



# Final Report



<b>Contract Number:</b> 2843-00/2021
<b>Title of the Intervention:</b> Clear then Grow: Explosive Hazards Clearance and Explosive Ordnance Risk Education with Agricultural Recovery in North East Syria (Phase II)
<b>Project Period:</b> 1 June 2021 – 31 May 2022. Extended until 31 August 2022.

**Reporting period:**

Reporting period:	1 June 2021 to 31 August 2022
Due date:	30 November 2022
ITF Contact Person:	Signature:



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>AANES</b>	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
<b>BAC</b>	Battle Area Clearance
<b>CF</b>	Coalition Forces
<b>CFP</b>	Community Focal Point
<b>CL</b>	Community Liaison
<b>EO</b>	Explosive Ordnance
<b>EOD</b>	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
<b>EORE</b>	Explosive Ordnance Risk Education
<b>ERW</b>	Explosive Remnants of War
<b>GIS</b>	Geographic Information System
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>GoT</b>	Government of Turkey
<b>HAO</b>	Humanitarian Affairs Office
<b>HRP</b>	Humanitarian Response Plan
<b>HI</b>	Humanity & Inclusion
<b>IED</b>	Improvised Explosive Devices
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IKMAA</b>	Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency
<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>KRG</b>	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
<b>MAO</b>	Mine Action Office
<b>MAWG</b>	Mine Action Working Group
<b>NES</b>	Northeast Syria
<b>NTS</b>	Non-technical Survey
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>TAF</b>	Turkish Armed Forces
<b>SAG</b>	Saratoga Advisors Group
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>TAF</b>	Turkish Armed Forces
<b>UNMAS</b>	United Nations Mine Action Service
<b>VBIED</b>	Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device
<b>WOS</b>	Whole of Syria

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## Summary of the intervention

This report provides an overview of the project's achievements between 1 June 2021 and 31 August 2022, the full project period. Although the project formally commenced on 1 June 2021, the actual start of project activities was slightly delayed due to the late signing of the Grant Agreement (signed on 12 July 2021). ITF commenced project preparations, pre-deployment and liaison with both project partners in the beginning of June 2021. Partner I (Saratoga Advisors Group – SAG) was able to continue the work started in Phase I of the project without major funding gaps and/or the need to fully shut down operations, thanks to the funding provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia. In mid-June 2021, the international staff that were engaged during Phase I of the project, returned to Northeast Syria (NES) to build up enhanced operations and re-hire local staff. By the time the grant agreement had been signed, the training of security staff was completed and all of SAG's national staff were officially (re)employed.

At the same time, ITF and Partner II (Khair Organization) were engaged in contract negotiation and finding a solution for the delivery of project funds into NES. Due to the war in Syria, the traditional banking system has collapsed with banks no longer functioning or lacking liquidity. Even if a traditional banking system existed, non-Syrian banks would not approve payments to a Syrian bank owing to sanctions on the Government of Syria (GoS) (even though the NES administration is separate from the GoS) and regardless of the project's humanitarian nature. A solution was found by August 2021, when Khair was fully mobilized as well. This primarily included close liaison and relationship-building with the communities of Al Khamayl and Al Burardi, where clearance activities were taking place during Phase I of the project. A more in-depth assessment was initially also carried out that enabled the team to stage its response better and tailor it to the specific needs of the target groups. In September 2022, full-scale agricultural support activities and preliminary vendor selection process and procurement activities have also begun.

Following the initial delays in the delivery of all outputs considering the factors mentioned above, the progress on all project outputs and anticipated achievements has been steady and progressing well, especially during the first six months of the project. In early 2022, the project progress has been halted for several weeks due to constraints stemming from the operational environment, namely:

1. the closure of the Iraq-NES border from 15 December 2021 until early February 2022,
2. the suspension of humanitarian mine action (HMA) activities between 4 January 2022 and 28 February, and then also from 4 July 2022 to 13 August 2022,
3. and the gravely deteriorated security situation in NES following the attack on Ghuweyran Prison and the escape of ISIS-affiliated detainees, as well as
4. the prospect of a renewed Government of Turkey (GoT) incursion along the border areas in summer 2022.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, and despite these operational challenges, ITF has been overwhelmed by both project partners, their international and especially national staff's focus and drive to perform. Their determination on the one hand to clear their land of explosive contamination and on the other hand to assist the rural communities, all with an eye to the hoped-for return of all the people who fled NES under ISIS and the 2019 GoT incursion into NES was admirable. The clearance of agricultural lands has paid dividends as people, including some returnees, have been able to re-start productively using the land cleared during Phase I. After much hardship and the burden of housing and dealing with ISIS fighters and their families in detention, continued clearance efforts in combination with agricultural support activities, are a proven method

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<sup>1</sup> These developments are discussed in more detail in the section Background/Context.

supporting returnees, stimulating the stagnant local economy and reviving, as well as modernizing agriculture as an important economic driver in the region.

## **Background/context**

The framework conditions in NES were very dynamic throughout the project period, with the conditions becoming increasingly complex in the second half of the project implementation. Security incidents were on the increase and political constellations were undergoing major shifts since late 2021, and then in early 2022, partially under the influence of the war in Ukraine. Developments specific to the HMA sector compounded the level of complexities and the need to navigate challenges posed by the operational environment. Below is a detailed overview of the framework conditions.

### **General Operational Challenges**

#### ***Border Crossing Point Closure***

Faysh Khabour border crossing remained the only border crossing into NES throughout the project duration, and only open to humanitarian/NGO staff three days of the week. As the only entry and exit point for international staff in key expert positions ensuring safe HMA operations, the border crossing developments were closely monitored throughout the project and the scheduling of border crossing permission approval processes for international staff rotations and monitoring visits was a major logistical feat.

This was complicated on 15 December 2021, when a violent incident took place at the border crossing with around 100 members of the Revolutionary Youth Union attacking Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq) Security Forces and storming the bridge over the Tigris River. The result of this attack, provocations and tensions that ensued was complete border closure on the Iraqi side, which persisted nearly two months and was a clear political signal to AANES on the need to prevent such attacks in future. This caused a number of issues for the ability of humanitarian organizations to operate in NES, as well as for the economy in NES, which is largely dependent on trade with KRG and the transport of humanitarian supplies across the border.

During the border closure, most international staff working with SAG were already out of country as they were departing for Christmas break. Two staff remained following a risk assessment and internal discussions. High-risk explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) operations have been paused due to the inability to evacuate people to KRG in case of a major injury, but low-risk area search and EORE, as well as agricultural support activities, have been able to continue even during border closure.

#### ***Economic Situation***

Under the impact of sanctions, the pandemic, and the triple water crisis (low levels of Euphrates River, limited availability of Alouk water station in Hasakah and overall drought due to lack of rain), the economic situation in NES has been worsening during the project implementation. Rainfall levels in early 2022 have remained substantially below long-term average levels; thus, the European Drought Observatory warned in March 2022 of a medium to high risk of drought impact on agriculture this season. This could have a severe impact on the agricultural yields in NES. Economic crisis has been compounded by the impacts from the crisis in Ukraine, which – coupled with the closure of the border with Iraq during January 2022 – led to substantially

increased food and oil prices throughout NES. The population was struggling with the high costs of food. This led many to incur more debt or to adopt negative coping strategies, including child labour and early marriage.

During the project implementation, the GoS implemented numerous austerity measures to cope with the domestic impact of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Food reserves and fossil fuel products have been rationed, several classes of exports have been restricted to service domestic demand, and foreign currency reserve spending has been limited for use on key commodity imports — primarily wheat — to offset the turmoil sweeping global markets, mounting shortages in the Syrian marketplace, and a drawdown in over-all imports from Russian and Ukrainian producers.

Towards the end of the project period, however, the economy has hit a new low with the Syrian pound's collapse (1 USD = 5100 SYP). The currency's downfall was driving up inflation further and aggravating hardship as Syrians struggle to afford food, power, and other basics. According to some reports, 80% of the Syrians were living under the poverty line as of 31 August 2022. Ongoing fuel crisis has had an additional impact on the last wheat crops, which were already affected by drought. As regards to food security, for example, in comparison to the previous year, it was reported that the 2022 wheat production in NES has increased from 250,000 tones in 2021 summer harvest to 360,000 tones in 2022 summer, which represents a 44% increase in yield. While a welcome positive trend, it was also stated by the NES authorities that 'more is needed to feed all'.

The prices in NES that were on the rise, especially fuel and oil prices, were having some impact on the project budget, but this was managed carefully by the project team. Potential instabilities resulting from food shortage or price hikes, such as demonstration which occasionally turned violent, were also being carefully monitored and avoided. The economic situation overall exacerbated an already problematic humanitarian situation and presented a potentially deteriorating security outlook.

### ***The Triple Water Crisis***

In 2021, NES has been affected by unprecedented low water levels of the Euphrates River, following low water flows into the Syrian portion of the river and the principal water reservoirs in NES, low and erratic rainfall during the 2020/21 winter season, accompanied by higher-than-average temperatures. These led to drought-like conditions in the region during the second quarter of 2021 and severely affected agricultural production. Coupled with the recurring shut-downs and reduced operational capacity of Alouk water station, supplying an estimated 500,000 people in Hasakah city and surrounding areas, this created the so-called Triple Water Crisis in NES. The crisis affected the humanitarian situation across NES, as well as this intervention's agricultural support program to an extent. One of the programming locations is the previously EO contaminated village of Al Buardi, in the proximity of the Iraq border, which is mostly home to returnees. The climate at the village is semi-arid; coupled with the drought and no natural water sources, Khair found that barley production and home gardening would not be viable at the location although historically barley may have been grown there. At the same time, they established that livestock production as an intervention more resilient to weather changes was worth supporting. This was a mitigation measure that was adopted as anticipated in the planning stage risk assessment. Khair thus focused efforts in the village on supporting sheep herders and livestock production.

### ***Covid-19 Pandemic and other Medical Issues***

One of the main risks that was foreseen ahead of the project start was the continuous impact of Covid-19, specifically flare ups of Covid-19 cases, and the AANES response (usually by curfews and banning public gatherings). In mid-August 2021 and throughout early fall of 2021, occasionally a ban on large gatherings, including large meetings, weddings, mourning tents/funerals, demonstrations, and conferences has been imposed by AANES, while mostly neglected by the local populace. AANES institutions and educational facilities remained open and functioned normally while adhering to all precautionary procedures, including the use of face masks, sanitizing products, and enforcing social distancing measures. Vaccination levels in NES remained low. Occasional shipments of Covid-19 vaccines arrive to Syria through the COVAX Facility, but little is administered in NES. The national vaccine deployment plan anticipated 20% of Syria's population to be vaccinated by end of 2021, but that goal is very likely not going to be reached.

Within the ITF project team, individual Covid-19 cases have been detected through regular PCT testing. These, however, did not have an impact on the project trajectory and progress. The medical staff on the team of SAG and the team leader of Khair continue to pass the following prevention plan information to all staff continually: protect yourself and those around you, keep physical distance of at least 1 meter from others, even if they don't appear to be sick, avoid crowds and close contact, wear a properly fitted mask when physical distancing is not possible and in poorly ventilated settings, clean your hands frequently with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water, cover your mouth and nose with a bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze, dispose of used tissues immediately and clean hands regularly. If you develop symptoms or test positive for COVID-19, self-isolate until you recover and inform your medical manager.

In addition to Covid-19, another medical issue has been detected during project operations. In November 2021 after visiting a number of small villages, EORE teams reported encountering several cases of individuals with leishmaniasis. Leishmaniasis is a skin infection caused by a single-celled parasite that is transmitted by the bite of a phlebotomine sand fly, and was pre-conflict restricted only to Aleppo and Damascus areas. Since 2013, an alarming increase of cases has been reported, which is not surprising considering leishmaniasis mostly affects poor people, and is associated with malnutrition, population displacement, poor housing, a weak immune system, and a lack of other resources. It is treatable and curable, but if not treated, some cases of leishmaniasis can be fatal. The teams have received instructions regarding the condition and preventive measures of transmission from an infected host from the medic. The project staff also attended a meeting to raise awareness through the NES NGO Forum, and to establish a means to deliver some much-needed healthcare and awareness to the affected areas that are consistent with families living well below the poverty line.

Towards the end of the summer, and with it also the present project, an increased incidence of cholera cases was detected in NES. These were mainly present in Raqqa, Deir ez Zour and Hasaka areas as they were linked to lack of clean and safe water. In Hasakah, the lack of Alouk water station's functioning and the reliance on trucked water of questionable quality were factors contributing to thousands of water-borne medical cases. The cholera outbreak also affected the local refugee and IDP camps, but did not have an impact on the project, which had already concluded by the time the outbreak reached its peak.

**Security Situation**

The security situation in NES remained in flux, especially with regards to the situation on the Northern border with the GoT. Within the project’s area of operations, the security situation and prevailing associated security risk has been assessed as Moderate overall, with certain potential areas of operation or during shorter time periods assessed as High.













## **Coordination**

The ITF project team continued to engage with the HAO in NES and the KRG authorities to ensure the validity of operational licences and registrations. Without these, the project team would not be able to operate in NES, and international staff and ITF HQ staff would not be able to cross the border from Iraq. Khair as the local partner was facing issues with the renewal of their registration in NES towards the end of the project period. This had no impact on the project implementation but may have an impact on potential future cooperation with Khair that is still struggling to receive an updated registration certificate. ITF has also engaged with the HAO on this, and an official response is still pending at the time of writing this report.

During the project, ITF has also been regularly coordinating its activities on various levels, first and foremost with the HAO and City Council/Canton in Hasakah City, which covers the area of project operations and receives input and feedback from the villages and communities ITF has served with this project. ITF met and discussed needs and priorities with the affected commu-

nities themselves, primarily through the village *mukhtars* and elders as well as individual beneficiaries. Both partners engaged in community liaison and enhanced dialogue with the communities of Al Khamayl and Al Buardi to inform them of the anticipated project activities, the timelines and solicit their feedback.

In addition to resolving the official status of a relationship with NES MAO through the MoU negotiations, ITF has been liaising with the NES MAO since its establishment, although the NES MAO's mandate was often unclear and undetermined. NES MAO, however, for example set up a hotline for reporting explosive hazards suspected contamination, but that hasn't fully come to life yet. ITF also supported NES MAO with training on how to operate a hotline, and with training on EORE and GIS/mapping systems. ITF has also held several sessions with the NES MAO representatives in order to increase their knowledge and awareness on the anticipated role of the NES MAO. In coordination with IKMAA, ITF has also been aiming to arrange an exchange of experience and a study visit of NES MAO in KRG. That has not happened yet, but ITF anticipates it is something that may take place in 2023. NES MAO remain under-resourced, and considerable capacity building efforts are required for the NES MAO to be able to actually serve their intended role. A well-functioning NES MAO abiding by International Mine Action Standards is, however, a shared goal of all HMA partners in NES.

Throughout project implementation, team ITF actively participated in the MAWG meetings at operational and country director levels, and shared available data with other partners. This cooperation and information-exchange within the MAWG has become increasingly vibrant during the shared challenge of MoU negotiations. Team ITF continued to engage with the NES NGO Forum, even though ITF as such cannot be a member of the Forum owing to its status, which is not that of an NGO. Nonetheless, ITF has developed good relations with the NES NGO Forum, which allowed for a constant and mutually-beneficial flow of information.

Team ITF also engaged more closely with the NES Food Security and Livelihoods Working Group (FSL WG), and especially with the Protection Working Group (PWG) and delivered presentation on its activities and operations planned in NES in the coming period. This resulted in the linking up with Concern Worldwide, an international NGO, which expressed the need for its staff to receive basic EORE training in order to better be able to operate its child safe spaces in Raqqa and Hasakah Provinces. Training session for nine of Concern's staff was held at ITF compound in Hasakah City during the last week of August 2021. One of the issues that has been identified by the team is that there is little coordination and communication between individual working groups, which is not a challenge unique to NES. ITF has been trying to achieve an exchange of information between FSL WG and PWG in view of the approach to link HMA and agricultural responses. There is no referral system in place, though, and the exchange of this information has been very slow or even impossible.

Reporting via the 4W's as per the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan commenced in September 2021 to the PWG for clearance as well as EORE, once the reporting matrix was fully developed by the PWG. Previously, this data has been partially transferred to the PWG through the MAWG coordinator IMMAP. But because ITF is not a member of the NES NGO Forum, this data was assigned to other clearance partners. This has highlighted the gap in IMMAP and NES-wide reporting procedures, and was discussed with the various partners. This and other reporting mechanism gaps to avoid duplication of reporting and missing out on information, as well as to streamline the reporting burden. It should also be noted that all reporting is done on a voluntary basis, and organizations are not obliged to comply.

Team ITF took part in the research conducted by Humanity & Inclusion's for an impact assessment on explosive hazards contamination in NES, which included information sharing and interviews at HQ level as well as field level in NES. ITF has also been able to endorse the report, along with Mines Advisory Group. The report was presented at an online closed-door event on 17 November 2021, in which ITF actively participated with its own input. The report, which is of private nature and not to be distributed further, is enclosed as Annex 2. The report was also used as a tool by ITF and other HMA partners in various advocacy events. One of such events was the 25<sup>th</sup> International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers (NDM-UN25), which took place from 23 to 24 June 2022, and where ITF presented in achievements and approach in NES to a number of interlocutors, including the mine action donor group.

Finally, Team ITF also regularly engaged with the Whole of Syria partners for the Mine Action area of responsibility, which is coordinated by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS). ITF reported to the Humanitarian Response Plan Financial Tracking Mechanism and through the 4W's reporting system.<sup>3</sup> An annual Mine Action partners' meeting was held on 23 November 2021 in a hybrid format, and attended only by a limited number of NES HMA partners. No further meetings were implemented until the end of the project period. ITF was present at the meeting, highlighting its integrated approach to HMA through the adoption of the follow-on agricultural support activities and the benefits thereof. It has been made clear by other organizations, including UNMAS, that ITF's approach is unique in Syria as none of the HMA partners have attempted this to date. It therefore gained a lot of interest, and is indeed something ITF intends to advocate for in the future, and build and expand on.

## Stakeholder analysis

During the project implementation, there have been no changes in the beneficiaries, target groups and implementing partners. The beneficiaries are local communities throughout the Al Hasakah Governorate as planned initially. All of the project activities have been focused on areas mainly to the south and east of Hasakah City. In the first few weeks of the project, some activities were also implemented in areas to the north of Hasakah City towards the so-called Peace Spring area; however, in light of renewed and intensified conflict activity, these areas were subsequently avoided. The project maintains its focus on the two most vulnerable groups as per the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, namely people living in areas with high levels of contamination and over-burdened communities with a large number of IDPs or returnees.

The target groups included members of mainly rural and agrarian communities, particularly in the villages of Al Khamayl, Al Buardi, Al Sereb, Al Hafayer, Al Maghloga, Al Makhroum and Al Noufelyia to name only the largest villages targeted. Rural communities in NES are most often those that are under-resourced and those where people live under the poverty line as much of the support is concentrated on IDP camps and on urban areas. Overall, the number of beneficiaries reached directly through the project is over 8,090 people in the villages where explosive hazards clearance was taking place, 11,187 people where EORE was delivered and 340 recipients of agricultural support program. Out of these, more than half were women, and nearly half

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<sup>3</sup> ITF's reports to the Financial Tracking Mechanism are currently not visible on the publicly accessible website although they have been reported in a timely manner, and ITF has been working with UNMAS and OCHA to address this issue for a few months now.

people are internally displaced persons (IDPs) or returnees, according to the heads of communes. At least 100 members of minority groups have been reached, mainly of the remaining Christian communities to the north of Hasakah city. Team ITF has also been working to collect more robust data on people with disabilities (PWDs) engaged through this intervention, mainly through the community liaison function of the EORE. At least 100 PWDs (but likely more) have been reached directly through EORE sessions that were tailored to their specific disability. The teams began collecting data on specific disabilities in order to report them to the NES NGO Forum and PWG in support of referral pathways for additional support, but there has been a very slow and minimal uptake of that information in the PWG.

The direct beneficiaries of the project also include the local national employees, who mainly benefit from regular training and coaching for their specific roles, as well as through stable income that brings about multiplying effects to the economically deprived communities. Overall, the project employed 52 local national staff, out of which 12 were female; female staff members include the head of finance and human resources, interpreters, EORE facilitators, a medic and several searchers. Contracted staff also included 12 drivers, who are all male. One PWD, a mine victim, that the team met during Phase I of the project was recruited, trained and is employed as an EORE facilitator.

The project partners remained the same, and ITF assesses that both partnerships functioned well with established regular reporting mechanisms and a constant flow of information. Khair staff is all Syrian nations with limited English language skills; however, through Khair's affiliation to WATAN charity and local national staff employed under the HMA component of the project, a dialogue through interpreters was taking place in English. Occasionally, this was time-consuming, but not in a way that would affect the project or the partnership. Both partners demonstrated high levels of cooperation and willingness to make this project a success. ITF carried out several monitoring visits during the project implementation, which involved extensive meetings and site visits with both partners.

None of the partners experienced any personnel fluctuations that would have a significant impact on the project implementation. Khair's staffing structure remained unchanged and reliable during the entire project implementation. The partner engaged experienced staff, including the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manager, to implement the MEL plan effectively. Operational staff of the HMA partner was trained (mostly refresher) over a two-week period in July 2021. The training included basic operational requirements and routines, such as arrival drills, medical briefings, high & low threat search methodologies, and Standard Operating Procedures, e.g. conventional and improvised explosive hazards finds and render safe procedures, evacuation procedures, etc. On 18 July 2021, live clearance operations were able to begin. On the other hand, EORE training for the newly implemented project EORE teams formally commenced on 11 July 2021 with the arrival of the subject matter expert (SME) into NES. The attendees covered an array of topics, inclusive of community engagement practices and protocols, an introduction to EORE and safety messages, EORE explosive ordnance safety, recognition and classifications of explosive hazards, and EORE data gathering. The initial EORE session of the teams delivered to the at-risk communities under close supervision of the international EORE SME was held on 26 July 2021. A further course validation session was held on 2 August 2021 at the Al Kamayl village, where ITF has already established close relationships during Phase I.



Additionally, SAG have instigated a monthly training matrix, to ensure no skill fade, update on new techniques as well as impart information as required. The first whole team re-training occurred between the 12 and 15 September 2021. This training period was needed to ensure the initial knowledge and skills imparted in July 2021 were taken up as required. Another whole team training was implemented in March 2022, after the lifting of the February 2022 suspension order, which was effectively also the return from New Year's stand-down. At that time, two international Technical Advisors decided to resign from their position, which was mainly due to the uncertainty of the security situation in NES and better opportunities arising elsewhere. Their roles were taken on by other project staff members, which was an achievable feat given the relatively short remaining time of the project. In order to maintain operations throughout the extended period of the project, some staff have been furloughed and the composition of teams was adjusted so that it still allowed for the delivery of the project results.

## 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**

The project started with a slight delay due to the late signing of the Grant Agreement and the protracted contract negotiations and payment system set-up between ITF and Khair. This lasted longer than anticipated due to the financial complexities in Syria, which led ITF and Khair to pursue the set-up of hawala-based payment system, which is the only way to ensure funding reaches local Syrian partners. These delays, however, have largely been made up thanks to the genuine enthusiasm of both partners to deliver the project in line with the initial plans. During negotiations, Khair began low-level preparation activities before official contract signing. Additional delays occurred in the implementation of activities due to the KRG / NES Border Closure which commenced on 15 December 2021, the Hasakah prison attack by ISIS and two stop work orders at the behest of the HAO, totaling nearly four months. During the months outside of the challenges mentioned, the performance and delivery of both partners was exceptional and commensurate as to a normal operating period. In light of objective delays stemming from the operational environment, over which the project team had no influence, the Austrian Development Agency approved an extension of the project and slight budget reallocation to make up for the delays. Unfortunately, however, over a month and a half of that extended period was again faced with a suspension order owing to negotiations between the NES MAO and the HMA organizations. This prevented SAG from completing the clearance goals in its entirety; yet, this was – however – owing to challenges stemming from the operational environment, which have been mitigated against as best as possible. The alternative was agreeing to an arrangement and relationship with the NES MAO, which would be in breach of humanitarian principles and principles of transparency and data protection.

The project was closely monitored by ITF HQ-based Project Manager (PM), who also serves as the Head of Implementation Office in Iraq. This was done through regular weekly calls with SAG senior project management team, as well as daily coordination and conversations with SAG's NES-based PM and Operations Manager. ITF PM was also actively engaged in all external stakeholder coordination, effectively as the ITF Country Director, in part also to triangulate the data obtained through various channels. A similar reporting and exchange system was established with Khair, although this has been slightly less frequent (bi-weekly or monthly) due

to the activities being less of a security concern and less linked with ITF directly.<sup>4</sup> ITF was also in correspondence with WATAN as Khair's affiliated entity. ITF PM visited NES on a quarterly basis, depending on the specific security situation; each visit involved oversight and extensive meetings with both partners as well as local and AANES authorities, and local communities in the project's area of operations.

1. The **initial monitoring visit** was carried out by ITF PM for Syria, accompanied by ITF PM for Jordan and ITF photographer, as well as a representative of the ADA. The field visit took place between 16 and 26 October 2021, and provided a good perspective of the project, including the possible future project goals. Travel into NES is complicated as the only access is possible by flying into Erbil, KRG and crossing over the land border after obtaining prior written permission by the KRG authorities and NES authorities.

Monitoring included a visit to HMA sites with active BAC in Al Hafayer village, where EORE sessions at a local school were also observed and monitored. Al Buardi village, where BAC has been completed was also visited for handover to the landowner and meeting with the mukhtar. At the village of Al Khamayl, a meeting with the mukhtar and village elders was held, as well as a visit to Khair's office. There, training of barley farmers was observed, and a meeting was held with several farmers (male and female) in training. The monitoring visit also included meetings with the NES MAO, HAO, NES NGO Forum, IMMAP, and Hasakah City Canton.

The visit confirmed the adherence of project partners to the project plans and the relevance of the project to the target groups. It was particularly valuable as a means for all involved to gain a perspective from the local communities, which – without an exception – confirmed that there is a great need for as well as appreciation for the support that is being provided. Feedback that was provided also included calls for enhanced support, which was shared on several occasions, and especially for agricultural activities. Agriculture traditionally enjoys support from AANES, but due to the Triple Water Crisis and economic crisis, over the last few years the support provided to farmers has been particularly meagre. There have also been calls for specialized support to IDP families, which, for instance, cannot benefit from barley growing support as they do not own land. The scope of the project has been explained repeatedly (including support that is envisioned for IDPs later in the project), and both partners have been encouraged post-visit to continue their open communication and dialogue with the communities to manage their expectations, prevent misunderstandings and clarify the mandate of ITF and ITF-supported partners.

2. During the closure of the border between KRG and NES, ITF PM for Syria carried out a visit to Erbil, KRG in order to support outreach to the local authorities in gaining a better understanding on the border closure and the possible solutions. The visit was carried out between 29 January and 3 February 2022. It also involved a meeting with representatives of Syrian donors and the NES NGO Forum, which had been trying to negotiate the opening of the border for NGOs and other humanitarian organizations with the KRG authorities. The border re-opened shortly after the completion of ITF PM's visit, when SAG's international staff was able to return to NES.

3. Between 7 and 12 March 2022, ITF PM for Syria carried out the **second monitoring visit to NES**, which followed the relative stabilization of security situation in NES. The visit included a visit to the communities of Al Buardi and Al Khamayl, together with Khair and SAG.

The visit to Al Buardi, where beneficiaries, most of which are returnees to the village, received livestock support, a discussion was held with both men and women (separately) from the village, all of which emphasized the need for support due to their remoteness. None of the villagers are able to work officially as the village is too far from the nearest larger communities, and

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<sup>4</sup> As part of risk management, SAG in NES operates under the ITF umbrella. This requires strong and persistent oversight by ITF.

children do not go to school. The villagers also expressed the wish to get support in growing barley, even though the environmental assessment had advised against this given the arid climate. The villagers also admitted that they do not have access to sufficient water resources that would allow the barley to grow. The area around the village is known as a good location for truffle search, which is likely an economic activity some of the villagers, living in very close proximity to the Iraqi border, are engaged in.

The visit to Al Khamayl, where beneficiaries received more comprehensive support, a focus group discussion was also held with both men and women. Comparatively, the village is a mix of host (Arab and Kurdish) population and IDPs. Women participated in the same discussion with men, but were also consulted separately. The feedback of the beneficiaries was overwhelmingly gratitude as all the participants confirmed that in the past several years, they have not been able to plant any seeds. They did emphasize the difference between those farmers with access to irrigation and those without. That is, indeed, a point to consider in future should more comprehensive funding become available that would also support the establishment or renovation of irrigation pathways. All community members additionally stressed that the village has not received any support so far – this is not surprising given that in NES a large portion of resources is invested in the maintenance of IDP camps, while IDP communities living in informal settlements or host communities are often left out. During the visit a discussion was also held on the vulnerability and eligibility criteria that have been set and the plans for future support.

A visit to the HMA clearance and EORE sites was unfortunately not possible during this visit due to a sandstorm. Nonetheless, during the visit, important meetings and long, complex discussions were also held both with the Director of the NES MAO and the Chair of the HAO, focused especially on the harmful effects of the recent suspension of HMA activities. Further coordination meetings were also held with IMMAP and the HMA WG Coordinator and the Director of the NES NGO Forum.

4. Between 7 and 11 May 2022, a **third monitoring visit to NES** was implemented by ITF PM for Syria and ITF PM for Lebanon. The highlight of the visit was a field visit to an active clearance and EORE site, as well as a meeting and visit to Al Khamayl village and the agricultural support beneficiaries.

An EORE workshop was visited at the village of Al Watwatia, where separate EORE workshops were held for children and adults. One of the villagers, a former teacher, described how she lost her husband in an EO explosion. The villagers mentioned that this is the first support they have received, even though their village is located where fights to expel ISIS were very intense. A clearance site visited was at the village of Al Sereb, where the active worksite is located in immediate proximity to a cultivated field, clearly exposing the danger EO pose to the landowners / users. Two mortars were located and removed from this site.

With Khair, ITF PMs visited the village of Al Khamayl and met with the community representatives, mukhtar and some beneficiaries. Most of the activities had been completed by then, but the selection of vulnerable families was ongoing. Due to the lack of rain and despite the provision quality seeds, most of the fields that were not irrigated failed. This emphasized the importance of consideration for irrigation support and/or support for other cultures, which require less water. The farmers whose field failed will, with additional funds, receive support in the form of seeds also for next year's harvest to hopefully re-start their production. ITF PMs were also able to observe the very basic living conditions within the village, and a substantial impact of small home gardens or the few sheep participants in the project have been given. Animal sheds for sheep have also been checked, and while very basic, serve their purpose. Several beneficiaries made it very clear that even this relatively small contribution had been life-changing for them as they have been able to afford the purchase of simple farming tools like shovels and hoes, which had previously been unaffordable for them.

A meeting with the NES MAO was also held and focused on the relevant issues in relation to the MoU negotiation process and finding ways for the coordination between NES MAO and HMA organizations to be more productive and constructive.

5. Between 30 July and 3 August 2022, a **fourth monitoring visit was carried out by ITF PM**, and involved a follow-up meeting with Khair. This meeting focused on potential future cooperation as well as the issue of Khair's registration renewal, which had been pending for a while. During the project implementation, this poses no obstacles for the completion of activities, but may present an impediment should the delay continue.

ITF PM also carried out a meeting with the Chair of the HAO in Raqqa, during which ITF escalated the issue of Khair's registration and transparently discussed ITF's future plans and challenges in NES. A major focus of the discussion was related to the MoU negotiations with the NES MAO and moving forward from the stalemate. ITF PM also met with the NES MAO, and likewise pushed for a productive discussion and the lifting of suspension order.

With SAG, ITF PM held a planning meeting regarding the team's departure and demobilization from NES at the end of August 2022. ITF PM and the SAG PM and Security/Logistics Advisor reviewed and checked the functionality all the project equipment, especially the items above the 1,500 EUR threshold.

A common point that kept being raised during all monitoring visits was that a more comprehensive livelihood support package was needed after the land clearance, particularly in light of recent droughts, water shortages, increasing prices and lack of infrastructure (especially electricity). Particularly in terms of agricultural recovery programming, it was expressed, and the partner assessed that a more comprehensive package that would bring, for example, together several villages as a commune would be more sustainable. Each village would then bring forward their comparative advantages, where e.g. the village with the best access to water would grow barley, another village would operate a mill and/or bakery, a third village would focus on animal grazing to produce dairy products etc. It was pointed out by the local communities and in meetings with the Civil Councils and especially the HAO, that more support is needed, especially for vulnerable families, like IDPs or returnees without a source of income as well as households with members with disabilities (due to the conflict, explosive hazards etc.).

The specific progress on each of the intervention's outputs is elaborated below:

### **Battle Area Clearance / Survey**

After training the operational staff, the initial NTS tasking that was undertaken on 18 July 2021, was acting on initial information imparted by the Hasakah Civil Council. It alluded to the possibility of EO contamination on agricultural land within the locality of Tel Tal Village, in the sub-district of Tal Tamar, north of Hasakah City, near the Peace Spring operations area. The NTS team determined that there was confirmed presence of EO within a formerly utilized agricultural outbuilding. Analyzing available information, the PM and OM determined to carry out a 'spot task', which essentially only involves the removal of specific explosive hazard items located and not a wider area search. This can be done when the information strongly suggests that no further contamination is known or can be expected in the area. During the spot task, 5 explosive items (mortars and projectiles) were rendered safe as well as 10 kg of explosive remnants of war (ERW) scrap. Community representatives also expressed the need for EORE activities to be conducted since none had ever taken place there despite clear explosive threats. This indicated the great need for EORE teams to be geographically linked to clearance teams.



*Clearance team during morning briefing (left), high-risk searcher during manual operations*



*International EOD expert during render safe operations (left), and high-risk searcher during search operations*

Explosive hazards removed from Tel Tal village Towards the end of July 2021, while the clearance team was exiting the Task Site location at Al Khamayl village along a pre-cleared Track, the team TA and national Operations Manager observed explosive hazards contamination within area cleared in January/February 2021. Upon more careful inspection, it has been ascertained from visible ground signs that an unknown entity had recently conducted a bulk demolition of explosive items. It was further determined that the demolition had resulted in a ‘blow out’, which is an effect of an improper EOD technique.



*Explosive hazards removed from Tel Tal village*

A *shura* was held with the Al Khamayl *mukhtar*, who mentioned that an explosion was heard a few days prior to locating those items. The migration of explosive hazards is not unusual in HMA for various reasons ranging from attempted harvesting to curiosity or people who believe they are assisting HMA organizations by ‘delivering’ items. This incident also highlighted the need for continuous community outreach and EORE, including in pre-cleared areas in order to raise awareness about the threats, safe behaviour, and teach locals on what actions to undertake in cases of locating items (i.e. reporting through NES MAO hotline or reporting to ITF point of contact). The village residents and the *mukhtar* were provided with the NES MAO reporting hotline phone number on several public spaces and through EORE sessions. This message and the message of not touching explosive hazards were also reinforced through more traditional means, such as during the call to prayer recited by the *muezzin*.



*The blow out area with visible damage to the soil, after the explosive items improperly disposed of had been removed.*

The incident was also reported to the NES MAO for their awareness and inspection. However, until the end of the project no feedback was received on their findings despite several enquiries. During August 2021 and until October 2021, operations continued at the two locations that were started during Phase I, namely Al Khamayl and Al Buardi. This was because clearance at the two locations was not fully completed during Phase I of the project; thorough existing knowledge and access to the two sites, it allowed for a smooth and safe transition of the (re)trained clearance teams to fully fledged operations. Suspected areas at Al Buardi have been cleared and part of them was returned to the community on 20 October 2021; specifically, an area of 200,258 sq. meters of agricultural land was handed back to the community through the village mukhtar during the ITF and ADA visit. A massive low- to medium-threat area at Al Khamayl was still awaiting clearance, however, after completing the areas in closest proximity to the village, the teams shifted to higher priority areas, determined during several NTSs carried out.

From early October 2021 onwards, the teams began operating in an area between the villages of Al Sereb and Al Hafayer, southwest of Hasakah City. The villages depend mainly on agricultural/farming activities and sheep herding, and land is shared by villages through a joint cooperative; the villages were established approximately a hundred years ago by Bedouin herders. During the occupation, ISIS destroyed the school at the Al Hafayer village, where two former homesteads were utilized for education purposes. There were around 1,790 people living in the villages combined. In 2014, ISIS attacked and occupied the area and planted numerous explosive devices. When the area was liberated from ISIS control, the families returned to their homes to find their agricultural lands contaminated. The area has previously been swept by SDF and International Coalition in 2016, however, visible contamination remained, and multiple explosive devices have been found in the area since. The clearance of this arable land of combined 340,460 sq. meters was completed on 30 November 2021 and was scheduled for hand-over after the final internal quality control in early December 2021.

Several NTS activities were also carried out at the time, in conjunction with the local civil councils and the information on potential contamination received through them. NTS activities are implemented to confirm or negate suspected explosive hazards contamination and to identify potential future tasking sites. The international EOD experts also carried out several 'spot tasks' removing individual items that have been found or identified by the community members; some of these items were located inside or in the proximity of people's dwellings. The teams continued to coordinate possible strengthening of operations in areas currently inhabited by minorities and other vulnerable groups. Most of these areas, however, are located in the north of NES, near the Peace Spring areas, and were inaccessible due to increased hostilities in the border areas. ITF implemented a 20-mile exclusion zone from the area of ongoing conflict for safety purposes.

From December 2021 onwards, clearance activities again continued at the remaining contaminated area at Al Khamayl village on former agricultural land populated by both host communities of various ethnic and religious groups and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Uncommon for this location, a fragmentation anti-personnel mine was located and rendered safe at the location. This indicated that the area was in fact a defensive position during the battles to expel ISIS laid with the intent of impeding offensive action. In light of this find and the unpredictability of remaining contamination, the area has been marked as 'high threat', which effectively slowed the speed of the progress on this task.



*OZM fragmentation mine and a mortar (top) and further explosive devices (bottom) located and removed during clearance operations*



Some low threat search operations were carried out after the border closure on 15 December 2021 due to the minimal safety risk for the staff involved. On 23 December 2021, the teams stood down for Christmas and New Year holidays until 3 January 2022. The anticipation then was that the border would re-open soon, allowing high risk work to continue, which is why the

teams engaged in the marking and re-visiting the project site anticipating 'live' clearance operations to continue soon. This, however, did not occur until late February 2022 due to a mix of factors: border closure, security risks due to ISIS attacks and suspension of all HMA operations by the HAO. Once the suspension order had been lifted, after the security situation had calmed and after the border had reopened, the clearance teams immediately underwent a few days of refresher training and then recommenced clearance activities in early March 2022.

Initially, the teams focused on the remaining contamination at former agricultural areas at the village of Al Khamayl, populated by both host communities and IDPs. Additionally, clearance teams deployed to Al Noufelyia Village, where explosive hazards have been reported in late 2021. Al Noufelyia Village is located approximately 20km southwest of Hasakah City, depends mainly on agriculture and has around 100 inhabitants. In 2014 ISIS attacked and occupied the south rural area of Hasakah forcing the civilians to flee their homes, or in some cases remain in the area under the control of ISIS. The area was liberated by the SDF and Coalition Forces in April 2016. This allowed the families to return to their homes only to find their homes and lands contaminated with EO. The clearance operations at this site were completed in April 2022 and culminated on 25 April 2022 with the land release/handover of 149,910 sq. meters of previously contaminated agricultural real-estate.

Since early May 2022, clearance operations focused on a field near the village of Al Sereb, where information was obtained during NTS that rockets may be contaminating an area in direct proximity to a cultivated field. The contaminated area was formerly used for growing barley or wheat but has not been used by the farmers due to their knowledge of explosive hazards presence. The team removed 3x mortars from the task, which could have resulted in deadly incidents should the farmers decided to plough this land despite the threat.





*Clearance teams seen working in the distance in direct proximity to a cultivated field*



*One of the mortars located and safely removed from a task site in direct proximity to a cultivated field.*

At the time, the team was also informed of an air dropped weapons in proximity to the village of Al Watwatia. It appeared to be dropped recently and of U.S. production and was estimated to be deployed during the response to ISIS-orchestrated prison breakout in January 2022. At the request of the Coalition Forces in NES, the project team removed the item and rendered it safe, as well as delivered the ordnance to the Coalition Forces for investigation. This allowed the farmers to access this field again and removed the danger posed to the villagers.



*The team excavating the air dropped weapon from a rocky ground (left) and the item after full extraction (right)*

Clearance operations continued at Al Noufelyia Village with meetings taking place with the village *mukhtar*, elders, and the landowner at the beginning of the month to confirm the team's access and acceptance the area. The teams also met with senior SDF Commanders due to the

large military training area that is adjacent to the clearance site. Deconfliction with the SDF for any live firing and clearance efforts was also carried out. The clearance works at Al Noufelyia village were ongoing when on 4 July 2022, the AANES Authorities suspended all HMA operations. These areas may be cleared during the future phases of the project.

During the project implementation, and as previously mentioned, numerous 'spot tasks' have been completed, acting on NTS and other reports from the communities. One of such instances was when *khelef* told the NTS team that when he returned to his village in 2015, he saw an UXO 10 meters from his house thrown between a pile of stones, and since then until now the object was still in place. He asked for help to remove that UXO to be able to build a small room next to his house safely. The UXO is very close to the homes of villagers it's thrown among a pile of stones sprayed around by red to indicate the danger. 1 x 130mm Projectile was removed from the task site.

In response to the intense urban clashes inside Hasakah City during the ISIS prison break, ITF and its partner also offered assistance in emergency survey and clearance in Hasakah. With intense armed clashes and shelling, it was very likely that a considerable number of unexploded ordnance was left behind (around 10% of dropped ordnance remains unexploded) after clashes subsided which could gravely endanger the urban population in southern Hasakah City. Due to the precarious security situation and Coalition Forces' involvement, this offer had not been taken on as the authorities themselves took care of removing the unexploded items.

SAG's clearance team, including the international technical advisors and national clearance staff, demonstrated a high degree of professionalism and expertise during the project implementation, which resulted in the safety and security of operations and passed without any incidents. The team constantly underwent training and re-fresher evolutions to as to build national staff's capacity, including medical instructions, first aid and trauma training, CASEVAC exercised, high risk search and render safe procedure drills, safe and correct usage of EOD equipment and EORE refresher instruction.

As attested by the progress of clearance operations when they were able to be implemented uninterruptedly and as observed during monitoring visits, the project team – especially the local staff – enjoyed a high level of trust and productive relations with the local communities, not only the *mukhtar* as the community representative, but also community members in general. Children were often curious to observe the work, but were instructed to stay away, highlighting the importance of EORE, and so were women, who played an important role in the local consultation processes and usually felt comfortable reaching out to female members on the team.

Until 31 August 2022, the total outputs for clearance efforts included:

- 210 kg of homemade explosives,
- 111.6 kg of ERW scrap,
- 4,657,459 sqm of cleared surface area,
- 1,135,152 sqm of subsurface area cleared,
- **5,638,418 sqm of total land release**
- 1,371,772 sqm of NTS area surveyed

### **Explosive Ordnance Risk Education**

During the project period, the EORE team reached a total of 11,187 direct beneficiaries in NES (44.4% male, 55.6% female) with age, gender and context specific EORE life-saving messages, successfully exceeding activity targets. The project built on existing context-sensitive local knowledge and connections, as well as a programmatic approach to improve vulnerable communities' abilities to cope with the effects of protracted conflict. All EORE activities were monitored by the international EORE TA, through daily follow ups, coaching and support to the local EORE teams.

Following the initial training that commenced in mid-July and lasted until the beginning of August 2021, two mixed-gender EORE teams delivered EORE sessions in various rural communities, mainly to the south of Hasakah City, including Al Humania, Al Maghloga, Al Motawaseta, Al Sereb, Al Hafayer, Ob Al Shouk, Masaawia, and Tel Faydat villages. All villages have a history of explosive incidents and are rural dwellings that have been left out of EORE efforts previously implemented by other HMA organizations. To strengthen the capacity development of the communities and the sustainability of the safety messages disseminated through our EORE sessions, a CFP (Community Focal Point) handbook has been released in each of the communities and training provided to selected CFPs selected through the *komin* (local authority in the villages). The CFPs will be able to remind all community members living in the village about the risk posed by EO and how to behave if seeing one, including children. This will enhance the project sustainability. All locations targeted are home to IPD populations, as well as a mix of ethnic and religious groups, including minorities. Individual cases of leishmaniasis were identified by the EORE teams while delivering EORE safety messaging and reported to the relevant health actors in NES for potential programming.

Interactive sessions were delivered in all the above-mentioned villages to better target children and keep a high level of attention during the delivery of the safety messages and explanation of safe behaviour to be undertaken by the community members. When possible, the teams delivered sessions in schools. When relevant, the sessions were also tailored to the unique IDP situation, where the teams explained how to approach the possible return to their area of origin regarding how to safety act and how to behave once back home and in the eventual presence of explosive hazards. The IDPs were very content their circumstances were taken into consideration and actively participated in the sessions.



*EORE session for children delivered at Al Watwatia village*

Like clearance activities, EORE sessions were suspended following the stop-work orders issued by the HAO. However, after the Ghwayran prison break in Hasakah hundreds of families who were living in that area fled due to the deteriorating security situation and were hosted in mosques, halls, and other large facilities. As an exception to the suspension of activities and in close coordination with the local authorities, ITF and its partner offered their assistance in the form of emergency response. This assistance was accepted, and the team delivered emergency sessions for IDPs on 1 February 2022. It is important for the IDPs to understand risks and undertake safe behaviours when an item is found or seen and when approaching their houses and the communities where they are going to return. Several sessions took place and encouraged active participation of everyone, especially children throughout the discussion and play. Teams, as per training received, displayed roll up posters – to guide the community members, including children – during the delivery of the key messages and distributed informative leaflets.



*EORE session for IDPs delivered on 1 February 2022*

Towards the end of the project, the mixed-gender EORE teams also worked extensively within the Washokani IDP Camp, working with ACTED and Save the Children, who operate and administer portions of the camp. Washokani camp is mainly home to IDP families that fled the Turkish military action in autumn 2019 and are mostly of minority background. Camp residents, as well as camp managers, participated in the EORE sessions to raise awareness among all relevant stakeholders.



*EORE session for children and adults at Washokani IDP camp*

For a short period of time, during relative calm, the EORE teams have also been able to focus their activities more closely on ensuring minority populations are included and addressed with EORE safety messaging in the Peace Spring areas. The security situation in these areas was, however, being monitored very closely and constantly to ensure the teams' safety. This included the villages of Tel Rman and A'Sforiyeh, for example, both of which are communities of permanent and IDP residents, predominantly of Christian faith. The sessions mainly focused on preparing the IDPs of how to safely act with regards to the future return to their homes of origin.



*EORE session at the village of Tel Rman*

EORE facilitators were always working in coordination with clearance teams to reinforce their messaging where shortfall was identified or in instances such as the incident of re-contamination at the village of Al Khamayl. The mixed-gender teams had, in cooperation with the village elders and community representatives, reached out directly to both children and adults by tailoring their messages to the specific audience. The team display roll-up posters and distribute leaflet, colouring books, coloured pencils and stickers to community members to reinforce the messaging. EORE sessions for children are more interactive to attract their attention and improve their learning on dangers posed by explosive hazards and which actions need to be taken for them to report the presence of ordnance and avoid incidents. During the project period, the teams also delivered sessions to PWDs, specifically, for example, a mentally impaired man, and several elderly PWDs. The sessions were delivered within their households, thus ensuring their comfort and wellbeing. Although PWDs and the elderly were found to be at lower immediate risk of explosive accidents (those whose mobility is affected), they were provided with EORE 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. The elderly often hold a particularly important role of village or regional leaders or leaders of their community, and were consulted thoroughly.

Depending on the social composition within the villages and dialogue with community members, which includes door-to-door visits and handing out of leaflets both for EORE purposes and for purpose of informing about potential clearance operations, the sessions for men and women may be held jointly or separately. The teams encourage a setting in which all community members may be able to participate actively and without restraint.



*Girl with a coloring book distributed in an EORE session*

All EORE materials that were handed out during and after sessions include information on the existing complaints mechanism. This is a secure ITF email and a local phone number through which all community members are encouraged to share complaints or feedback either anonymously or not. This message is also reinforced verbally through the EORE sessions, where it is imparted on the community members that all complaints shall be treated in confidentiality and will be researched. To date, no complaint has been received.

EORE teams maintained the conduct of mobile data collection as per the established process, including monitoring pre-session knowledge and evaluation of the increase of knowledge of the participants after the sessions. All participants without exception demonstrated increased knowledge after the sessions. This was done using the KoBo toolbox. To better ensure the randomization of pre- and post-session knowledge surveys, the session evaluations will be monitored by daily de-briefings and a newly introduced Bi-Monthly EORE internal Quality Assurance undertaken by the international GIS/EORE manager. The teams also delivered informal EORE awareness sessions to the staff of one international NGO, and informal training for the NES MAO.

Until 31 August, the total EORE output included:

- Children: 5 – 12 Years of Age:
  - Boys: 3,652
  - Girls: 3,402
- Youths: 13 – 17 Years of Age:
  - Boys: 317
  - Girls: 305
- Adults: 18 years +
  - Males: 1000
  - Females: 2,511
- **Total beneficiaries reached with EORE: 11,187**
- **CFPs trained: 32**

## Agricultural Recovery Program

Khair's work on the project began in August 2022 following the signing of the grant agreement and the negotiation of the payment mechanism. Preparatory works required to be able to implement agricultural recovery activities included close liaison and relationship-building with the communities of Al Kamayl and Al Buardi, where clearance activities were taking place during Phase I of the project. A more in-depth assessment was also carried out that will enable the team to stage its response better and tailor it to the specific needs of the beneficiaries. Full-scale agricultural support activities through the establishment of local agricultural cooperatives that shall support the selection of beneficiaries, and preliminary vendor selection process and procurement activities have also begun in the initial month of the operations.



*Khair's rented office space in Al Khamayl*

From the start of the project, Khair was liaising closely with the village *mukhtars* at the respective locations to sensitize them to the project and to share all of the relevant information about the planned activities. This was done to manage community expectations as the project will be following a phased approach, and to make sure that the community understands the limited mandate, the independent ways of determining beneficiary selection criteria, and the need for community input to ensure that the intervention is conflict-sensitive.

The first activity was ensuring support for barley farmers, which was planned in both villages. However, due to the Triple Water Crisis and the general situation at Al Buardi that does not have its own water source and a semi-arid climate, it has been decided by Khair in consultation with project participants, that this activity would only focus on the village of Al Khamayl. Beneficiary selection criteria were communicated to the *mukhtar* as well as advertised publicly throughout the village. It included the need to have access to agricultural land as well as previous experience with barley cultivation to make sure the target group is farmers who have been affected by contamination and/or economic crisis. Families with low income were also among those prioritized. Selection and vulnerability criteria for all Khair's activities are enclosed as Annex 3.



*Beneficiaries registering for distribution*

In mid-October 2021, beneficiary registration for 50 barley farmers (16 females, 34 males) was carried out at the village of Al Khamayl. Beneficiary registration took place without specific issues or complaints. The trainings for the barley-growing beneficiaries were held in late October 2021 and were attended by all beneficiaries at a 100% rate. All beneficiaries had to take a pre-training and post-training knowledge test, which showed an increase in knowledge in all cases. The beneficiaries were split in two groups of 25 beneficiaries to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Farmers were sensitized and trained regarding climate-resistant agricultural culture during technical trainings, as well as provided with information on the use of environmentally friendly fertilizers in lieu of the chemicals which may harm agricultural land. At the same time, the partner was obtaining barley and agricultural tools price quotations and worked with the vendors to set up a voucher system for the beneficiaries. Barley seeds and vouchers to be redeemed for fertilizers, simple tools, or other agricultural inputs in the value of 30 EUR were distributed to the beneficiaries in November 2021.



*A fortnight before harvest, a farmer standards at his wheat (right) and barley (left) field, both of which are irrigated*

During November 2021, registration of 75 beneficiaries (31 females, 44 males) in livestock support for sheep herders took place, both in the village of Al Buardi (17 beneficiaries) and in the village of Al Khamayl (58 beneficiaries). Targeting and selection criteria was pre-announced



like in the case of barley growers, and the team worked closely with the local community to ensure the most vulnerable households are to be targeted for support. The criteria included the condition of relevant experience in livestock, but also limited the number of heads of livestock the beneficiary may already possess. To ensure adequate care for the animals, it was also a requirement for the beneficiaries to own a livestock shed. Khair utilized the low market price of lambs and by finding a suitable vendor, in November 2021 purchased them at two thirds to even half of the anticipated cost. This enabled them to procure more sheep. Instead of anticipated two sheep per beneficiary, each beneficiary will be provided with four sheep in the value of 300 EUR.



#### *Sheep provided to the beneficiaries of the project*

The distribution was carried out in February 2022, after the beneficiaries had completed their training and after a veterinary examination had been conducted on the animals. All beneficiaries were provided with vouchers to buy animal fodder for at least six months, and an agricultural engineer / veterinarian also monitored the animal welfare and addressed any inquiries or questions the beneficiaries may have. Most sheep that were distributed were nearing the end of their gestation period. The beneficiaries were able to benefit from milk production, which is mainly used to produce yoghurt, a staple of the local cuisine and an important source of nutrients for families coping with food insecurity.

By April 2022, the registration and verification of horticultural support beneficiaries has also been completed. 100 beneficiaries (38 males, 62 females), the majority of which are female heads of households or have members who are PWDs, have been provided with the technical training and vouchers to procure the necessary tools for vegetable production. They have been provided with access to high-quality seeds, which mainly included okra, eggplants, cucumbers, zucchini, tomatoes, parsley and various other herbs. Most beneficiaries had access to water through their home-owned water wells or the communal village well. Beneficiaries have also been provided with vouchers to buy very basic tools, such as shovels or hoes, or other farming items. Even the simplest items had previously been looted by ISIS and – although simple – have been unaffordable for them in the past; all beneficiaries also received technical training and have attended it without exception.



*Female project beneficiaries who are also heads of their households pose proudly with their newly-obtained tools. Neither have been able to tend to their gardens in the past years due to a lack of resources.*

In April 2022, the partner also commenced the registration of 100 vulnerable families (mainly IDP families; 48 male beneficiaries, 52 female) for the support through vouchers, redeemable at local businesses. Vulnerability criteria that have been identified gave priority to IDP families, female-headed households with small children, families with female, elderly or children as breadwinners, and families with PWD as family members and large families of more than eight people. The names for beneficiaries were nominated by the Hasakah Civil Council – South and the Al Khamayl *komin*, but cross-checked and verified by Khair’s MEL Department. Each beneficiary received a voucher in the value of 100 Euro, which was redeemable at the newly established or supported businesses at the Al Khamayl village.



*Living conditions and situations of two IDPs beneficiary families*

Activities in support of small business development and marketing were also implemented as planned. 15 beneficiaries (9 males, 6 females) were selected based on pre-defined beneficiary selection criteria, which included previous experience in running a business or in the proposed business sector, not having more than 10 acres of land, 3 cows or 25 sheep, and clear willingness to participate in the program. The participation involved initial training in the duration of two days, which was allowed for all participants in the project and was completed in April 2022.

The selected beneficiaries then actively participated in a three-day training held in mid-June 2022, which covered basic principles of economy, shopping mechanisms, marketing strategies and sample development. Each selected participants then had to submit a proposal, which was evaluated by Khair's team and was proposed for funding if it provided evidence that it can make reasonable profit in the short-term. All recipients of the grant have agreed to start work within one month and used the amount of the grants on business expenses, all of which was not only verified by Khair but also by the community committee.



*Beneficiaries of the small business development activity in their newly set-up shop, selling mainly local produce*

Despite the two-month delay and thanks to the extension of the project, by the end of the project branch of the Vegetable and Stock Association was opened in Al Khamayl and the beneficiaries received their training and planned goods. Severe drought in the region affected the impact of agricultural support provision, especially for barley farmers whose fields are rainfed. These farmers received additional assistance, which will help them purchase seeds to grow during the next planting season – with the hope that irrigation system can be improved or the drought is not as severe.

The village *mukhtars* made it clear during the dialogue with Khair and during monitoring visit by ITF that there are more families that need support overall and has requested further assistance to be extended to the community in general. A few complaints were received by IDPs who expressed their regret that they were not targeted for the initial activities; however, it was explained to them, that this is not possible since IDPs do not own land and their engagement could be a driving cause for land right issues. It has also been communicated to them again that activities meant for IDPs are planned later in the project; more clarity and attention was also devoted by Khair to communicate clearly and openly also on the independent selection criteria determination. Importantly, Khair publicized all the selection criteria transparently and openly beforehand and has made it clear in the resolution of the complaints that the target criteria were aimed to be set as objectively as possible. Khair set up a well-functioning system, verifying that the registered beneficiaries complied with the set criteria and monitored voucher distribution as well as voucher redeeming process. The Khair monitoring team also monitored all technical trainings and implemented post-distribution monitoring and follow-up with project beneficiaries.

Overall, this project component greatly assisted in bringing back productive life to rural areas that have been neglected the improvement of the living conditions of the village residents, resulting in lower product prices because of the larger amount of food available and lower production costs. The intervention was well received and positive for the beneficiaries, but there was a general request for the project to be replicated because there is a need for long-term

assistance in the region and the humanitarian needs, especially among populations living outside IDP camps where there is less support available as a rule, are becoming increasingly acute.

Some beneficiaries reported great satisfaction in that they have been able to receive even the simplest tools and inputs and reported that these have helped improve their livelihoods. Other beneficiaries highlighted the need for more support or were disappointed because their rain-fed fields failed. Despite all mitigation measures and a conflict-sensitive approach, the intervention by Khair led to some minor tensions between the displaced and the host community, as the local community views the displaced as competitors for opportunities to benefit from the project, while the IDPs sometimes left out from the activities. These complaints did not represent sentiment opposing the intervention or planned activities but did accentuate the inability of the project to meet all demands for assistance – which are on the rise. This is a risk, where the local community could seek to blame Khair or ITF for this situation; however, this risk has been managed adequately by Khair and community outreach supported by ITF HQ staff during monitoring visits assisted as well. The fact that this intervention was multi-faceted was also of assistance as the local community recognized these efforts as greater commitment of the project team to support the local community.

## **Environmental Considerations**

The project took an environmentally friendly approach to the extent possible. For the clearance and EORE components of the project, all works were adhering to the environmental management policies, including relevant International Mine Action Standards. This primarily pertains to task remediation post-clearance operations, thus minimizing potential damage to the environment and arable agricultural land. As per these guidelines, *in situ* destruction of explosive hazards was avoided whenever possible. During Phase II it was only attempted once when a fragmentation anti-personnel mine was located at one of the sites and was not safe to be rendered safe by other means. Team ITF returned the land to previous state after disposal to greatest possible the extent and soil and vegetation were returned to their place of origin as per IMAS. The project had a positive impact on the environment as it removed 210 kg of homemade explosives from land. Explosives, especially when homemade, are a major potential contaminator of soil due to the presence of various chemical substances, which become increasingly harmful under the impact of external factors such as extreme weather. Additionally, 111.6 kg of EO scrap (mainly metal and plastic) have also been removed from land.

ITF engaged with the Conflict and Environment Observatory, which was in development of the impact assessment tool, but that has not yet been completed. 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 AANES.

Within the agricultural support activities, approaches that involved climate change adaptation, use of environmentally friendly agricultural technologies, fertilizers and pest removals were incorporated into the training matrix for all project beneficiaries. The adherence to these principles was monitored after the farmers were provided with all the tools and planted seeds / raise sheep. Throughout the project, a segregated waste management system has been established, splitting waste to food waste, recyclable and other. This was initially somewhat alien to the local national staff but has steadily become accepted and a norm for all.

In further efforts to reduce fuel usage and therefore cut down on harmful diesel fuel emissions as well as save funds, the team has negotiated with the Hasakah Safe Villa owner, who has agreed to purchase a solar hot water heating system. The system was installed in mid-November 2021, and worked all year round, although there was some need to heat the water further

with a boiler or immersion heater during the winter months. In the summer, it provided for nearly all of the hot water requirements. Other than the initial installation cost and maintenance, there were no running costs to budget for. Solar thermal systems are by design very low maintenance. Aside from an annual check the system should only need professional servicing every 3-5 years. The project personnel have also been looking at installing solar cells to cover the power needs and reduce the need for a fuel-ran generator. Solar cells have for now been deemed too large of an investment considering the budget constraints, but are envisioned for the potential continuation of the project.

## **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, including vulnerable groups, were involved in the identification and assessment of their needs, pre-deployment surveys, and prioritization of interventions. The principle of free, meaningful, and informed participation of local communities was applied to the greatest extent possible given the challenging operational environment in NES.

Mine action operations 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 ensures their buy-in, but also ensures the safety and security of project staff considering explosive hazards, the overall conflict-affected context, and prolonged exposure of clearance or EORE teams in open spaces. Standard mine action procedures, e.g. deployment of NTS teams, community liaison sessions, EORE standards, have been fully applied on this project.

The deployment of NTS team and EORE/community liaison teams meant that the project team was in coordination and dialogue with the local communities daily. The project has made sure to include all affected individuals and groups in decision-making. This was initially made clear in the starting point of the prioritization mechanism that was established, i.e. through the discussions with the Civil Council, which brings together members of four different religious and ethnic groups, including minorities. They have the ability and knowledge to identify a diverse range of affected communities, and rough information on their social composition. The teams were making sure to communicate the need to reach out to all social groups as often as possible. It was therefore, for example, an important trait of both clearance and EORE teams that they comprised female team members, which were able to communicate with women more effectively in some communities where women take a more traditional role. Khair adopted similar practices but identified it as a shortfall on their own team that in the MEL department during the project implementation they did not employ a female team member. This shortfall did not result in any major difficulties during the project but would ease communication sometimes and will be considered in future.

Minority groups have been involved freely, effectively, and meaningfully in the project, specifically Christian minorities that have been persecuted in NES on several occasions and displaced multiple times. The targeted communities included both host populations, as well as IDPs and returnees, all of which are involved proactively in project activities. This was ensured through beneficiary targeting criteria for agricultural activities and by reaching out to the local communities. Importantly, the project was aiming to strike a balance between supporting the two majority communities in Hasakah Governorate, i.e. Kurdish and Arab population. Not so much in Hasakah, but more to the south of it, the relations between the two groups occasionally grew tense. The tensions were more pronounced along the IDP-host community line, where IDPs were often seen as competitors for potential resources. Partially, that was due to the focus of the donor community on IDP communities; even though in the current circumstances in NES it is also the host communities that are experiencing an acute economic crisis and humanitarian needs.

The EORE teams are also recording data on PWDs, and especially on explosive hazards victims, and elderly persons. As an example, in one of the villages, three victims, all children from two families, were encountered. A dedicated EORE session for those families and children was developed with great results reported. The majority of EORE sessions were provided in houses and tents within the respective communities, and all EORE sessions were delivered in locations that were easily accessible to all population groups, including PWDs, taking into consideration the most culturally and socially appropriate setting. Although PWDs and the elderly were found to be at lower immediate risk of explosive accidents (those whose mobility is affected), they were provided with EORE 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. The elderly often hold a particularly important role of village or regional leaders or leaders of their community, and were consulted thoroughly. ITF team worked hard on engaging PWDs and was able to train and employ one of the PWDs encountered during Phase I of the project as an EORE facilitator. His story, attitude and work ethic are admirable and had a vital impact on his surroundings, including his team members and beneficiaries. He showcased that PWDs should not be marginalized and can be productive community members.

During the monitoring visit in NES, ITF and ADA representatives were also presented with the case of a 12-year-old girl from an IDP family residing in a village targeted during this project. The girl suffered a life-changing injury to her leg in an air raid in Deir ez Zour, where her family is from. Her two brothers were killed in the attack. In an open-door setting and dialogue with ITF representatives, the girl's father pleaded for support; the girl could not walk normally as the injured leg could not carry weight. She was also suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and was experiencing frequent nightmares. Although ITF did not have the capacity to implement victim assistance project, ITF tried to reach out to organizations that do and refer the girl to them for treatment, but without success. ITF then decided to follow up with the girl's family in order to gain more information about her injury and medical rehabilitation required and provided funds for the girl's treatment. The initial surgery required can be offered to the girl in Damascus at a specialized hospital, however, will only be able to be done once the girl stops growing. ITF did ensure support for the girl's appropriate medical check-ups, medication, and physical therapy, which greatly improved the girl's injured leg mobility, the girl's posture, gait and with all that also her mental well-being. While going beyond the scope of the project, this was an important action for trust-building. It demonstrated to the local communities that both the field teams and ITF as an organization are doing everything within their power to support all vulnerable members. A brief medical report on the girl's improvement is attached for the ADA's interest as Annex 4.

## **Gender Considerations**

By looking at the gender disaggregated data for all project activities, it is evident that implementation of gender-specific recommendations was taken on well as women make up over half of all beneficiaries and target groups reached overall. A gender analysis carried out with Humanity & Inclusion and the Multi-Sector Needs Assessment found that explosive hazards in NES disproportionately affect children and teenage boys with well over a third of injuries impacting teenage boys. A large majority of explosive ordnance accidents involves men and boys, while women and girls are most often impacted as bystanders. The most common activities during which accidents occurred in NES are farming or tending livestock, playing with explosives, household work, travelling because of displacement, moving, or disposing of EO, and collecting scrap metal.

Bringing these sets of data together, the impact of EO corresponds greatly with the social roles. While women and girls are traditionally relegated to conducting household work, especially in Arab communities, they are not as exposed to explosive hazards; men and boys are most active in public space and are therefore more vulnerable due to, for example, the boys' role in agriculture. Over two thirds of women or girls killed or injured by explosive ordnance are either

travelling, doing household work, or touching and tampering with them. Yet, in areas affected by ISIS as was the case in areas of operations for this project, many women were left as sole breadwinners following men as head of household's abduction, disappearance, or recruitment into ISIS, forcing women to the public space, and making them less unaffected.

Women within Kurdish communities in NES are generally considered to have more freedom to decide and participate in public life. But even as women from more traditional settings begin to tear down taboos and challenge the established gender norms, they are also expected to become more vulnerable to the impact of explosive ordnance. At the same time, analysis of data shows that agricultural communities are more at-risk from explosives due to their livelihoods being based on the need to cultivate available land resources, many of which are unsafe. With scant alternative livelihood opportunities, agricultural workers clear land themselves, throwing explosive ordnance into rivers and canals and thereby contaminating them. Some agricultural workers even attempt to harvest chemical components of the IEDs that can be used as fertilizers, the price of which has increased immensely during the economic crisis. Economic downturn in Syria has also been leading individuals – mostly men but also women – to seek alternative income sources. Some, are for example, resorting to collecting scrap to sell. However, as witnessed during the field visit, scrap piles are frequently filled with explosive hazards.

The project has been aiming to promote gender mainstreaming on several levels. First and foremost, women were given the same access to the clearance and EORE team jobs, which are mostly seen as a man's world even in societies where progressive gender norms are standard. Women were given the same opportunities to develop their skills and progress professionally. Some of them are single breadwinners for their family. By involving them in the project teams, strong messages to promote women equality are sent to the communities. EORE teams were mixed gender, recruited from the local communities, reflecting the linguistic and ethnic makeup of the area, and holding detailed knowledge of the local culture. Clearance teams were also mixed gender, with women making up about a quarter of all search staff. Their role was important in the field when women from local communities felt freer to reach out to the team deployed after noticing women engaged in the field.

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 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.

Through constant liaison with the local community, elders and mukhtars, and with constant enforcement of gender mainstreaming messages, women were given space and access to all the project activities without exception. The majority of those taking part in EORE sessions for example, were women. Women were also equally involved in the CFPs program, which gives them a particularly powerful role in their communities. While constant dialogue is required, the teams reported that reaching out to female community members was not overly difficult, mainly thanks to the female team members. Likewise, women made up well over a half of beneficiaries of agricultural support program. Female barley farmers, sheep herders, gardeners and small business owners were involved in the program together with men and were provided with the agency to partake in decision making freely. Where culturally appropriate and preferred by the communities, however, EORE sessions or trainings were provided to women alone by female staff.

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. 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.

### **Specific Requirement: Project Equipment**

One of the conditions, set out by the ADA during the approval of the extension and budget relocation was that all equipment items above 1,500 EUR in single item value at the time of purchase be paid for at the end of the project. All such items were booked by SAG, while Khair or ITF purchased no items above 1,500 EUR in value during the project. Considering that some of the equipment was already pre-used when purchased, that there is a limited market for most of these equipment items, and that some of the equipment may need to remain in NES in line with the local requirements, ITF and the ADA came to an agreement that this equipment be handed over to the newly established local NGO Reachout ITF aims to partner with in future.

At the time of submitting this report, Reachout is still in the process of registration. All required documents have been drafted and submitted. However, the process is still ongoing. It is possible it may be delayed due to the focus of AANES on fending off airstrikes on its territory and potential land invasion by Turkey. The security situation currently has led to a stay-home order for all public officials in AANES. As agreed with the ADA, ITF currently remains the custodian of the equipment (which is held safe, under 24/7 watch in the Hasakah office and has been checked by ITF PM in November 2022) until the NGO is officially established. Upon the NGO's establishment ITF will be legally obliged to gift the equipment to the NGO and present evidence thereof to the ADA. The documentation confirming that SAG as the project partner has handed over the equipment to ITF as the temporary custodian as well as a full list of equipment inventory are attached as Annex 5 and Annex 6.

### **Project Visibility**

The project has maintained a low visibility in-country, with the exception of marking the clearance sites as per IMAS and the publication of agricultural support beneficiary criteria. Internationally, the project has gained a lot of visibility on ITF's social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram) and ITF's website ([www.itf.si](http://www.itf.si)), where materials highlighting the project's achievements and importance of donor contributions were published on a regular basis (at least once a month). A few presentations, including the value of this interventions, were held within the EU forum at various working groups during Slovenia's presidency to the Council of the EU.

ITF took part in various working groups in NES and Whole of Syria to advocate for the project's good practice approach. Internationally, ITF also participated in advocacy sessions hosted by Humanity & Inclusion following the publishing of their private report mentioned earlier and enclosed as Annex 2. On 16 November 2021, during ITF Board of Advisors session chaired by the Austrian Ambassador to Slovenia, ITF also held a 'virtual field visit' to NES, which was a resounding success and gained a lot of positive feedback.

ITF has also aimed to stir additional discussions within the mine action community in relation to the unique approach of this project. Bringing together the "Clear" and "Grow" parts under the roof of one project is not common in the mine action community, which still often operates in silos from other humanitarian-development-peace efforts, and often finds it difficult to identify and implement meaningful links to other humanitarian and development initiatives. ITF PM therefore authored an article regarding the experience of this project, which was published in the Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction, the most widely read journal within the mine action community. The article, which additionally increases the visibility of this project within a specific expert target audience, is enclosed as Annex 7 and also available [here](#).



## Lessons Learned and Perspectives

The key lesson learnt during the project were as follows:

1. Strong coordination with other HMA actors has proven very beneficial in maintaining a common stance in negotiations on the NES MAO MoU. It is very important that HMA partners were able to form and maintain a joint position on this in the long term and throughout the negotiation process; despite the difficulties organizations experienced as a result of the suspensions, not giving in to non-humanitarian demands was critical for the independence of the mine action – and broader humanitarian – sector in NES. Always maintaining a joint position, despite attempts to trick individual NGOs into agreeing to some demands, increased the chance for setting up a relationship with the NES MAO that is beneficial for all in the long term, and not in breach of humanitarian principles. The joint negotiations approach did bring HMA organizations in NES closer together and, if anything, strengthened their overall coordination and deconflicting mechanisms as it opened further and more frequent channels of communication.
2. In comparison to Phase I of the project, during Phase II, EORE activities were implemented alongside clearance activities. This eased community outreach and enabled the teams to engage with the community members, including vulnerable groups, more frequently and more effectively. This had reverberating effects and increases the safety for more direct beneficiaries as well as their broader communities and was a good model for establishing closer cooperation with the communities. EORE teams have proven to be instrumental in ensuring a constant channel of communication and dialogue with the targeted communities.
3. Open and transparent communication and continuous dialogue that has been established with the rural communities included in the project has borne fruit. The villagers and the *mukhtars*, as well as regional representatives, were very appreciative of the efforts of this project and ascribe key value to it for the regeneration of their communities. Through transparent and open communication, it has become clear that, while the project made a positive difference in the lives of beneficiaries, increased support for agricultural recovery programming and broader farming livelihoods is required as there are many people in need. A more complex project approach with several geographically related communities engaged and a wider array of agricultural programming activities supported would increase sustainability and would enable the communities to maintain a stronger foothold.
4. Considering worsening economic situation in NES and the shifting of international donor community's resources to geographic areas that are currently in the headlines, it is crucial to keep advocating for sustainable donor support in NES. NES is an area that continues to host tens of thousands of IDPs, is faced with another potential military incursion and on top of it all is mainly left to fend for itself in dealing with the thousands of ISIS prisoners, their wives, widows and children. Many of them are held in IDP camps, where they continue to spread and entrench their radical ideas. The attack on Ghwayran Prison was likely only an exercise and an initial attempt for a wider attack that is yet to come. All available analyses indicate that unless addressed urgently and jointly with the impact of the economic crisis in NES, this issue is a ticking time bomb that will go off sooner or later. In that case, the effects will be felt globally. The Ghwayran Prison attack also exposed the very real security risks that continue to exist in NES and always require caution even with the relative calm that is felt in most areas for most of the time.
5. In terms of project partnerships, the lessons and experience of cooperation for ITF have been positive. SAG has been a cooperative partner but has decided to re-focus their work on other geographic areas following the conclusion of this present project.

Based on an internal assessment and planning, ITF will re-design its HMA approach in NES in future to support a local NGO as its new partner with a stronger emphasis on technical and organizational capacity building. This will also lessen the reliance on international staff as it would entail an even smaller international staff footprint and would ease project implementation during the challenging times of border closures and similar events. Khair has likewise been a partner, with which ITF has been able to establish successful cooperation. Their experience has made it possible for them to effectively deliver on all of the project's agricultural recovery components. Khair was, however, experiencing an issue with the renewal of their registration; until that is renewed and a new license is obtained, they will not be able to partner with ITF again, and ITF has already identified some additional potential partners for potential related future project should such a need arise.

6. The benefits of further extending coordination with stakeholders that may not be directly related to the project activities have been made clear yet have proven to be very difficult to materialize. A lot of the international NGOs in NES experience frequent staff rotations and changes, and it is very difficult establishing and maintaining a productive cooperation. Only the PWG changed 5 working group coordinators during the project, the HMA sub-working group changed 2 coordinators with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person incoming during the writing of this report. While newly established relationship with a few international NGOs that are likewise operating in NES may be useful in future, there have been no major benefits for this project in general. The NGO benefitted from the project by improving the safety and security of its operations and its staff overall, which is a good result of the project and may also facilitate exchange of key information between the organizations in future.

Overall, the project action plan and intervention design remained unchanged during the project. The model that has been set up with this project was truly one that is not common in the mine action community. As a reflection of the project evaluation conducted during Phase I of the project, it maximized the cooperation and complementarity of the two project components, the Clear and the Grow. A broader agricultural support intervention would have been desired but was unfortunately not possible due to budget constraints and the mine action part of the program, which was during Phase II largely dependent on the costly but vital international workforce. Following over a year and a half of additional relevant experience gained among local national staff, for future interventions, the HMA component will be implemented with less intensive international expert engagement.

## Finances

The initially planned budget has undergone one reallocation, which was approved by the Austrian Development Agency on 22 April 2022. The budget reallocation and project extension were requested due to the impact of contractual processes and changes in the operational environment, which were outside of the project team's control. This included factors such as initial project delay, delayed project fund delivery to NES, deterioration of the security situation and political tensions resulting in temporary work suspension and closure of the border between Iraq and Syria.

Overall, following both partner's financial statements and their respective audit reports submitted, it has been established that 3,366,635 EUR of the project budget has been expended until 31 August 2022. This is 26,990 EUR less than originally budgeted and constitutes 99.20% 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 final financial statement and audit are enclosed as Annex 8 and Annex 9 respectively.

## List of Annexes

Annex 1	Monitoring Matrix
Annex 2	Report: Explosive Ordnance Contamination in northeast Syria: Impact and Required Action
Annex 3	Beneficiary Selection and Vulnerability Criteria
Annex 4	Medical Report (Syrian Girl)
Annex 5	Equipment Handover Document
Annex 6	Project Equipment Inventory List
Annex 7	ITF Article in the Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction
Annex 8	Final Financial Statement
Annex 9	Audit Report

# Annex 1

## Outcome and Output Matrix

**Outcome:** An environment where reconstruction and socio-economic recovery can occur free from constraints posed by explosive hazards and enable populations affected by explosive hazards contamination to build their resilience.

**Indicator 1:** proportion of vulnerable groups participating in the project's planning, budgeting and decision-making (SDG Target 16.7)

This indicator measures the level of vulnerable groups (IDPs, minorities, PWDs, elderly people, females as heads of households etc.) taking part in the project's decision-making in order to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. It aims to measure the number of vulnerable group members that both benefited from the project as target group members and the number of vulnerable group members that took part in the project planning and prioritization process.

Over 12,000 persons from Hasakah Governorate were directly engaged in the project either as employees, representatives of local authorities or communities or direct EORE, CFP or agricultural support beneficiaries. Clearance beneficiary figures were not included in this calculation since clearance has a direct impact on the community living in close proximity as well as the broader community but does not entail beneficiaries' direct participation per se. According to available data, over 6,200 of these persons are either IDPs, returnees, minority group members, PWDs, elderly, or female heads of households or people living below poverty line.

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	45%	45%	45%
Achievement	/	Approx. 43%	Approx. 51 %
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	-2%	+ 6%

**Indicator 2:** proportion of target population living in contaminated areas report improved access

This indicator is aimed to measuring the proportion of target population that reports improved access to cleared areas on a representative sample of the targeted communities. Data was collected following the completion of works at each task site. Data from numerous discussions with the local communities and the data collected post-clearance suggests there are hardly any community members that do not see their access to cleared areas improved post-clearance.

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	80%	NA	80%
Achievement	0%	NA	Approx. 90%
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	/	+10%

**Indicator 3:** proportion of target population has knowledge and skills to adopt safe behaviour in regards to explosive hazards

This indicator looks at the increase of knowledge of the beneficiaries interviewed before an EORE session and afterwards. All surveyed participants in EORE sessions have demonstrated an increased level of knowledge that allows them to adopt safe behaviour. The average pre-

session level of knowledge was completing correctly around 10% of the questionnaire, while the post-session levels of knowledge increased to between 80%-85% of the demonstrated knowledge.

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	80%	80%	80%
Achievement	0%	100%	100%
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	+20%	+20%

**Indicator 4:** proportion of targeted farmers and livestock owners report enhanced food security or socioeconomic resilience

The partner carried out a survey on a sample of 52 beneficiaries, out of which 12 beneficiaries mentioned that their expectations from the project have not been met entirely. The proportion is slightly higher due to the failure of drought-reliant barley crop, as well as some beneficiaries' additional wishes for support, which can not be provided at this time. Many beneficiaries expressed the need for the establishment of a bakery in the community, digging of wells in the village, provision of solar panels, or the actual set up of the electrical grid in the village. While acknowledging that these are all legitimate needs, especially the latter is a type of support that can only be provided by the local authorities and not an NGO. When questioned about the quality and the value of the support provided with the project, the beneficiaries all reported positive results, but would wish for a more comprehensive support package.

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	80%	NA	80%
Achievement	0%	NA	77%
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	NA	-3%

**Output 1:** Non-technical survey and battle area clearance are conducted on suspected or confirmed explosive hazards contaminated former agricultural land or infrastructure in ISIS liberated areas is conducted and cleared land is returned to local population for their safe and productive use.

The accomplishment of this output has not been fully achieved with 5,638,418 sq. meters cleared and released until the end of the Phase II of the project, which is slightly less than the 6,000,000 sq. meters that were anticipated and is due to objective factors outside of the project team's control. ITF and its partner anticipated the realization of this output at the time when a three-month extension was requested. This, however, could not factor in the additional stop work order issued by the authorities towards all HMA organizations. The impact of the suspension was that effectively cut the clearance operations short by over a further month and a half. Two tasks were already being in the process of clearance when the suspension order was issued on 4 July, in the total area of 1,050,959 sq. meters. Out of that 154,193 sq. meters has already been cleared at the time but could not be released because the task has not been completed. Overall, however, during both phases of the project over 9 million sq. meters of formerly unused agricultural land, which has in many cases turned into dust due to lack of cultivations, have been cleared and returned to the communities for their productive use.

**Indicator 1:** number of sq. meters cleared and released

	Baseline	11/2021	08/2022
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Target (planned)	9,645,605 m <sup>2</sup>	9,645,605 m <sup>2</sup>	9,645,605 m <sup>2</sup>
Achievement	3,645,605 m <sup>2</sup>	6,176,363 m <sup>2</sup>	9,284,023 m <sup>2</sup>
Comparison (e.g. in %)	37.8%	63.8%	96.25%

**Output 2:** Individuals living in at risk communities take part in tailored, context-specific EORE sessions and training, and have increased knowledge and skills to be able to better protect themselves, their friends and families from explosive hazards.

11,187 people (4,969 male, 6,218 female) have been reached with the EORE sessions; out of these 68% were children under the age of 18. After an initially slow progress in reaching this target, there has been some restructuring of the teams where searchers temporarily assisted EORE teams in message delivery. The growth of targeted beneficiaries' figures was relatively slow at the start due to mainly rural settings in which sessions take place, which normally do not gather large crowds. EORE sessions were then also delivered at a handful of schools, assisting in the delivery of targeted figures, as well as at Washokani IDP camp and to IDP displaced during the Ghwayran Prison attack in Hasakeh. CFPs were also increasingly being involved in the project, 43% of them women; CFPs were people of importance within the community that enjoy a high degree of respect, such as religious leaders, teachers, elderly and similar.

**Indicator 1:** Number of local population receiving risk education messages about the dangers of explosive hazards

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	9,750	9,750	9,750
Achievement	0	4,843	11,187 (4,969 male, 6,218 female)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	49%	114.7%

**Indicator 2:** Number of Community Focal Points (CFPs) trained to share risk education safety messages with peers & people in their spheres of influence

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	30	30	30
Achievement	0	8 (4 male, 4 female)	32 (18 males, 14 females)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	27%	106,66%

**Output 3:** Targeted and needs-based farming and livestock agricultural recovery support program is delivered through the value chains approach to population living in or rightfully using arable land, including areas recently cleared from explosive hazards by Team ITF.

The progress on this output has been a little delayed initially, but Khair made up for most of the time that was lost in the initial two months. The approach Khair used in its segment of the project was a phased one, with initial support for barley growers, then for livestock herder,

followed by activities supporting home gardeners and small businesses with support for particularly vulnerable households planned as the last phase of the project. Out of 340 total beneficiaries, 167 or 49% were female; a large proportion of those women were the sole breadwinners of the family or even taking care of their extended families. This is an excellent achievement in support of the women within targeted communities.

Khair did observe minor conflict within the community due to the targeting of host communities and not involving IDPs – this has been mitigated in the project planning itself by including activities that are targeting IDPs. On the other hand, host communities complained that IDPs are eating away their income. It has been carefully communicated with both IDPs and host communities that everyone will be able to benefit from the project, albeit at a different time, and for everyone's benefit, but that independently set selection and vulnerability criteria will have to be in place – not with the attempt to leave anyone out, but simply because of limited resources. The spillover effects of supporting host communities are felt also in the IDP community living in the area and vice versa. Unfortunately, the needs in NES are immense and additional resources would be required to encompass all who require assistance.

**Indicator 1:** Number of recipients of small business grants and training for the development of agribusiness in support of local farmers and livestock owners

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	15	NA	15
Achievement	0	NA	15 (9 males, 6 females)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	/	100%

**Indicator 2:** Number of livestock owners receiving sheep and livestock inputs with relevant training

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	75	75 (30 male, 45 female)	75 (30 male, 45 female)
Achievement	0	75 (44 male, 31 female)	75 (44 male, 31 female)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	100%	100%

**Indicator 3:** Number of people receiving home gardening kits and training to produce vegetables for their own consumption

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	100	NA	100
Achievement	0	NA	100 (38 males, 62 females)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	/	100%



**Indicator 4:** Number of farmers receiving barley seeds and barley-production inputs with relevant training

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	50	50 (40 male, 10 female)	50 (40 male, 10 female)
Achievement	0	50 (34 male, 16 female)	50 (34 male, 16 female)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	100%	100%

**Indicator 5:** Number of people as heads of the most vulnerable households receiving vouchers redeemable at local markets in support of local farmers and livestock owners

	Baseline	11/2021	8/2022
Target (planned)	100	NA	100
Achievement	0	NA	100 (48 males, 52 females)
Comparison (e.g. in %)	/	/	100%