engaging in bilateral relationship-building and careful communication with other mine action counterparts. Overall, during project duration, this did not have an impact on the performance. But should such tendencies continue, difficulties affecting operations or their safety may arise.

Occasional coordination issues were among the reasons behind the idea of the NES authorities to attempt establishing a National Mine Action Authority (NMAA). In mine action, NMAAs are national organizations (ideally civilian, sometimes military) that act as the focal point for all mine action issues in a particular country. They have the knowledge about the needs and requirements in mine action, they develop and adopt standards that reflect clearance requirements within their country, they set up processes to assess the capacities of mine action organizations and give out licenses to operate, and they have the mandate to not only coordinate, but task specific organizations to specific clearance / survey / RE tasks. In early 2021, attempt to form a NMAA have started to emerge in NES, namely in the form of the establishment of a Mine Action Office (MAO) within the HAO of the Autonomous Administration. The NES NGO Forum and all mine action operators, including ITF, have been engaging with the MAO from its inception to clarify their mandate and role. In order to function properly and serve the purpose for which it was established, the MAO should have available the required technical expertise and in-depth knowledge of International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), which was not the case until the end of the project. The mine action operators therefore offered their technical expertise in supporting the establishment of a properly functioning MAO.

The MAO was officially established as of 1 April 2021, however it has not yet become operational. This development, however, indicates that a policy on mine action at the level of NES Autonomous Administration may be emerging. As seen in NES previously, the interests may be solely with the purpose of supporting mine action, but may also have a different background, such as collection of information, control of international organizations, nepotism attempts etc. which go against the humanitarian standards. Mine action operators are therefore working closely with the NES NGO Forum to negotiate a common treatment and model of cooperation with the MAO that serves to improve mine action in NES. Until a regulatory framework comes to existence and the MAO sets up applicable National Mine Action Standards or becomes fully operational, the mine action organizations shall continue to operate as they did until now, and that is in conformity with IMAS.

# Stakeholder analysis

## Risk Education Stakeholders

To increase civilian population's safety and sustainable returns under this project, DCA as the RE partner targeted at-risk communities in Ar Raqqa Governorate, based on their humanitarian needs related to risk of exposure to explosive hazards, regardless of their social status or personal circumstances. Several factors were taken into consideration in identifying communities to target with RE, including whether they lived in or close to explosive ordnance (EO) contaminated areas; occurrence/frequency of EO accidents; influx of IDPs; expected population movements (especially planned returns) to contaminated areas; and developments in context and security. The information was gathered through multiple sources, such as exchanges with communal leaders, beneficiaries and community focal points during RE sessions and coordination visits (especially in areas of displacement), news on local social media platforms, local contextual knowledge of RE staff who originate from Ar Raqqa, a rapid needs assessment conducted by DCA in Ar Raqqa in November 2019, and alerts relevant to population movements or contextual updates shared by the NES Protection Working Group, NES NGO Forum and the Mine Action Sub-Cluster (MASC).

The choice of communities was then determined upon consultation with local authorities, namely Civil Councils and the HAO. This process not only led to an effective triangulation of information upon which to base the planning of relevant and effective RE interventions, but also ensured local populations and authorities (men and women) were engaged in the prioritization and sustainability of interventions aiming to enhance the security of their peers. Further, throughout the project duration, DCA project management regularly and actively participated in the NES NGO Forum, NES Protection and MASC working groups, and bilateral meetings with other humanitarian and stabilization actors active in NES, to ensure that project activities were timely, appropriate, relevant, coordinated and complementary.

During the first half of the project, the RE partner focused primarily on targeting IDPs recently displaced from the conflict zones in Tal Abyad, Ras Al Ain and Ein Issa, as a result of the Operation Peace Spring. The aim was to enable IDPs to move more safely within the heavily contaminated regions of Raqqa or to their next destination. Subsequently, RE activities targeted in parallel host communities and previously settled IDPs in Raqqa city and rural areas (predominantly originating from Hama, Homs, Idleb and Deir Ez-Zor). As reported by the Raqqa Civil Council in November 2019, almost 70% of the newly arriving IDPs were scattered in the city staying with relatives or in rented apartments. Hence, the ITF-funded DCA RE team worked predominantly in several large zones of Raqqa city (Rmeileh, Al Nahda, Al Battani) and the Tel Abyad formal camp (located in Tal Al Samen 40 km north of Raqqa city). The team also delivered RE activities in the villages of Al Asadiya and Al Rohayat, and the informal settlements of Al Jarbooa and Al Asadiya.

In line with DCA's RE strategy of focusing on activities and actions supporting individuals at risk of EO accidents, the RE team worked closely with specific population groups identified as most at-risk based on collected information (as described above), in addition to newly arriving IDPs. These select vulnerable groups included individuals pushed by extreme socio-economic hardships to take on higher risk; namely scrap metal collectors and rubble removers (boys, young and older men) who rummaged in open fields or piles of rubble contaminated with explosive ordnance, daily workers (men and women) planting and harvesting contaminated lands, and men who had removed explosive hazards from their homes to render them safe for their families when no longer able to afford rent in safer displacement locations. As well, out-of-school children spending longer times in open

spaces and pushed by their innate curiosity, and reckless adolescent boys urged by a desire to impress their peers were also targeted by the RE team.

Individuals selected for Community Focal Point (CFP) training included local authority representatives and adult community members chosen by their communities for their communication skills and the levels of respect and influence they hold among their peers. The DCA RE team encouraged men and women, from different socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds and/or with disabilities, to participate in the CFP training, to ensure their different perceptions of and exposures to the risks of EO were taken into account.

Regarding RE safety briefings and training of trainers (TOT), the recipient NGOs were selected based on whether they were active in EO contaminated areas in Raqqa, Hassakeh and Deiz Ez Zor, in addition to their needs for enhancing the safety of their staff and workers from EOs while conducting their duties in these areas. The NGOs were encouraged to facilitate gender balanced participation of their staff and workers in DCA RE trainings.

It is worth noting that the spread of Covid-19 did not affect the identification or targeting of RE beneficiaries. Moreover, during the project period, there was no change in DCA's organizational structure. However, the international RE Coordinator was unable to be based inside NES, partially due to security and access constraints, and partially due to Covid-19 related international travel restrictions. In addition, there was a 2-month gap in this role whilst a new international RE Coordinator was recruited. During that time, the RE Coordinator managed the RE team and activities remotely, while the RE Supervisor (based in Menbij) conducted field visits and provided on-site support.

### **Clearance Stakeholders**

Based on the input from the Food Security Baseline Survey report conducted in NES, and funded by other donors, as well as on the inputs from both assessments, the originally identified target group for the clearance segment of the project remained unchanged. Khabur River Valley remained the priority location for these project activities, although it has been spread out further out in its proximity to the arable lands towards the Iraqi border with a formerly very strong ISIS presence. Both areas have been selected and prioritized following a consultative process between the partner and the local authorities, particularly the Civil Council and the HAO, as well as based on the exchanges with community leaders, and beneficiaries. The information was verified and cross-checked through the MAWG coordinator and the mine action operations database to avoid duplication of efforts as best as reasonably possible.

No clearance task began before previously implementing non-technical survey (NTS), which is standard process in mine action to ensure both data triangulation and community participation. NTS also ensures higher safety level of clearance staff by gaining information on the contamination level and type that can be expected in a specific area. Based on this information, clearance teams can better prepare for a particular clearance task. NTS typically starts by analyzing historical data, information on conflict activities in the area, potential previous explosive accidents, but most importantly involves a physical visit to the location by the NTS team. The team then visually inspects the location for any visible signs of contamination, and reaches out to the community members to inform them about potential activities and at the same time gain first-hand information on community experience, e.g. have accidents previously occurred and where, which area the community may be avoiding.

Once the NTS team ascertained that the need for clearance at a particular location existed, a detailed implementation plan would be put in place (please see Implementation Plans for Al Khamayl and Al Buardi tasks in Annex 11). The development of an implementation plan encompasses due diligence on land rights, which would always be carried out in close cooperation with the Civil Councils and the HAO (please see Annex 12 for an example of a work order issued by the HAO). In case any potential land rights issues would be detected in this phase, the clearance efforts would be put on hold until that is resolved through third party (i.e. local authorities). This, however, did not occur during project implementation.

Towards the end of the project, additional information on contaminated areas began coming in through tips as the word of mouth started spreading about the clearance efforts. The consultative process with the local authorities and communities has been kept in place, nonetheless. The approach to focus clearance efforts in agricultural areas has been very much welcome by both local authorities and the prioritized communities. It was confirmed several times that such an approach was something that is missing in NES, and that local farmers were greatly affected due to major arable lands not being utilized in light of contamination.

In terms of organizational set up and management, Covid-19 did have an impact to some degree on the clearance segment of the project. That was mostly due to the delayed registration in KRG, travel restrictions and access constraints, which required international staff to work from home for a large part of 2020. While working from home/Erbil office, the two international Technical Advisors, however, carried out vital preparatory work to be able to stand the clearance segment of the project up as soon as possible. In light of all restrictions, it has been noted that the staff went far and beyond for the benefit of the project and the beneficiaries. At the same time, and in order to support the registration process, ITF had to engage a Legal Advisor with expert knowledge of various institutions in KRG and their requirements. This was initially not foreseen, but had to be acted upon to ensure persistent and expert outreach of ITF in the KRG institutions.

One of the most significant changes occurred with the cutting down of security support on the project; effective since January 2021, the Autonomous Administration banned the deployment of international staff or international organizations in security support roles. It has also been determined during the project duration that the security situation in NES is not such that static security at clearance sites would be something helpful. In fact, too much security could draw too much attention. That is why security support was significantly reduced starting January 2021 with the maintenance of only a limited number of national staff and the maintenance of watchkeepers at the secure compound. This incurred cost savings, which were able to extend the life of the project.

Due to uncertainties with regards to project extensions, the project lost one of the three International EOD Technical Advisors in mid-December 2020, who was offered long-term deployment and a stable position. Because the additional extension of the project was only of a few months, it was not possible to find a suitably trained person to be deployed on such a short notice. Only the border crossing approvals process has been extended from a few days to sometimes a few weeks, so engagement of a new staff member was not possible. The work was therefore continued by the two remaining International EOD Technical Advisors, who then took on the implementation of all aspects of the project in cooperation with national staff. In mine action, there is a need for permanent technical cross-check, which meant that the two remaining staff were unable to take rotations. In case of anyone's leave or sick days, the operations would have to be stopped completely. This would affect a project of this kind in the long term, but did not have much influence in this phase – the staff made up for all the pauses with working extended days or weekends. For a protracted period, such burden on a limited number of staff could not be allowed as it could cause serious security concerns.

## Monitoring results

**For the detailed description of the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the achievement of outcome and outputs, of indicators measured against baseline and target values, please fill in Annex 1**

Overall project monitoring efforts have been carried out by ITF as the lead on the project and by both partners individually. ITF was monitoring the work of both partners through regular meetings, weekly or monthly calls, monthly or bi-monthly reports and specific activity updates. Photo or video materials were shared with ITF regularly to certify the data. ITF was also liaising with other NES-based organizations, IMMAP as the head of the MAWG, and the NES NGO Forum to verify data shared. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented the planned field visit to NES. Two visits to Erbil, KRG were carried out within the project, and also served monitoring purposes. Separate monitoring data for each of the partners and their respective activities is reported below:

### Risk Education Monitoring

During the project period, the RE team reached a total of **6,934 direct beneficiaries in Ar Raqqa** (24.5% male, 25.5% female) with age, gender and context specific RE life-saving messages, successfully achieving all activity targets. The project built on existing context-sensitive local knowledge and connections, as well as a programmatic holistic approach across DCA units to improve vulnerable communities' abilities to cope with the effects of protracted conflict. All RE activities were monitored remotely by the international RE Coordinator, through daily follow ups, coaching and support to the RE Supervisor and team, and on the ground by the national RE Supervisor based in Menbij who conducted frequent visits to project locations in Raqqa.

Specifically, the RE team delivered **direct RE sessions to 6,871 beneficiaries** living in areas contaminated with EO or contemplating movements across hazardous areas, of which 1,714 were boys, 1,770 girls, 1,680 men and 1,707 women. The beneficiaries consisted of 3,833 IDPs and 3,038 host community members, who were reached in their homes, markets and places of work (59%), in formal and informal camps (31%), in NFI distribution sites managed by DCA (9%) and in DCA's child-friendly space (CFS) in Raqqa (1%). This activity complemented other DCA humanitarian interventions funded by other donors; children and their caregivers attending structured PSS activities at DCA's CFS were provided with age-appropriate RE sessions (including songs and games for children), and vulnerable households targeted with emergency support in the form of provision of essential NFIs were given emergency RE at the distribution sites – these were predominantly newly displaced families scattered across Raqqa city and surrounding rural areas, who were otherwise harder to locate and reach. 4,562 of these beneficiaries also benefitted from Covid-19 basic hygiene and prevention awareness messages; these were integrated into RE sessions to assist in raising awareness and curbing the spread of the pandemic. These sessions included the distribution of Covid-19 awareness leaflets developed by the WHO, and public health posters placed in and around health facilities and public gathering points.



RE session to a family in Rohayat village exhibiting COVID-19 precautionary measures



RE session to IDPs in Tel Abyad Camp



Emergency RE provided to IDPs at a DCA distribution site in February 2020 in Raqqa city

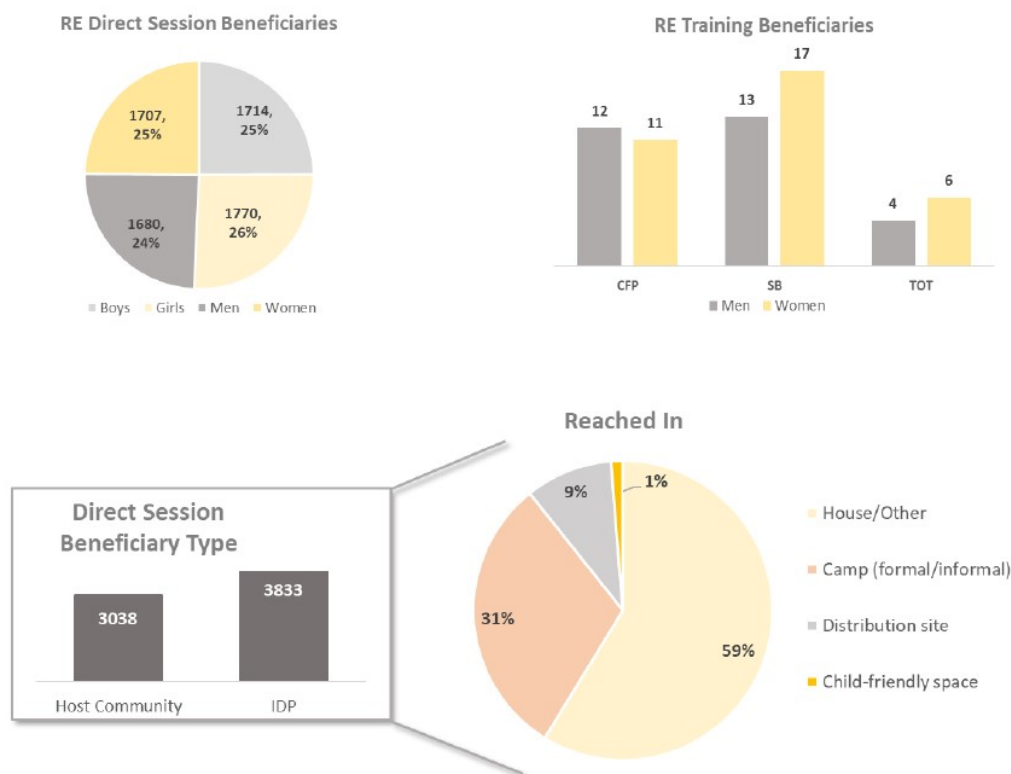




RE session provided to IDPs at Al Jarbooa informal settlement.

In addition, **30 humanitarian staff and cash-for-work workers** (13 men, 17 women), from the international NGO Blumont, received RE Security Briefings, to help reduce their risk of injury from explosive hazards in the areas they work in across Raqqa. Blumont was selected to receive Safety Briefings as they are active in Raqqa and Hassakeh, providing early recovery, food security and camp management services. 10 humanitarian staff (4 men and 6 women) received RE TOT, from the local NGO New Horizons, to enable them to share basic RE safety messages and leaflets to the beneficiaries they reach through education and protection programs, targeting mainly women and children, in Raqqa and Deiz Ez-Zor. DCA maintains close collaborative ties with these organizations, who regularly request DCA to provide RE targeted trainings to new staff, volunteers and workers in their various areas of operations. To note, the TOT activity was renamed as TSM (Training Humanitarian Staff on EORE Safe Behaviour Messaging) after the project end, to better reflect its purpose. **23 community members and authority figures** (12 men, 11 women) benefited from RE CFP training in Al Nahda neighbourhood and Tel Abyad Camp; they consisted mostly of local leaders (such as Comins, council members and tribal leaders) and public sector employees (in different roles in local municipalities), who have the communication skills, influence and interest necessary in propagating safety messages within their communities and in reporting EO items or accidents on behalf of their communities. They also consisted of teachers in the Tal Abyad Camp who worked in schools run by the camp's education committee – in which DCA distributed Emergency RE School Kits (comprised of stationery and RE printed materials) funded by another donor – to enable them to circulate safe behaviour messages among their students.

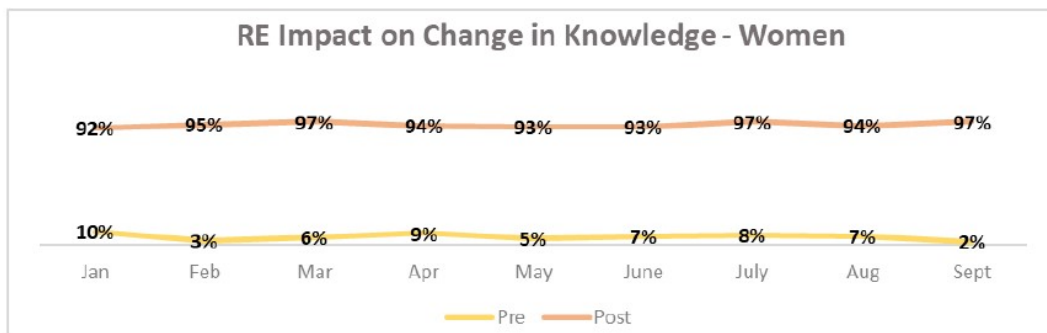
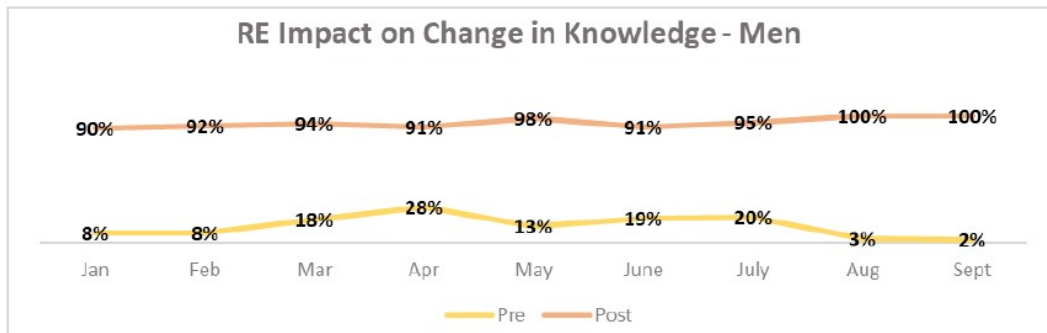
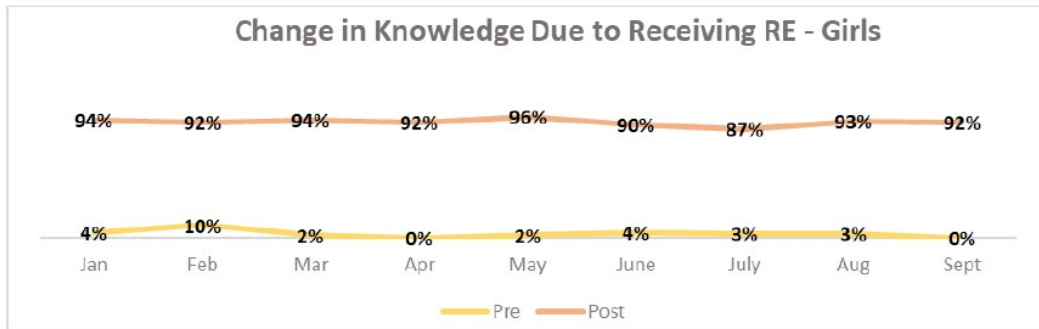
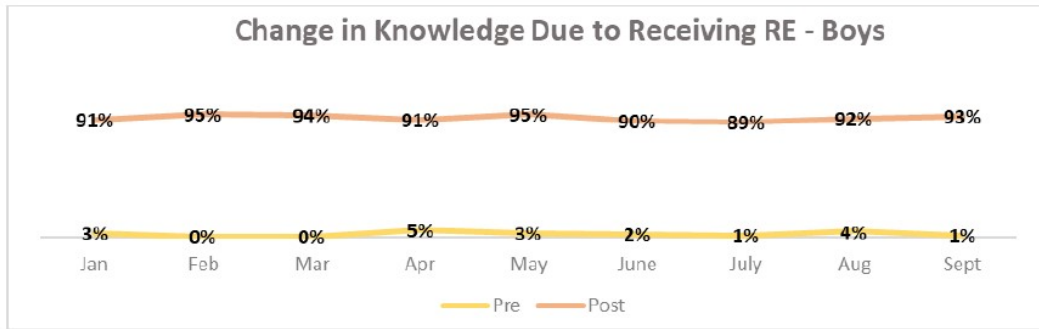
DCA is an active member of the following coordination and technical working groups: NES NGO Forum, Protection, Mine Action, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), Case Management, Child Protection, Shelter/NFI, Cash for Work and Multi-Purpose Cash. Through these groups, DCA programme management can coordinate humanitarian activities with other NGOs present in NES, to prevent duplication of interventions, ensure that the objectives, results and activities of the project address the needs on the ground, and complement current and planned interventions by DCA and other humanitarian and stabilization actors in the region. RE activity results and locations were shared on a monthly basis to the NES Protection Working Group and the Mine Action Sub-cluster through dedicated reports (such as the 4W report).



The DCA RE team **surveyed 373 beneficiaries (104 boys, 81 girls, 97 men and 91 women)** during the project period. Participants were randomly selected from beneficiaries attending RE sessions and were asked the same set of questions before and after the session, to gauge the increase of their knowledge on the dangers of explosive hazards and safe behaviours as a direct result of the received RE session. Results are used as an indicator of the effectiveness of RE sessions provided, as well as to highlight and implement areas for improvement.

**All surveyed beneficiaries (100%) showed an increased in knowledge and understanding**, as they answered more questions correctly after the RE session than they had before the session. The average increase in knowledge across all ages and genders was 87%. Without the RE messages provided by DCA, these individuals were less able to avoid dangerous areas and explosive/suspicious objects and could subsequently adopt safer behaviours to enhance their safety and that of their loved ones. The results confirm that the messages were delivered in a relevant and clear manner, taking into account cultural and local context, as well as risky behaviours of local population groups. According to survey results, the one question that was not answered fully correctly by participants was 'reasons why explosive hazards are dangerous' after receiving the RE session. On average, half of the respondents could name only 2 out of the 5 correct answers. More effort will be exerted by DCA RE teams to ensure all EO accident impacts are retained by beneficiaries.

Those who exhibited the highest average baseline knowledge (13%) were men; mainly due to their higher exposure to news and information exchange about the context, and – for some – due to their previous military service. On average, knowledge increased from 2% to 92% for boys, 3% to 92% for girls, 13% to 95% for men, and 6% to 95% for women. The results of the pre- and post-surveys for each gender and age group are represented below for the entire project period.



## Battle Area Clearance / Survey Monitoring

The initial task for the EHM clearance teams was the Village of Al Kamayl, selected in consultation with the Al Hasakah Civil Council and the HAO in NES. The area was known for agriculture prior to the conflict, with most farmers producing wheat and millet. Since the war, the land has been left in disrepair due to the known presence of explosive hazards. A large

majority of the villagers fled the area that was occupied by ISIS between 2015 and 2017, but later returned. Most of them are unemployed, also because of the inaccessibility of fertile land that was once the source of their livelihoods. During the site familiarisation and community outreach sessions, the project staff were provided with the information that two explosive incidents occurred at this location previously, resulting in the loss of life in one case and severe injuries in the second. This was a clear indication of the presence of explosive hazards.

Following a little over a month of steady and successful operations, on 19 November 2020, ITF teams conducted land release/handover of the previously contaminated agricultural space within the Village of Kamayl. The released land covered an expanse of 1,123,470 sq. meters within Zones 1-3. The handover included a map appreciation and an actual physical on the ground assessment to clarify which areas have been cleared of explosive hazards. The village Mukhtar expressed his upmost appreciation for efforts in facilitating a safe and secure space for the re-development of communal agricultural land. The land is tilted by the village commune cooperative, meaning that all members of the village are able to benefit from accessing safe agricultural land.



Since ISIS's occupation, arable land has been left to despair and most of the trees in the area have been cut down.



ITF team during a shura with local representatives; meaningful community outreach is vital in ensuring the safety and security of operations.



The clearance team during low threat visual area search.



*107mm rocket, one of the explosive items located and rendered safe during operations at the site.*

In January 2021, following the return from New Year stand-down period and a protracted return to NES due to the need for international staff to quarantine in KRG, operations continued on Zone 4 of the site. In its entirety, Zone 4 comprises a total area of 6,863,521 sq. meters. For the ease of managing the BAC Clearance Operation Zone 4 has been further broken down into seven search boxes/areas: Zones 4 A through to 4 G. In January and February 2021, BAC operations within the vicinity of Al Kamayl Village continued in Zone 4 Area A, clearing a total of 995,305 sq. meters, with 1 x rocket (with explosive fill), 2x projectiles, 4x IED main charges and 67kg of ERW scrap safely removed from the site.

On 25 February 2021, project team conducted land release (the Handover Certificate is enclosed as Annex 13) of the cleared area in conjunction with the Mukhtar of Al Kamayl Village, Mr Sultan Hamada. The cleared real-estate was immediately being utilised safely by multiple individual groups of Bedouin sheep herders, that occupy the land as part of their winter migration from as far as Ar Raqqa, prior to proceeding to Qamishli where they will sell a portion of their stock. During the land release and communication with the community, it has been im-

parted by their representatives that while the plan is there to plan trees and crops, the community presently lacks support to proceed with that. Through community engagement with the Bedouin herders, they emphasized that during their time at Al Kamayl last year, they were able to locate (and play with!) numerous suspected items, which were now no longer there.

**The second site, selected following a similar inclusive process, was at the Village of Al Buardi** near the Al Hol displaced person camp. Up-to-date information obtained during non-technical survey confirmed the presence of explosive hazards within the area, particularly in the form of an IED (improvised explosive device) Belt laid by ISIS. The IED Belt ran through previously utilised agricultural land all the way to the Iraqi Border, a distance of approximately six kilometers. During information gathering, the teams learned that previously, a civilian lost his legs above the knees and another shepherd lost his life, both due to explosive incidents.

The land is owned by a local tribe and was once used for the cultivation of wheat, which was sold locally. Twice yearly, in autumn and winter Bedouin herders migrate from as far as Raqqa to facilitate bedding down their sheep and goats on the land. They would also utilise the leftover wheat sustenance to feed their herds, so none of the plants go to waste. While in discussion with the ITF team in NES, a representative of the local tribe expressed his anticipation of the completion of explosive hazards clearance: *“I look very much forward to once again planting crops on this land”*.

Live battle area clearance operations commenced on 9 November 2020 following the high threat search methodology. Throughout the clearance process, among others, 13 full IEDs in the net quantity of approximately 110 kg of home-made explosives were located and rendered safe on the site. On 6 December 2020, ITF staff conducted land release of the previously contaminated agricultural space within the Village of Al Buard, and handed the land over to its owners for safe and productive use (Handover Certificate is enclosed as Annex 14). The released land covered an area of 1,502,894 sq. meters, and was handed over to local representatives, following a map appreciation and an actual physical on the ground assessment of cleared land.



Vista overlooking the second task site at Al Buardi Village.



A partially exposed ISIS IED, located and rendered safe during operations.



ISIS IED, located and rendered safe during clearance operations.



High threat search methodology utilized during clearance operations.

In March 2021, BAC operations within the vicinity of Al Buardi Village continued utilising Technical Search Methodology. During two weeks in March, the teams cleared an area of 97,413 sq. meters and removed 1 full IED, 9 IED main changes, 2 improvised electrical detonators, all together 190kg in net explosive quantity. The handover at the site has not yet been conducted as the site section has not yet been completed, pending the continuation of the Phase II project. During the last day of on-site operations, the teams did, however, implement an informal risk education session in order to familiarize the local community with the threats in their area and teach them about safe behaviour.



Community engagement and information RE session at Al Buardi village





One of the five IED main charges that were rendered safe & removed from the task site by the team.

In February 2021, for example, the ITF team also deployed to the village of Um Alquife, where it was determined and flagged by the local Civil Council that an agricultural area owned by a member of a religious minority was contaminated with explosive hazards. As recently as December of 2020, a 13-year-old shepherd retrieved an explosive item from the land, which resulted in him losing an arm. Following the incident, the injured teenager returned to his own village, where the villagers collected funds to pay for his medical treatment. As of 28 February 2021, the land has been cleared of mortars that were preventing its safe use and returned to its owner. The handover certificate is enclosed as Annex 15.



A 60mm mortar removed from the task site



Religious minorities benefitted from the project, including through the return of formerly contaminated land for their safe use and cultivation.

Until 31 March 2021, total explosive hazards removed included:

- 11 pieces of unexploded ordnance,
- 31 IEDs,
- 24 pieces of small arms ammunitions and
- additional 44 component parts of IEDs.
- **420kg of net explosive quantity was safely removed from the environment**, along with 266kg of explosive ordnance scrap.
- **The full area cleared and handed back to the communities for their safe use amounted to 3,645,605 sq. meters.**

The complete list of all statistics on the achievements of survey and clearance operations, is enclosed to this report as Annex 16. A full list of all IMSMA reports submitted and NTS and clearance operations carried out can be found in Annex 17.

The clearance operations presented the opportunity to maximise the positive impacts with regards to the marginalised and vulnerable local populace, in terms of conflict transformation and enhancement of regeneration. A safe and secure agricultural space may provide the local inhabitants in the two targeted areas with a plausible opportunity for sustainable re-development, thus reducing poverty, enhancing employment opportunities, and promoting a semblance of normality with the overall aim of fostering a vibrant civil society, whilst also eliminating the ever present threat of death or life-changing injuries. It should also be noted that in light of the dire economic situation, the communities may not be able to afford even the most basic agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers or tools, and oftentimes further support in this respect will be required to be able to fully harness the impact of this initiative.

Throughout the implementation of explosive hazards clearance operations, the ITF team on the ground in NES was striving to make this project intervention as inclusive as possible by reaching out to various religious and ethnic minorities to learn more about their needs, priorities, and make sure everyone can benefit from this project on an equal footing. This has also been emphasized in the various meetings with the Al Hasakah Civil Council, where all population groups are represented. Through the many discussions, religious and ethnic minorities have been exposed as a particularly vulnerable population group in that the majority of them have been displaced first during the ISIS occupation, and then again during the more recent instabilities.

Some of them were able to flee the country and found refuge abroad. Most of those internally displaced, however, have been displaced for a second or even third time following the Operation Peace Spring of 9 October 2019. In this process, several explosive hazards contaminated areas mostly to the north of Al Hasakah City have been identified, where religious and ethnic minorities currently reside and aim to cultivate agricultural land. The situation in this area is precarious due to ongoing fighting and armed clashes; depending on the security developments in the specific micro-locations, ITF aims to address the needs of populations living there through further explosive hazards clearance in the next phase of the project.

### **Environmental Considerations**

While RE interventions in general have a low environmental footprint as project activities are purely outreach/training, conducted either in the area in which the teams are already based or via short-term travel, that is not entirely the case for clearance interventions.

Both partners collected most data electronically through GIS and other Information Management systems, thus reducing paper. The RE partner attempted to use recycled paper for its printed RE materials, however this was not possible due to supply shortages in-country.

In order for RE messaging to be effective, it must be kept concise and simple. For that reason, the RE partner was unable to additionally include messaging on environmentally friendly approaches in its regular RE sessions. In light of the pandemic, however, and the impact it has on everyone, RE sessions did typically begin by enforcing basic Covid-19 prevention measures and related knowledge.

On the other hand, clearance interventions tend to have a much more profound environmental impact, especially if implemented without much consideration for the environment. The clearance partner aimed to reduce waste internally by, for example, fitting all team members with reusable water bottles and filtering systems thus greatly reducing single-use plastics and waste collected on site. At each clearance site, an area was set up, where all waste would be collected to be further processed in line with the established practices in the Autonomous Administration of NES. The partner also considered the installation of solar panels at the secure compound to reduce the use of fuel for the generator. That was, however, not possible due to the difficulty accessing solar panels in NES and due to the significant cost and a short project period.

Clearance works were implemented without a single *in situ* explosion, which could have a great negative impact on the environment. *In situ* explosions are typically practices when explosive items are deemed too unstable to be removed. During the project all explosive devices were rendered safe and removed, then placed in a secure SDF-controlled location for their destruction. No humanitarian actor in NES is allowed to destroy explosive hazards as that requires the use of additional explosives, which are not accessible for security reasons. Whenever significant land disruption took place due to the removal explosive items, the land was remediated to the greatest possible extent and soil and vegetation were returned to their place of origin as per IMAS. The project teams succeeded in removing 420kg of explosives and 266kg of explosive ordnance scrap from the soil. That is well over half a ton of various environmental pollutants that have been removed, which is a significant success and a very significant positive project impact.

### **Social Considerations**

An inclusive, non-discriminatory and Do No Harm approach was adopted in all phases of the project and in all activities. Local authorities, community leaders and community members were

involved in the identification of their needs, pre-deployment surveys, prioritization of interventions, and in the enhancement of their communities' resilience towards the threats of explosive hazards. The principle of free, meaningful and informed participation of local communities (especially women and vulnerable groups) was applied to the greatest extent possible given the relatively short time frame of the project.

Mine action operations – clearance or RE – and established operational standards inherently adopt the principles of free, meaningful and informed participation. Local communities must be thoroughly consulted and informed about the planned intervention because that very importantly ensured their buy-in, but also ensures the safety and security of project staff in light of explosive hazards and the overall conflict-affected context. Standard mine action procedures, e.g. deployment of NTS teams, community liaison sessions, RE standards, have been fully applied on this project.

Levels of community participation are anticipated to be further increased in future and monitored better through, for example, the delivery of standardized leaflets and information campaigns at affected communities, and by bringing the RE and clearance components of the project closer together.

The project overall also aimed to ensure the free, informed and meaningful participation of people with disabilities and the elderly. The majority of RE sessions were provided in houses and tents within the respective communities, all RE sessions were delivered in locations that were easily accessible to all population groups, including persons with disabilities, taking into consideration the most culturally and socially appropriate setting. Although people with disabilities and the elderly were found to be at lower immediate risk of explosive accidents, they were as well provided with RE sessions considering the indirect impact on these groups if family members fall victim to explosive hazards, as well as the long-term consequences of contamination which tend to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities within the community.

During survey and clearance operations, elderly people were often very directly involved in key informant interviews. The elderly often hold a particularly important role of village or regional leaders or leaders of their community, and were consulted thoroughly. People with disabilities also typically provide key information on their needs and requirements. A case study of a young man disabled in a mine accident is enclosed as Annex 18. Throughout the project, the clearance and NTS teams, as well as RE teams, stressed the importance of respecting and including the elderly, people with disabilities, and explosive ordnance victims; the latter are particularly often ostracised due to their injuries. Efforts will be invested to ensure more systematic participation at all levels and of all population groups, as well as to measure participation better.

### **Gender Considerations**

In order to optimize acceptance and facilitate implementation of the project, gender was mainstreamed through all components of the project. RE partner deployed a mixed-gender RE team recruited from the local communities, reflecting the linguistic and ethnic makeup of the area, and holding detailed knowledge of the local culture. Clearance partner also ensured mixed-gender clearance teams, with women making up about a third of all search staff. Their role was important in the field in that women from local communities felt freer to reach out to the team deployed after noticing women engaged in the field. A case study of a female clearance team member is enclosed as Annex 18.

To prevent tensions in the operational areas, host communities were not disregarded for RE session delivery even when priority was given to IDPs. Where culturally appropriate and preferred by the communities, RE sessions were provided to women alone by female staff. During clearance works, similar approaches were applied. Notwithstanding, women sometimes took equal part in *shuras* with the local community. At a *shura* at Al Khamayl, for example, out of eight people in attendance, two were women. The only two people employed within the group were the two women, one of them the head teacher at a local school, and the other the village pharmacist. Employed and educated women in NES are not uncommon, depending on the specific community.

During the first visit to any community, the focal points were asked about the makeup and most pressing needs of the society, and about any particular socio-cultural aspects to take into consideration. This then allowed the teams to adapt their approaches, communications and outreach. The team also probed into the circumstances and living conditions of each community to better understand existing risk-taking behaviours of its population groups, possible future causes of explosive accidents, or the actual contamination.

The participation of women in all activities – RE and clearance – was massively encouraged. Women were hailed as important influencers within their family units and were asked to reinforce safety messages in their homes with their children and husbands after the RE team left, for example. In addition, women made up 54% of trained community focal points and humanitarian staff, thus reflecting their more active roles in local councils and professional arenas. As most frequent wood-collectors and with a number of widows being the sole breadwinners in the family, they were also actively approached to share their views and knowledge that would help address the most pressing explosive hazards threats. Seeing women deminers in the field who acted as role models also encouraged women within the community to partake.

Women are represented on an equal footing to men in the Civil Councils, which is also made up of a mix of ethnic and religious groups. Genuine engagement and regular consultations with the Civil Council on key operational issues is therefore key for ensuring gender mainstreaming at all levels of the project.

## **External Evaluation**

In spite of the pandemic, an external evaluation of the project was carried out between November 2020 and February 2021 by combining international expert evaluation managers and NES-based field surveyors/enumerators. This model has proven to be a good choice, especially in light of time and travel restrictions.

Overall, the external evaluation, which is enclosed as Annex 19, confirmed the strong performance of the programme, deep understanding of the local contexts and capacity to adapt to needs and opportunities. It found that, through a tight programming and prioritisation system, the project was able to adequately absorb the socio-economic and security situations on the ground and translate them rapidly into concrete measures. The project maintained business continuity by adopting flexible working arrangements, utilising local networks in country and ongoing effective contextual analysis. Due to various external factors including obtaining permissions and the spread of COVID 19, the project experienced some delays in implementation in 2020. As of early March 2021, when the evaluation was completed, the project was on track to meet most of the activity targets. It confirmed that both project components made significant positive contributions towards the safety and security of beneficiaries. Other noteworthy gains

include the positive impact that both projects have had on children's safety and wellbeing alongside further embedding progressive gender norms into local decision making processes and representation.

According to the evaluators, SAG and DCA have demonstrated commitment, flexibility, transparency quality and willingness to coordinate with local communities and external stakeholders. At the same time, the operating environment for mine action agencies in the country remains fluid and at times particularly challenging. The evaluation further found that for ITF and the partners to remain relevant and continue the high levels of service to beneficiaries, it will not only be important to them to increase their cost-effectiveness but also demonstrate a clear niche that adds value in an increasingly competitive arena.

Despite the great effects of the project, the evaluation found some areas that would benefit from additional improvements. The recommendations proposed by the evaluators have been discussed with the evaluating team and with both partners in a workshop, as well as with each of the partners bilaterally. ITF further carried out an internal review, and in preparation of the potential next phase of the project aimed to incorporate the proposed recommendations as far as reasonably possible. A comment has been added to each of the recommendations for clarity on how ITF and partners aim to incorporate this:

#### *Recommendations for ITF*

- *Continue to improve impact measurement result systems, analysis, reporting and communication of results by increasing the capacities of the team and staff, by promoting engagement by development actors in areas where ITF is working, by developing an advocacy and communication strategy for Impact Measurement and by extending the measurement of impact of training activities.* – Impact measurement will be strengthened in future through the use of new information management tools and by working with partners more closely on measuring impact. This will be done consistently pre- and post-activity and will be included in each of the regular reports. The role of GIS advisor will be empowered with the use of IM and impact reporting tools. 4Ws reporting will be a requirement for project partners.
- *Develop an exit strategy that measures and considers the effective capacities of national partners.* – An exit strategy will be further developed and elaborated on. In light of the fact that ITF only began operating in NES shortly before the evaluation took place, that was being developed during evaluation.
- *Organize regular meetings and identify relevant actors to cooperate on mine action activities.* – This was implemented prior to and throughout the project with regular international and bilateral meetings.
- *Develop networks with training institutions to help facilitate the transition of staff.* – This will be explored further in future. Collaborations and partnerships are already being set up with other organizations operating in NES to support staff transition. In any case, a lot of staff in mine action rotate between organizations, so transitioning is relatively common practice.

#### *Recommendations to improve pre-implementation processes*

- *Build a system of alerts through the network of community liaisons to identify groups at risk and trigger emergency actions. In particular, develop awareness of one focal point in each affected community. The focal point should be responsible for informing community members of the risks and exact location of hazards. The focal point should also be responsible for alerting the regional offices of the potential risks coming.* – This was partially already set up through the training of CFP for RE. Their role was a lot like what the evaluators proposed. This will be polished and added on in future, when RE and clearance take place hand-in-hand.
- *Along the same lines, Community Liaison Officers should be trained to pay extra attention to the risks marginalised populations are exposed to and to take immediate actions*

*through the community to mitigate these risks.* – CL officers are usually trained on these risks, and certainly will be in the coming phases of the project. Special attention will be devoted to this topic.

- *Identifying specific Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) routes and assess whether IDP are traversing contaminated areas should be part of survey and land clearance.* – This is typically part of NTS and RE activities.
- *Set new targets for survey and clearance for any additional project extension based on confirmed past performance and assessed needs. Clarify the availability of teams for upcoming projects with SAG. Clearly define and publish the decision-making criteria for the prioritization process. Establish a regular communication channel or meetings between SAG and local authorities to review the criteria to increase community participation.* – Past performance may not always be the best indicator for future survey and clearance targets as a specific area may see much more or less complexity in terms of contamination than the one before. Prioritization and selection criteria will, however, be much more clearly elaborated on. Written guidance may be developed internally or in cooperation with the MAO, depending on its trajectory.

*Recommendations on optimising the impact of land survey and clearance on communities*

- *Strengthen socio-economic impact assessment procedures and tools – As developed above, measuring the impact of demining on development efficiently can have a significant impact on the programme. ITF, in consultation with the IPs, should review the methodology to be able to measure impact more adequately. More importantly, it should develop the analysis of this data with the strategic goal of proving the direct and indirect impact of the project to governmental actors and donors alike.* – This will be further strengthened in the next phases of the project, including through the deployment of the GIS/IM technical advisor.
- *Improve the land selection process by increasing transparency, local knowledge and shared understanding of land selection criteria.* – Same as above, more clarity will be provided. However, in spite of the current lack of an effective NMAA, there is not much freedom for a mine action organization to develop completely proprietary prioritization criteria. Priorities are set jointly with Civil Councils and the HAO.
- *Optimise the impact of land survey and clearance, the project is a humanitarian initiative and should remain so. Yet, by linking up with development actors and key stakeholders when land is released, the project could help secure a more sustainable impact. Not all the land has to go to subsistence agriculture. The release of new cultivable areas should give the opportunity to development actors to inform farmers and communities about the options they have to develop their land; the existing mechanisms to fund potential productive investments and the key actors working in this field in the area.* – This was the idea within the project from the start. Given the realities on the ground and the individual mandates of different organizations, it has, however, been assessed as much more realistic for the project to incorporate the development component, rather than rely on an external partner who may or may not deliver.
- *Develop a system of community liaison for land clearance- This includes to build an ERW/UXO emergency alert system to identify groups at risk, trigger emergency actions and to support regular information sharing. Emergency care is very difficult to access in remote areas of Syria. Training community liaison officers for emergency care would help fill this gap – at least as a palliative measure whilst the level of service delivery is still very low.* – Through the establishment of the MAO, a hotline for UXO alerts is also planned to be established, which shall address this issue.
- *Identify and link up with effective livelihood programmes for survivors – Providing livelihood opportunities is one of the most difficult area of intervention for humanitarian and development actors. Many training programmes fail at doing so. Rather than stretching limited resources, the project should aim at linking up with the existing programmes that have pre-existing livelihood and resilience programmes. This can include further assistance for beneficiaries on how to use the cleared land or coverage of agricultural*

*support, e.g. through fertilisers or seeds.* – Ideally, this would be the case. However, in view of limited funding all organizations are faced with and their specific mandates (sometimes donor-dictated), it is near impossible to expect other organizations to engage in cleared areas benevolently. ITF is, however, coordinating with the Food Security and Livelihoods Working Group to support synergies, but these cannot be guaranteed. If ITF aims to support communities in recently cleared areas, it has been estimated that this is best done through the development of a combined ‘Clear then Grow’ approach, bringing all activities under one umbrella.

- *Strengthen the link between mine action and development through prioritization, utilizing post-clearance measurements and reporting against national development documents. Also further cooperate and communicate with other development agencies to improve the effects of demining on individuals along with their socio-economic development.* – These will be strengthened through additional outreach to development actors in the coming months.
- *Explore local cooperation, e.g. in the possibility of recycling ERW through local recycling organisations.* – No local recycling organisations have been identified yet, but partners will explore this further. This would also require approval from the SDF as they are only ones that can handle ERW once it has been removed from clearance sites.
- *Include mine-affected communities in the communication and cooperation process through feedback mechanisms, information display, local staff trained on communication skills. Measure the well-being feedback by including indicators on life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing or community potential in the Impact Measurement.* – These mechanisms will be improved in the next phase of the project and communication will be intensified through the provision of leaflets, information at local notice boards, etc.

#### *Recommendations on Mine Risk Education*

- *Include MRE information in land clearance activities. By systematically keeping MRE trainers informed of land survey and clearance initiatives, they can help answer questions and clarify misconceptions villagers may have. This would be especially useful in cases of community- based demining where individuals are permanently based in the communities they serve. Build a systematic and standardises system for data collection, maintenance and analysis. Additionally, further build the capacity of field staff to implement and modernise educational sessions for risk awareness.* – Due to limitations in preparation for phase I of the project, this was not the case. However, this will be redressed in the coming phases, when the RE and clearance will be implemented hand-in-hand, at the same location in order to inform one another.
- *Push for disability and mine accidents to be part of the beneficiary selection criteria. It would be a more cost-effective way to support socio-economic reintegration than setting up independent training with little hope of success from scratch. Assess the risks and needs associated with minority communities or other disadvantaged groups to better understand vulnerabilities and corresponding actions. This also can include to connect which organisations who focus on the survivors of hazard related accidents.* – This was one of the criteria even though people with disabilities may not be as exposed to explosive hazards as other population groups. What is more, in future, the project will aim to bring people with disabilities into the teams to effectively support the reintegration and through RE sessions reinforce this messaging on a daily basis.
- *The MRE assistance activities should target all relevant stakeholders on the ground, e.g. the identified groups in the KAP surveys.* – We believe this was the case during project implementation, and will be maintained in future.
- *Analyse MRE from a multiple factor causation perspective, identifying predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors. Injury causation intertwined with personal obligations and societal responsibilities will provide a beneficial context for future MRE initiatives.* – To a certain extent, this was already being done, but will be looked into further in future.



- *Adopt a more widespread and often digitalised approach of MRE for wider engagement especially with the youth. For instance, the development of visual films, seminars and more interactive methods of learning were raised as viable alternatives to traditional methods of teaching. This includes the further promotion of the project through social media platforms or other innovative means.* – This is a recurring theme in the mine action community, but also a very contentious topic. It has been argued that particularly social media RE is not as effective as “traditional” RE sessions. It also makes it a lot more difficult to measure beneficiary figures and knowledge retention. Therefore, while innovative approaches are being explored, this will be treated with caution.
- *Explorer opportunities to incorporate MRE into official educational curriculum to further increase awareness and build the capacities of students and school children through cooperation and partnership with authorities.* – This has already been explored, and currently the Autonomous Administration did not show specific interest or willingness for RE messaging to become part of the curriculum.

#### *Recommendations on Gender, Environment & other cross cutting themes*

- *Ensure a rapid implementation of a gender strategy and monitor progress based on the indicators – the project has made notable progress in the implementation, but the process is still slow. It is important for ITF to make sure that the strategy does not go unheeded and to regularly keep track of progress. Mainstreaming gender will not be an easy task in a programme like this; this will require ITF’s constant attention and commitment.* – A lot has been achieved in gender mainstreaming in a very short period of time. ITF will maintain checks and balances to improve the implement gender strategy.
- *Find innovative ways to record women’s needs and perceptions during surveys – As mentioned above, the understanding of women-specific needs and priorities is still quite low in the project implementation. It is recommended to collect data on female vs. males needs. When it is possible to send women (secure, relatively close areas), push for the recruitment of female surveyors. This includes to promote gender-balanced participation, to review the selection criteria with considering the demographics or interest of the local populations as well as connection with organisations who focus on gender equity. Implement additional projects that ensure that both genders benefit from the land clearance.* – During project implementation, women as RE team members or searchers were regularly available and sent to reach out to female members of the community. They formed large portions of the NES-based teams, also in order to ensure that women within the community feel more comfortable engaging in the project. More will be done in terms of pre- and post-activity impact assessments to measure and understand women and their perceptions.
- *When in the field, surveyors working with IPs should explain to community leaders the necessity for the organisation to record women’s perceptions and get the approval from community leaders and relatives for phone calls to be made directly to a representative number of women in the community, making sure to have a variety of age groups and marital status.* – This has been made clear repeatedly, and will continue to be made clear. Phone calls, however, may not be the best tool in this context as often women, who stay home do not have access to phones. Alternative models will be sought such as women groups, door-to-door outreach etc. through the deployment of enhanced mixed-gender RE/CL teams.
- *With the support of an expert, assess the environmental impact of mine action activities – ITF must go through a thorough review of its processes in the field to assess the environmental impact each activity has. At this stage, ITF does not have the expertise to do so in-house and this will require hiring an external consultant. The consultant’s mission will be to assess whether the environmental issue is significant – and requires action – or marginal, and to identify which processes are problematic or should be changed.* – An environmental impact tool for mine action exists and its use is relatively straightforward. ITF will connect with the tool’s creators to help guide the environmental assessment.

## **Project Visibility**

Throughout project implementation, ITF was paying a lot of attention to conflict sensitive, balanced and thought-out project communication and visibility. Whenever possible, and in discussions with other donors, ITF was conveying the messages of the importance of life-saving work supported by the Austrian Development Cooperation / Agency and the impact it has on the local population in NES in international fora. In-country, both partners operated on zero visibility principle or near-zero visibility principle in order to maintain the neutrality and maintain a minimum level of safety of their staff. When in-country and implementing activities, both partners ensured that relevant information was shared with relevant counterparts, especially the benefiting communities, but did not publicize the information widely so as to avoid any untoward events or unwanted attention.

In consultations with the security advisors, extensive communication and PR attempts were made to raise the visibility of the project internationally. ITF regularly communicated about the project on its social media, namely Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. All social media communications reached a wide audience (Please see examples attached as Annex 21), with organic outreach averaging beyond 1,000 people per post. This is well above ITF's usual reach. ITF also published articles on the project at its website, which are available [here](#) and [here](#).

ITF engaged with traditional media. In December 2020, the project was visited by a War Correspondent of the British Daily Mirror, which resulted in a series of articles and high-quality photo material. At the end of December 2020, the project also gained wide coverage in the Daily Mirror, a British newspaper. The first story was focusing mostly on the work done by the international EOD experts engaged on the project and can be found [here](#). The second article emphasized the local staff aspects and their motivation to work in this field of expertise, and is available [here](#). The project also achieved major 2-full page coverage in the Slovenian newspaper Dnevnik in February 2021, which can be accessed [here](#). For print version of the article, please see Annex 21. In April 2021, ITF was similarly contacted by the Austrian Press Agency, which drafted a news piece on the project. A slightly redacted version of the article was, according to APA, published [here](#).

## **Lessons learned and perspectives**

Evaluating contextual developments (namely operating in a global pandemic) that arose during the project period, as well as evaluating the relevance and impact of its project modalities, the following principal lessons learned have been considered by the project partners within and beyond this project, have shaped the design, planning and/or implementation of existing interventions, and will continue to shape future interventions. Some of these were elements already in place but whose importance was reconfirmed.

- Flexibility in operational modalities – As long as the Covid-19 pandemic remains a concern, partners will continue to implement the modifications put in place in 2020/2021 across its activities (namely social distancing, reduced session size, use of protective equipment etc). Furthermore, although the interventions are focused on humanitarian mine action, the project teams shall contribute to other ongoing public health campaigns such as Covid-19 basic hygiene and prevention, especially when it is the only humanitarian actor present in remote or hard to reach areas.

- Duty of care towards personnel – In response to the spread of Covid-19 in NES, partners will continue to uphold on-the-job precautionary measures set in place in 2020/2021, to limit the spread of infection among personnel. The partners consider staff safety and wellbeing a priority. ITF management will continue to monitor the situation and respond proactively and efficiently to arising changes.
- Robust in situ and remote management – Relying on one of the partner's prior experience in remote management of activities in NES, the team was able to rapidly shift to a remote management model enabling at least some RE activities in-country to continue seamlessly once the security situation (as a result of the incursion in October-November 2019) and lifting of movement restrictions (Covid-19 related) allowed. It was evident that the regular capacity building of staff during the project, combined with robust on-the-job coaching and support provided by the international staff and daily over the phone/online platforms, enabled the projects to be minimally affected by force majeure events in terms of quality and effectiveness. This is less applicable for the clearance operations, where international and high-level expertise on the ground is key for ensuring safety and security of operations. A lot, however, can be achieved by appropriately streamlining international presence, lightening the international footprint, and on-the-job capacity building, which has been practiced during the project.
- Influence of local staff – Project local staff, men and women, have been a positive influence on their communities locally and regionally. For instance, not only have children, especially girls, been observed in subsequent visits mimicking RE sessions they received or looked up to female members of clearance teams as role models, higher abidance by community members to Covid-19 precautionary measures has also been observed by all project staff, especially in terms of improved hygiene practices and limiting gatherings. This serves as evidence of the influence of teams on communities through the RE content delivered and through their everyday presence in the field implementing clearance operations. It enhances their status as role models of risk reduction and associated safer behaviours. It also demonstrates very practically the message that was being reinforced throughout the project, and that is that women can and should play an active role in the local community and that their voices should be heard and efforts should be made seen.
- New opportunities for complementary humanitarian interventions – As vulnerabilities increase in the still fragile security context of NES, exacerbated by rising socio-economic stressors, it is evident that implementing programs that integrate different facets of humanitarian assistance along with mine action must continue, until comprehensive and sustainable services and income-generating activities can return to those regions. ITF with its partners will keep looking into new opportunities for complementary assistance to vulnerable population groups, including persons with disabilities, female-headed households, and victims of explosive accidents. This is something that is being acted upon in Phase II of the project. Based on positive feedback on the idea of linking mine action and agricultural support directly into a specific approach, ITF will aim to develop this further as its niche addressing the wider human security.
- Linking RE and clearance more closely – From the perspective of ITF as the project managing organization and the lead on this project, both partners performed exceptionally under extremely difficult and unique circumstances. While they were both successful with separate sets of activities in separate locations, ITF estimates much more profound impact would be achieved if the two activities would be brought closer together. Typically, in mine action, RE and clearance are implemented concurrently and as mutually reinforcing activities, where RE serves also as a community liaison function

and data collection tool for clearance. During the planning stage of the project this was not foreseen due to the existing capacities of both partners at the time. This, however, will be revised for future interventions. By bringing RE/CL and clearance together a more focused and all-encompassing community outreach will also be possible.

- Role of ITF – Pandemic permitting, ITF intends to take on a stronger role in the project's future interventions by taking lead in partnership- and network-building, further guidance and maintenance of impact measurement tools.
- Strengthened impact assessments – During project activities, clearance partner was not able to carry out in-depth post-activity impact assessments systematically due to limited staffing and resources. Impact assessments were done sporadically and anecdotally, and while they still provide testament to project's results, the outcomes of the intervention may be more difficult to compare in the long run. For future intervention, this component will be strengthened so as to allow for the project to gain systematic impact insight and results that are easily evaluated.
- Potential new operational areas – Another lesson learnt for the project was that Al Hasakah and Ar Raqqa governorates are areas where mine action interventions were most densely concentrated. It goes without saying that the needs are great in both geographic locations, and mine action efforts are very much required. Deir ez Zour governorate, to the south of Al Hasakah, however, remains a major priority area for future mine action interventions. The explosive hazards survey and clearance and RE needs there are massive, especially in areas to the southeast of the governorate. These areas are very remote, and little (if any) humanitarian assistance (including mine action) trickles there; explosive hazards contamination is massive, though, with items polluting major roads and roadside areas, schools, hospitals and other key infrastructure. The clearance team conducted two short assessment mission with the support of CF to the area to assess the possibility of future interventions there. In addition to the great need, it has also been estimated that due to the remoteness of the area and little life and medical support available, which is vital for explosive ordnance management, significant resources would be required to set up operations there. For information, summary assessment reports with imagery from Baghuz and Susat can be found in Annex 22. Another potential area for clearance operations is to the north of Al Hasakah, near the Peace Spring area, where particularly vulnerable population groups reside and cultivate their land. This would require no additional resources, but is pending due to continued active hostilities in the area.
- Fluid regulatory frameworks and political relationships – Regulatory frameworks remained extremely fluid both within NES and KRG. Political tensions between the two entities occasionally resulted in measures affecting humanitarian organizations, for example tightening of border crossing rules or extension of the border crossing approval deadlines. It has proven to be key for the project to maintain the engagement of well-versed, informed and well-connected local staff on both sides of the border, who are able to react to changed regulations in real time and address the issues before they arise.

## Finances

The initially planned budget has undergone three reallocations in order to better match the reality on the ground, particularly in light of the deteriorating security situation and the pandemic, both of which resulted in a delay in some of the project activities, longer staff engagements than initially anticipated to prevent the loss of qualified expert staff, and savings in equipment.

Overall, following both partner's financial statements and their respective audit reports submitted, it has been established that 2,191,021 EUR of the project budget has been expended until 31 March 2021. This is 31,201 EUR less than originally budgeted, and constitutes 98.60% of the overall project budget. The budget has been audited by BDO Revizija d.o.o., acting as an independent auditor and selected following the open call selection process.

The only significant underspending was noted under the Travel Costs budget line, where 90.77% of envisioned budget was expended. The underspending on travel costs is mainly due to Covid-19 related travel restrictions, which on the one hand led to less travel overall and, surprisingly, cheaper overseas and especially air travel.

The audit report and the final financial statement is enclosed as Annex 23.

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## Annex 1

**Outcome:** Sustainable returns of civilian population to safe/cleared areas enabled.

To a great extent, the outcome of the project was accomplished with the returnees coming back to Al Hasakah and Ar Raqqa, following the stabilization of security situation. An important external factor is that many people are willing to return to their homes or home areas in spite of the potential explosive hazards threats. From the information available some clearance operations were ongoing in Ar Raqqa and parts of Al Hasakah for a short period of time during the project, but were mostly halted or stopped after the onset of the pandemic. ITF and its partners intend to liaise with the local authorities and the NES NGO Forum in the coming months to possibly obtain information on the relative safety of these returns.

It is precisely because of this willingness of the returnee population to take the risk, that the risk education and safety messaging are vital in order to prevent accidents, injury and death both among the host communities and IDPs. The target population that has been reached so far has, without exception, reported and through post-impact survey demonstrated increased knowledge of safe behavior towards explosive threats.

**Indicator 1:** Safe returns of civilian population to target locations in Ar Raqqa and in Al Hasakah

	Baseline: 12,310 re- turnees in Al Hasakah	31 March 2021	Baseline: 47,429 re- turnees in Ar Raqqa	31 March 2021
Target (planned)	20,000	20,000	60,000	60,000
Achievement <sup>2</sup>	0	52,708	0	58,110
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0%	263%	0%	96,8%

**Indicator 2:** Target population in Ar Raqqa has knowledge and skills to adopt safer behavior with regards to ERW and IEDs

	Baseline: 0% of target popula- tion	31 March 2021
Target (planned)	80%	80%
Achievement	0%	100%
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0%	125%

**Output 1: Assessment, non-technical and technical survey activities on ERW-affected land at determined ISIS liberated areas implemented, and non-ERW-affected land released with reaching out to the affected communities.**

<sup>2</sup> Data on returnee achievements was gathered for the period between October 2019 and 31 March 2021, and is based on the information available at the UN OCHA's IDP tracking mechanism.

This output has been exceeded by over 140%, which is mainly due to the type of contamination found in the area, where BAC methodology that was deployed to a large extent relied on systematic technical survey and inspection methodology.

**Indicator 1.1:** million m<sup>2</sup> of land released

	Baseline: 0 m <sup>2</sup>	31 March 2021
Target (planned)	0.28 million m <sup>2</sup>	1.15 million m <sup>2</sup>
Achievement	0 m <sup>2</sup>	3,222,236 m <sup>2</sup>
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0%	280%

**Output 2: Land and infrastructure cleared through ERW and UXO clearance operations is returned to local population and put to use.**

This output has been exceeded by almost 130%; due to the methodology applicable in light of the contamination, and the relatively scattered contamination on agricultural land large swathes of land were surveyed and cleared. The figures included in output 1 are also included in output 2, so this type of measures will be avoided in future.

**Indicator 2.1:** million m<sup>2</sup> of land cleared

	Baseline: 0 m <sup>2</sup>	31 March 2021
Target (planned)	1.4 million m <sup>2</sup>	1.59 million m <sup>2</sup>
Achievement	0 m <sup>2</sup>	3,645,605 m <sup>2</sup>
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0%	229%

**Output 3: At risk communities, based on humanitarian need related to risk of exposure to explosive hazards regardless of their social status and personal circumstances, have increased knowledge and skills and are better able to protect themselves, their friends and families from explosive hazards.**

This output has likewise been fully achieved or exceeded as per below.

**Indicator 3.1:** Community members receive safety messages about the dangers of explosive hazards

	Baseline: 0 people	30 September 2020
Target (planned)	6,300	6,300
Achievement	0	6,871 Boys: 1,714 Girls: 1,770 Men: 1,680 Women: 1,707
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0 %	109 %



**Indicator 3.2:** Community Focal Points (CPFs) trained to share safety messages with peers & people in their spheres of influence

	Baseline: 0 people	30 September 2020
Target (planned)	20	20
Achievement	0	23 Men: 12 Women: 11
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0 %	115 %

**Indicator 3.3:** Humanitarian workers from other NGOs are given Safety Briefings

	Baseline: 0 people	30 September 2020
Target (planned)	10	10
Achievement	0	30 Men: 13 Women: 17
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0%	300%

**Indicator 3.4:** Humanitarian workers from other NGOs participate in Training of Trainers

	Baseline: 0 people	30 September 2020
Target (planned)	10	10
Achievement	0	10 Men: 4 Women: 6
Comparison (e.g. in %)	0 %	100%