

Supporting Communities' Recovery Through Integrated Mine Action and Climate Resilience Interventions in Hard-to-Reach Areas of Afghanistan



Figure 1: A deminer working in one of the minefields in Monai village, Hesarak district.

Afghanistan: A History of Conflict

Afghanistan ranks among the most vulnerable countries to climate change¹. Widely regarded as a “threat multiplier”, climate change intensifies human insecurity and poses poverty, displacement, and fragility risks.² According to recent studies, by 2030, droughts and sudden onset events such as flash floods are likely to be regarded as the norm rather than as a temporary or cyclical event, posing long-term risks to populations who rely on agriculture and livestock for their subsistence and income.³ In addition to land degradation and lack of access to quality farmland, Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of explosive hazard contamination in the world, with a legacy of conflict that continues to claim innocent

¹ Germanwatch, Global Climate Risk Index 2021.

² DRC and Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Exploring the Environment, Conflict, Migration Nexus in Asia, March 2022

³ SEI, Socio-Economic Impacts of Climate Change in Afghanistan. A Report to the Department for International Development, Stockholm Environment Institute.

lives and disrupt local livelihoods. In a context where more than 70% of the population lives in rural areas and 80% of livelihoods depend directly or indirectly on agriculture, the presence of explosive ordnance (EO) cripples Afghan communities' prospects to recover and achieve self-reliance.⁴

As a result of the relative cessation of conflict following the political takeover of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in August 2021, DRC now has greater access to communities and EO contaminated sites than ever before, representing a unique window of opportunity to expand programmatic focus to hard-to-reach locations, including areas that have seen little to no aid and Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) response in the past. DRC is the only actor in Afghanistan capable of delivering integrated HMA and recovery programming. This has the potential to contribute to socio-economic development and stability through the clearance of otherwise inaccessible land. Complemented by infrastructure rehabilitation initiatives and earthworks, DRC's integrated interventions bolster the productive use of cleared land and help mitigate the long-term impact of slow and sudden onset natural disasters. The ultimate objective of DRC's integrated programming in hard-to-reach areas is to enable Afghan populations trapped in a post-conflict phase and negatively impacted by climate change to sustainably recover.

DRC's Approach to Integrated Programming

DRC defines integrated programming as a holistic approach across sectors to address risks that people affected by conflict and displacement experience, their vulnerabilities, and their needs. It is a distinct approach that combines complementary sectoral approaches which collectively contribute to achieving mutually reinforcing outcomes and a common programme objective.

DRC Afghanistan is uniquely positioned to leverage on complementarities of its complex portfolio, including Protection, MPCA, Economic Recovery, Shelter and Settlements, Camp Coordination and Camp Management, and Humanitarian Mine Action, to strengthen the impact of its programming on hard-to-reach communities. The overall goal of DRC Afghanistan's multi-sector program is to promote favorable conditions for shock and displacement-affected communities to seek safety, claim their basic rights and pursue self-reliance.

Through a well-tested and carefully phased approach to HMA and recovery programming, DRC is addressing the multifaceted issues arising from EO contamination, including the inability of many farming communities to practice traditional livelihoods or access natural resources and markets. At the same time, DRC is generating employment opportunities by training and financially supporting (through salaries) a locally sourced deminer workforce, thereby transferring skills and knowledge beneficial for sustainable engagement in the HMA job market. A typical deminer will often come from rural communities and an environment characterized by little to no formal education, high levels of illiteracy, limited economic resources, and tend to be the main breadwinners of large households. As such, deminers largely align with the beneficiary profile most aid actors aim to target.

⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan 2022.

Step 1: Integrated Assessments



DRC strategic focus is on hard-to-reach areas across Afghanistan, with 70% of our target locations in 2023 being classified as hard-to-reach. Applying a newly developed task selection process that takes into account the potential for complementary interventions, DRC teams identify priority tasks for land clearance activities. Before the start of the intervention, joint teams including MEAL, HMA, and Economic Recovery members conduct a series of assessments to identify hazards and establish a baseline for the prioritization of clearance in accordance with community perspectives and potential for development of productive land and assets.

Step 2: Humanitarian Mine Action



HMA staff initiate operations by conducting detailed re-survey of hazardous areas to clearly define the boundaries of safe and unsafe areas. Subsequently, clearance teams are deployed based on detailed task implementation plans to clear and release unsafe areas. To supplement these activities, a localised and targeted approach to Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) is implemented and emergency victim assistance (EVA) can also be utilized to support survivors of EO-related accidents.

Step 3: Recovery & Climate Resilience Interventions



Following the completion of land clearance operations, DRC Economic Recovery teams implement recovery interventions based on the priority needs identified through the baseline assessments and extensive community consultations. The design of the interventions takes into account the preferences of men and women within the community, and it is tailored to their specific needs. Acknowledging the needs arising from climate change and sudden onset events such as floods, DRC teams train community members in the implementation of low-tech earthworks aimed at mitigating the risk of disasters. These can include – among others - terracing, the excavation of trenches, and the planting of trees on previously contaminated land.

Step 4: Impact Evaluation



At pre-established times during the implementation of the activities, DRC MEAL teams conduct a multi-sector evaluation to measure the joint impact of HMA and recovery interventions, to evaluate the effectiveness of the response, and inform future programming. DRC impact evaluations are designed to go beyond the measurement of sectorial outcomes to capture the effect of the intervention on composite indicators.

Case Study

Monai Village, Hesarak district, Nangarhar



Figure 2: A Focus Group Discussion with community members, July 2023

With an estimated population of 1,085 residents, Monai village is situated in the North-West of Hesarak district (Nangarhar province). Monai is the last village in Hesarak district, and it is connected with Khaki Jabbar and Surobi districts of Kabul province through the Kabul-Hesarak Road. Because of its location, this village has historically had strategic relevance, including during previous conflicts, leading to high levels of EO contamination. Today, due to its geographical remoteness and history of conflict, Monai village in Hesarak district is considered an hard-to-reach area.

Hard-to-reach

Taking advantage of unprecedented access to hard-to-reach areas across the country, DRC expanded its programmatic reach from 11 to 19 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan. This was made possible by DRC's long-standing operational presence, nexus programme, as well as continuous access negotiations and strategic engagement with key actors on the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance.

Hard-to-reach areas in Afghanistan include remote, rural districts that were under the control of armed opposition groups prior to the IEA takeover in August 2021. Their remoteness, lack of investments and limited assistance received in the decades of war result in the acute vulnerability of communities living in these locations. Today, their vulnerability is also compounded by climate change and limited capacities for natural resource management and disaster risk reduction.

The primary source of income of Monai village's residents is daily labour. However, they also rely on agriculture, livestock and collecting pine nuts as seasonal sources of income and for food production for household consumption. Families living in this location reported not having access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and markets, due to their remoteness from the main cities. Water for irrigation and household consumption is also very limited and most people fetch water from a local well, which is reportedly far from most of the houses. The condition of their main road is also very poor. For this reason, people commonly use the floodway as an alternative route, which is risky as it is regularly impacted by flash floods. The village was also heavily mined during the Soviet-Afghan war and the presence of EOs have caused several accidents. Hundreds of families were displaced during decades of conflict and many of them have still not returned due to presence of EO, as well as lack of water and job opportunities.

“Six people were wounded before DRC cleared the area. Some families’ livestock were also killed due to mines – this was their only source of income. [Before the Project] We were scared and knew of the dangers, but we took the risks anyways – we didn’t have any other choice.”

(FGD participant, July 2023)



Figure 3: Map of Monai Village and land cleared by DRC teams, September 2023

DRC's Humanitarian Mine Action team started a clearance operation in Monai village in June 2022. DRC's activities aimed at clearing the EO contamination from the village to provide a safe living environment for the residents and release contaminated land for productive use. Following land clearance operations, DRC implemented a recovery programme to provide access to water for agricultural use, as well as to mitigate the impact of flash floods through the implementation of low-tech earthworks. This intervention aimed at supporting the resumption and expansion of agricultural activities, creating job opportunities, and supporting Monai's community resilience to climate change. Ultimately, the intervention

aimed at promoting an enabling environment for voluntary returns to the village and at mitigating the risk of further displacement due to food insecurity, lack of essential services and livelihoods opportunities.

“We can already see and feel the difference. It’s about freedom of movement, but also our economic situation. This improves everything. We are extremely happy, to be honest. Women and our children, they are now moving freely. Before, we were very worried when walking in surrounding areas.”

(FGD participant, July 2023)

DRC’s Response

Humanitarian Mine Action

With SIDA funding, DRC conducted clearance operations in Monai village in June 2022. Thanks to this intervention, DRC cleared and released a total of 454,609 m². During the clearance operation, DRC teams found and safely destroyed 42 anti-personnel mines, 4 bomblets, 7 rockets, 16 mortars, 13 grenades and 89 fuses. The cleared land was handed over to the community for productive use. Based on findings from the integrated baseline assessment conducted by DRC teams at the start of the intervention, the community will use the cleared land for constructing the necessary infrastructure to improve natural resource management, accessing water for drinking and irrigation, collecting firewood, moving to other villages and main cities, and for the grazing of animals.

Alongside the removal of EO threats, the DRC mixed-gender EORE team conducted Explosive Ordnance Risk Education sessions to 1,719 individuals in Monai and surrounding villages to reduce casualties by promoting safe behaviour among at-risk groups.



Figure 4: A picture of Monai village taken from one of the cleared hazards.

In addition, with support from ECHO, DRC conducted Emergency Victim Assistance (EVA) for the survivors of accidents caused by mines or UXO. The EVA is an immediate cash response targeting survivors and their families with accessing immediate care and to support their recovery from injuries caused by the accident. The DRC teams identified a total of 12 EO survivors for EVA response in Hesarak district, which were subsequently responded by DRC. Out of these, 3 cases were supported in Monai village.

Recovery & Climate Resilience Interventions

With funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DRC implemented a recovery program in Monai village to maximize the impact of land clearance activities through rehabilitation of basic infrastructure for natural resource management and disaster risk reduction. At the start of the intervention, DRC Economic Recovery teams conducted assessments to identify the most relevant complementary interventions tailored to the specific environment, as well as needs and preference of the target community.

Assessment findings confirmed that the community's main priority was accessing water for irrigation and household use. As a result, DRC constructed a 300-meter-long intake canal to provide water for irrigation. The constructed canal, complemented by a series of protective walls and super passages, would not have been possible before the completion of the clearance operations, as part of the canal was built in previously EO-contaminated land. A total of 106 community members (90 unskilled and 16 skilled) were temporarily employed through a Cash for Work scheme to work on the construction of the canal to generate temporary income.

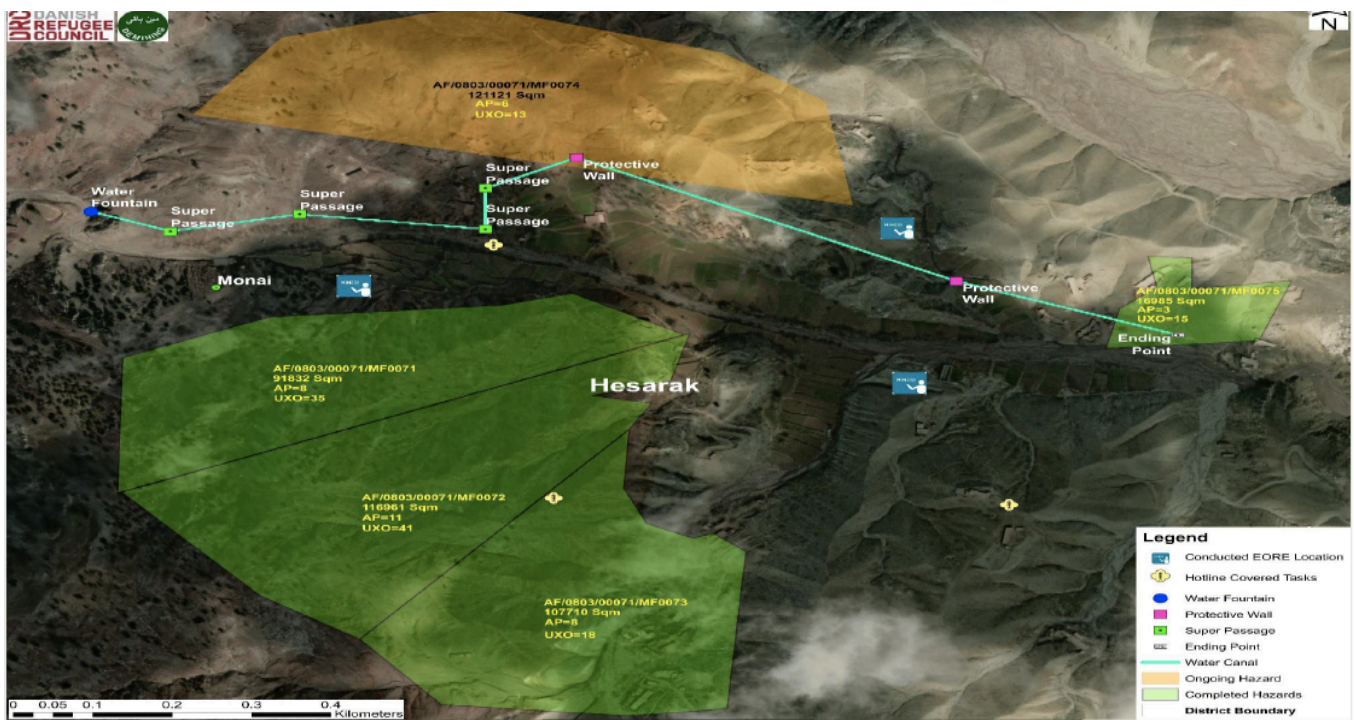


Figure 5: Activity Map, Monai Village, Hesarak District, September 2023

Additionally, Monai village is in a flood-prone area. Seasonal rains, combined with increasing land degradation from climate change, result in flash floods that cause damage to community infrastructure and severely impact agricultural production. The irrigation canal, for example, had been affected by a flood years before DRC's intervention and the community did not have the resources to independently rehabilitate it. To protect the newly built intake canal from seasonal flood, DRC constructed two super passages and one spillway. It is estimated that, thanks to this project, the Monai community will have access to water for irrigation for hundred of hectares of land which was not being used due the presence of EO contamination and the lack of water for irrigation and livestock. To ensure access to water for daily use for women residing in Monai village, DRC created a community access point dedicated to women, who use the irrigation water wash clothes, cleaning home utensils, etc.

Finally, to reduce the negative impact of flash floods, DRC also built terraces using local materials and labour and planted fruit trees on cleared land (on the hill sides marked by three released tasks on the map above, lower left corner). As part of the Dutch MFA-funded project, DRC established 1,000 terraces for walnut plantation and has already identified a nursery to continue planting these trees in the future. Thanks to this project, the community will be able to generate a sustainable source of income in the upcoming 3-5 years. Applying the techniques shared by DRC teams, community members will be able to maintain and further expand the terraces and to promote the reforestation and resilience of the Monai community.



Figure 6: A group of men employed through a cash for work scheme work on the rehabilitation of the intake canal, July 2023

Impact Assessment

Before the start of the clearance intervention, DRC conducted a baseline study in Monai village to understand the priority of the target community in terms of clearance of contaminated area. Information gathered through this initial assessment included who will benefit from the cleared land, for what purposes the cleared land will be used, and to determine the socio-economic impact the clearance activities.

Seven months after the completion of the clearance activities, DRC redeployed the teams to conduct impact assessment in Monai village. The aim of this assessment was to understand the effectiveness of DRC's integrated HMA and Recovery interventions on the target community, as well as the economic situation and living conditions of residents before and after the multi-sectoral response. Specifically, the study gathered information on DRC's HMA and cash-for-work activities, which were implemented in the same area, and collected feedback regarding the major challenges and needs residents were facing.

The majority of participants reported that they were relying on casual work or daily labor, livestock and agriculture to meet their basic survival needs. Before the clearance activities, community members reported that they faced difficulties accessing water source for drinking and irrigation due to EO contamination. They added that most of the people felt very unsafe while working, travelling, accessing water sources and accessing land for agriculture and grazing. While residents viewed the newly decontaminated land as safe and secure following clearance operations, they were initially unable to productively use the land due to lack of access to water for irrigation. Thanks to the construction of intake canal through a cash-for-work approach, respondents reported having sufficient irrigation water and improved ability to harvest their land. All the respondents reported being very satisfied with DRC's work. They added, they have not faced any difficulties accessing basic services and feel very safe in the community while children play and adults access basic services, water resources and roads for travel and trading.

More specifically, the recovery and climate resilience interventions had the following impact on the target community:

- Increased agricultural production.
- Reduced water wastage due to improvements on traditional irrigation system.
- Improved control of seasonal water for agriculture proposes.
- Created short-term employment opportunities and improved ability to meet basic needs through cash for work
- Enabled the adoption of double cropping on year bases.
- Reduced the risk of floods and promoted the reforestation of previously contaminated mountainous areas

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