

The socio-economic consequences of landmines essay



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Introduction:

Landmines have profound social and economic consequences to civilians. Although landmines are meant to curb enemy access to terrain, they affect the local civilian populations quite severely. They depopulate entire regions of the country, get in the way of agricultural production and interfere with transportation. They also bring down the economic infrastructure and kill/maim several innocent civilians. Landmines are at times deployed as a means of sabotage – they make useless strategic commercial structures and cripple the economy (Giannou 1997). Also, when surface transportation is hampered, farmers can no longer transit their produce to marketplaces. This results in inflation and soaring of commodity prices. Mined roads make the effects of famine and drought more severe by hampering food relief and restricting movement of supplies.

Disastrous results follow when mines are embedded in fertile agricultural lands. For example, in Zimbabwe diseases are rampant and thousands of cattle are infected with foot and mouth disease. The total livestock casualties since 1980 had reached a whopping nine thousands – worth 15 million Zimbabwean dollars. Add to this, the loss of herdsman's limbs and lives – it paints a distressing picture. In Mupa National Park in Angola, for instance, landmines are used by poachers have virtually wiped out the elephant population there. There is a similar concern in Zimbabwe, where buffaloes and other endangered wildlife are often the victims of landmines (Giannou 1997).

Large numbers of people are forced to migrate to other regions, which leads to problems of overcrowding and overall degradation of the environment. This in turn leads to increased susceptibility to infectious diseases among the refugees. A recent report indicates that as many as eighty-eight nations were found to be affected to some degree by landmines and unexploded ordnances.

Children are the most vulnerable group to fall victim to landmines, as they are too young to read or interpret warning signs. Also, due to their weak constitution, they are far more susceptible to succumb to injuries than adults. Moreover, they will have to constantly keep changing their prosthetic limbs as their stunted limbs keeps growing.

Movement against Landmines:

The 1997 Mine Ban Treaty was a significant step forward toward worldwide eradication of anti-personnel mines. The Landmine Monitor Report of year 2000 indicates that nearly three in four countries in the world have signed and/or ratified the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. The number of manufacturers of landmines has also reduced significantly. Most remarkably, during the year 2000, no shipments of mines were reported. Among the already manufactured ones, 50 nations have joined hands in destroying 22 million stockpiled mines (Pearn 2002).

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines is the lead-up that culminated in the Mine Ban Treaty in Geneva, Switzerland. The campaign was so effective that it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A few years later the campaign set up the Landmine Monitor that comprises a worldwide reporting <https://assignbuster.com/the-socio-economic-consequences-of-landmines-essay/>

network that compiles a comprehensive database and issues reports annually (Faulkner 1998).

But there are disappointments too. Since coming into effect from March 1999 onwards, landmines were reported to have been used in as many as 20 conflicts around the world, although mostly by “ non-state actors” (Kingman 2000).

Although much progress has been made, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines remains worried about the lack of resources to carry out de-mining and awareness projects. The report says: “ At a time when there is a danger of the international community turning its attention elsewhere, to deal with the next hot issue, there is instead a need for a redoubling of efforts to get mines out of the ground more rapidly and to better address the needs of mine victims and mine-affected communities” (Faulkner 1998).

The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan was formed by a coalition of 15 non-governmental organizations. It employs nearly 5000 people for de-mining and awareness campaigns. However, after the Sept 11 attacks, its projects were stalled and most of its office infrastructure ransacked and looted. The recent pledging of \$3 billion by donor countries toward a 3 year rehabilitation plan is only a small consolation (Kingman 2000).

History of Landmines:

Primitive forms of landmines were used in the battle of Agincourt in England during the 15th century. The next large scale use was observed during the American Civil War of the 19th century. But not until the turn of the 20th

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century did landmines find usage weapons of strategic importance. The First World War saw the implementation of landmines to destroy tanks. This proved so effective that during the Second World War as many as 300 million anti-tank mines were used (Pearn 2002).

Initially, landmines were used as a defensive and tactical weapon – delaying the progress of enemy troops and denying them access to key terrains and supplies. The surprise element attached to a landmine explosion is said to have a negative effect on enemy combatants and increase their stress levels. It proved to be a weapon that not only caused physical injuries but also psychological wounds as well – as soldiers constantly have to live in a state of anxiety and fear (Priest 1997).

After the 1950's technological innovations led to landmines being delivered by air. This meant that landmines were being used in larger numbers and at a more rapid pace. The nature of tactics and strategy too changed, as mines are now being deployed to drive enemy troops to positions of weakness. These landmines, being called the “scatterables”, were widely used during the Vietnam War. It had negative consequences for all parties – 30 percent of American casualties during the war are due to these “scatterables”. Landmines were the weapon of choice for many small-scale wars of the 60's and 70's (Pearn 2002).

Newer technologies have led to the design of “smart mines, which are used for offensive purposes. This has put civilian lives in further jeopardy. Clearing these sophisticated mines is difficult too. It is in this context that the Mine Ban Treaty was conceived. The treaty had already had some definite positive

results – by the end of 1999 only a handful of countries are still into landmine production and all the exporters have also ceased their activities (Faulkner 1997).

Example 1:

Northern Uganda is seeing a bitter armed conflict for more than 20 years now. In this region, 22 people suffer landmine wounds every month. The situation here is so severe than the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs had classified it as one of four “ forgotten emergencies” in the world. Millions of people are driven out of their homes into army-guarded camps. The region is rife with diseases, violence and human rights violations.

How well these victims re-integrate into the society is dependent on the medical facilities available in the region and the support they receive from their communities. Unfortunately, not all cultures are embracive of the handicapped. Margaret Arach, a landmine survivor has this to say,

“ Once back home from the hospital, the physical pain and recovery from the amputation were not the only obstacles I had to face. I was treated as a social outcast by my family. My mother was particularly ashamed, wishing that I rather be dead than live as an amputee. I was forced to do all the household chores — grind grain, bake bread and clean — even though I did not have a prosthesis or even crutches to help get around. When visitors came to the house, my mother sent me to the backyard, so as not to be seen. I felt completely isolated and without hope for the future. Although my father offered some support, he too died of an illness not long after I came home from the hospital.” (Oppong & Kalipeni 2005).

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In the badly hit Acholi region, although a large-scale mine-awareness campaign was undertaken, not much de-mining has been done as yet. Emmanuel Kalanzi, a local community leader is worried no end by this situation, “ The rebels planted mines in village paths, granaries around water wells, schools and healthcare facilities, while unexploded ordnances are also numerous. Even of the ongoing peace talks succeed, people cannot return to their homes, because their backyards and gardens are now minefields.” (Oppong & Kalipeni 2005).

There are other concerns too. The Acholi and Gulu regions have the highest mortality rates and very high incidences of malaria due to poor sanitation levels in the camps. Patrick Langoya Otto, an administrator in Gulu asserts that the district has most number of HIV/AIDS cases in the whole of Uganda. He also adds,

“ Access to prevention services and psychosocial support for those in the conflict area is a major concern. Anti-retrovirals are also difficult to come by. For instance, at St Joseph’s Hospital, the largest provider of drugs in Kitgum district, 670 people receive the drugs, but this represents just 24% of the hospital’s total number of HIV-positive patients that need treatment” (Oppong & Kalipeni 2005)

Nearly 80% of the population in this region is dependent on relief food for their survival. Only half of the HIV infected pregnant women, in Kitgum and Pader districts, register themselves in programmes that prevent infection transmission to children. High costs for commuting and medical expenses put off many women from attending antenatal clinics. And even if they do

attend, staff shortages and incompetence of medical personnel result in poor treatment. Charles Odong, who lost his sister to HIV/AIDS says, “ People are so desperate for food that many are willing to sell sex and risk contracting HIV because they say the disease will take some time to kill you, while the hunger will kill you immediately. Finding food for people in the region should be a priority for the government and aid agencies, because it helps those who are already sick and could also help prevent new infections” (Oppong & Kalipeni 2005).

Example 2:

The economic consequences of landmines are equally devastating. The most distressing aspect of landmines is that they make the land uninhabitable. The dispersal of mines is so random and unsystematic that even those responsible for planting these mines have little idea as to where they are. Hence, millions of acres of land across the world are simply put to waste. The peasants and herdsman are the most affected, as most mines are planted in rural lands used for agriculture and grazing. Nguyen Muoi, a peasant from central Vietnam says,

“ I used to live a very active life before. I was a strong and hardworking farmer and I took care of my 2 acres of land with ease. In fact, I often did extra work for other farmers, to keep myself busy and also to earn additional income. But the landmine explosion changed all that. The explosion had shattered every bone in both my hands. My body was covered in fragments, both large and small. It was only by a miracle that I survived. From being a very active person, I have now become a wreck myself and dependent on

others for everything. At times I feel I should end my life. The accident had not only taken away my valuable hands but it also took away my dignity” (Walsh & Walsh 2003).

His brother Da Nang adds, “ My brother was such a dynamic person before. He was someone we all looked up to – for his energy and enthusiasm. But now, all that is lost. Every one in the family is shattered. It is horrifying to see him in this condition. The extensive treatment for Muoi had cost us 15, 000, 000 Vietnamese Dollars and pushed us into deep debt”(Burkhalter 1997).

Example 3:

A study of the social costs of landmines in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia and Mozambique show that one in two families are affected in some way by landmines. Most landmine explosions happen in these countries to peasant farmers, herdsman, nomads or fleeing refugees, as they are the ones who come in contact with the open countryside. The survivors are not everywhere able to participate in family or professional life. In these societies, each member of the family plays a vital role in day-to-day existence of the group and a loss of even one individual’s earning capacity can pose serious threats to the survival of the family. Hasancevic Mehmed, a Bosnian mine explosion survivor says,

“ Although I am a qualified electrician, I could not find any jobs. My family was on the brink of starvation. That’s when I contacted the local Military Invalid Branch and they offered me training in copper engraving. After completing my training, I began a small business making souvenirs in copper. Since all of my souvenirs were hand made it took me a lot of time
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and energy to get the final product. I did not have adequate equipment, which meant I had to rely on my neighbour who had a car repair workshop to polish the final products. I had to work very hard to find customers for my products and established many contacts with local authorities, who were buying the souvenirs for the visitors who came to their town" (Mitchell 2004).

His brother Ivanisevic Mehmed, who volunteers with the de-mining effort, adds,

" During my volunteer work, the biggest problem we face is the wide dispersal of landmines, since it comes in the way of any rehabilitation effort and impedes the delivery of international humanitarian supplies. The other day my co-worker lost his leg in an explosion. I do not know when my luck will run out. The only way to avoid this problem is if the supplies will be air-dropped. But we all know that is not going to happen since its cost is several times higher to road transport" (Mather 2002)

A recent study indicates that as much as 40% of the households with a landmine victim have difficulty providing for their food, let alone other essential expenses towards rehabilitation. The situation is even worse if the victim is a child, for he/she will have to be dependent on other members of the family for the rest of his/her life. One big hurdle for the victims is the complex and drawn out bureaucracy that they have to confront. In

Hasancevic Mehmed's case, " Me and my friend decided to apply for a micro loan so that we could buy equipment that would improve the quality of the products and shorten the time spent producing them. We sought help from a couple of organizations, but unfortunately the criteria for loans didn't suit us-

the repayment period was too short and the interest rate was too high.

Although I was very disappointed, I was also determined not to give up and continued with my work despite all difficulties.” (Walsh & Walsh 2003)

Conclusion:

The injuries that result due to landmines and unexploded ordnances can vary in their severity. While the more fortunate end up with multiple fragmentation wounds, the unluckier ones can lose their limbs and senses (touch, vision, hearing, etc). On top of this they would have to endure body disfigurement, chronic pain and post-traumatic stress disorder that manifest in the aftermath of the explosion.

In Angola, for example, one third of the country’s territory is made unusable by landmines. The fertile lands of the southeast are largely abandoned and its native inhabitants pushed into arid regions that are prone to droughts. Agricultural production in the south of Sudan is destroyed by landmines, making it one of the most impoverished countries in the world. In Somalia too, the livelihood of nomadic herders are put in jeopardy by the wide scattering of mines in pastoral lands. In Mozambique, major roads, railway tracks, power supply lines and fertile agricultural lands were mined. In some places, even schools, clinics and people’s gardens are not spared. In Zimbabwe, as much as a million acres of land was so heavily mined during war years that the region has become uninhabitable. So too in Ethiopia, where livestock are common casualties to mines planted in desert pastures. Such an environment hampers subsequent refugee repatriation and economic reintegration into their native societies (Mather 2002).

More broadly, the decreased food production has a far reaching impact on the region's economy as a whole. Some analysts have pointed out that agricultural output could be increased significantly if only the lands are ridden of the mines. For example, the unused fertile lands of Vietnam, if used properly, could help double the country's agricultural production. The already poor countries are made poorer by the landmines. The country's post war rebuilding efforts are also hampered by the amputees and the disabled, who themselves require care. Families are displaced and refugee numbers grow, as problems spread to surrounding countries. All tourism activities are suspended as a result of landmines. (Nadis 1997)

For civilians, there are threats other than landmines, and none more potent than unexploded bomblets from cluster bombs. Where anti-personnel mines are meant to maim, these bomblets can kill. The United States has the notorious distinction of being the leader in using this very destructive ammunition. In its operations in Afghanistan alone it had dropped over 600 cluster bombs, of which many did not explode - in effect they are now accidents waiting to happen (Mustoe 1997). These bomblets are sensitive and detonate easily. The yellow can-shaped bomblets attract the attention of children. What adds to the chaos is the usage of the same yellow colour for air-dropped food packets too. (Priest 1997)

In this scenario, the number one priority should be to protect children from land-mines. An international commitment to a thorough de-mining operation is called for. Awareness programmes and rehabilitation efforts should supplement the de-mining operations. Children in high-risk regions should receive special awareness education that involves role-playing and child-to-

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child approaches. Policies at national and international levels should reflect this concern for children's well being. Also, more diplomatic capital should be spent on arriving at mine clearance agreements. Governments across the globe should consent to ban the manufacture, use and trade of landmines as a way of supporting the worldwide ban. (Burkhalter 1997)

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The hallmark of good literature is that it combines art with raising social consciousness. This is certainly true of the 3 classics perused for this essay. Falling into different genres like fiction, nonfiction and reportage, the three works treat the social consequences of war in their own unique ways. The rest of this essay will show how themes of love, loss, perception and reality are adequately addressed in these works.

The Things They Carried is an assortment of short stories penned by Tim O'Brien based on his first hand experiences in Vietnam. O'Brien was part of the platoon called Alpha Company, which was actively engaged in combat with the Vietnamese. As a result, though the stories contain fictitious additions, they are mostly based on real events witnessed by the author. Several themes recur through these stories. Chief among them are love, camaraderie and courage. Love is most pronounced in the relationship between Cross and Martha. Cross agrees to narrate his .