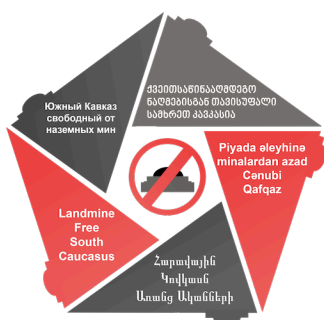


# Taking forward the work on land mine action advocacy in the South Caucasus



A report of LINKS Europe based on a consultation process on the 2018-2023 regional campaign “Landmine Free South Caucasus”, conducted with stakeholders between June 2023 and February 2024

1 March 2024



This report was prepared by LINKS Europe, with the support of the European Union.



## I. Background and Context

The South Caucasus is a region with some of the highest incidences of contamination from landmines and other unexploded remnants of war in the world. Whilst the problem affects Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia differently none can say they have eradicated it. Contamination by landmines and other unexploded remnants of war remains a major problem for the future development of the region and a real risk to life.

LINKS Europe has since 2018 been promoting the importance of a holistic, region-wide approach to clear the South Caucasus of landmines completely. Following a meeting in Tbilisi in October 2018 at which key stakeholders from the three countries and from the international community were present, we launched the regional campaign LANDMINE FREE SOUTH CAUCASUS (LFSC), with the first event taking place on 4 April 2019.

For five years LINKS Europe had the opportunity to co-ordinate this information and awareness-raising campaign, navigating the very difficult regional political context, and not being defeated by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a regional effort delivered in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia with the participation of demining agencies, official bodies and civil society organisations. The campaign has held dozens of activities across the region with the participation of thousands of people, produced more than twenty information and education videos in the five campaign languages: Armenian, Azerbaijan, Georgian, English and Russian; and distributed tens of thousands of publications and information material.

We published quarterly the electronic newsletter, South Caucasus Landmine Observer, which goes out to thousands of subscribers, and we have had a very high engagement with our online presence during key campaign moments. At the policy level, we hosted a number of policy meetings with the participation of Ministers, diplomats, MPs, senior officials and NGO activists. We worked closely with partners in the three countries and are grateful for the support and encouragement we have received.

The campaign LANDMINE FREE SOUTH CAUCASUS was co-ordinated by LINKS Europe working with partners from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and beyond, with the support of the European Union. Apart from funding the campaign the EU also provided political support through the presence at the main events of senior EU diplomats.

More information on the Landmine Free South Caucasus campaign 2018-2023 is available on various LINKS Europe publications that accompanied the LFSC campaign. (see hyperlinks for these publications on the last page).

After five years, during which the campaign has become a recognised brand it is now time to renew it and relaunch it for the next years, with more active participation by local stakeholders. We remain convinced that a regional approach is not only helpful but necessary in many circumstances, despite the obvious difficulties such an approach entails. This however needs to be a flexible approach, and very often more localised action is necessary.





## II. Consultation process

In June 2023, at a meeting it organised on the margins of the Intersessionals of the Ottawa Convention in Geneva, LINKS Europe announced a process for reviewing the work of the campaign, and for outlining a way forward. It subsequently started consulting stakeholders, including governments, demining agencies, NGOs, international donors, and other interested parties. A more formal consultation process was held from 15 January to 15 February 2024 through an open call to which anyone could reply. In the consultation process since June 2023 LINKS Europe held 22 in-person meetings in Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Brussels, London, The Hague, and Geneva; It also held 12 online meetings. It received written submissions from several partners.

In summary, the conclusions of the consultation process are that the Landmine Free South Caucasus campaign was a timely intervention which brought the issue of landmines to the fore of the public and of decision-makers in the South Caucasus at a very difficult time for the region. The success of the campaign in working simultaneously in the three countries – engaging multiple constituencies ranging from Government ministers to schoolchildren, and working in five languages – in a period which saw a war, a pandemic, mass population displacement and a crisis in European Security, was highlighted by many stakeholders. The

campaign was a confidence-building measure at a time of war and turmoil in the region.

The work needs to be continued but ways must be found to make it more efficient, effective, and focussed. The present format of the LFSC is not sustainable because it is trying to achieve too much with very modest resources, and the work needs, therefore, to be re-organised.

From the Consultation process twelve recommendations emerge, which LINKS Europe is bringing to the attention of donors and relevant stakeholders, and which it will start implementing with immediate effect.

### 1. Mine action is a necessary confidence-building measure

Mine action is a vital pillar in the process of building peace in the region. There remains however a significant lack of trust between the countries of the region when dealing with this issue. Mine action must therefore be seen as a necessary confidence-building measure for the foreseeable future.

LINKS Europe's initial engagement with the topic of mine action was the result of it having identified this as a priority area in the process of building trust and confidence between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Subsequent events have reinforced this need. Even in the most optimistic of scen-

arios, related to peace in the region on the one hand and landmine clearance on the other, landmines and other unexploded ordinance of war will continue to kill people in the region for at least another decade, probably more. In the interest of peace in the region the three SouthCaucasus countries should work together, and be seen working together on landmine clearance, and on the process of returning landmine-contaminated lands to their communities, thus also contributing to environmental rehabilitation.

## **2. A regional approach when possible; a more flexible localised approach when necessary**

Any kind of regional interaction in the South Caucasus has been very problematic, particularly because of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Positive developments in the relationship between the two countries are encouraging, but co-operation between the two on landmine issues remains modest and episodic. There is an urgent need for a more structured co-operation, including through the involvement of the two national demining agencies: ANAMA and CHDE.

However, a regional mine-action plan needs to be flexible, not least because it should not be dominated by any one side, and equally to avoid any one side obstructing the process for short-term gains.

## **3. Slow progress in the process of the three countries adhering to the Ottawa convention is disappointing**

We were disappointed that not more has been achieved in the five years of the LFSC campaign in the process of moving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to adhere to the Ottawa Convention, the 1997 “Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their De-

struction”. The campaign engaged the three governments on this issue continuously. In all three countries we kept being told that the door towards accession was open, but unfortunately, no progress has been made.

This is primarily a political decision, as the limited value of anti-personnel landmines in modern warfare is well recognised. Unfortunately, the experience of Ukraine in the last two years appears to have hardened some positions, even though the opposite should have been the case.

Adhering to the Ottawa convention, even if in a phased manner, is the logical next step that needs to be taken by the governments of the three countries.

We will keep this issue on the agenda, and the international community must do the same.

The Implementation Support Unit of the Convention needs to step up its engagement with the three governments. We remain convinced the objective of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia joining the convention is within reach.

## **4. The taboo of the national demining organisations working together needs to be broken**

There has been a taboo in the past on the national demining organisations of Armenia and Azerbaijan interacting with each other. We have dented this taboo a few times through LFSC, but this remains a challenging issue. This interaction must now necessarily develop to involve contact and eventually co-operation at a technical level. A more appropriate inter-state structure, such as the UN, NATO, OSCE or EU must now take over the work of bringing the demining agencies together, and to start exploring with them how they can work together. This should lead to the



early establishment of a database for shared information on landmine contamination, based on maps of minefields, as well as oral evidence from persons who were involved in the planting of landmines.

### **5. Increasing transparency in the work of MODs and national demining agencies on demining issues; better dialogue between them and civil society**

In the consultation process, various local NGOs referred to the absence of dialogue between NGO advocacy on landmine action and state structures – particularly the national demining agencies and Ministries of Defence. Such a dialogue framework at the national level should be an important pillar for future work. Some embryonic structures, such as the Public Council of ANAMA in Azerbaijan, exist, but this work needs to be considerably expanded.

### **6. Local NGOs working on mine-action need to be empowered**

Local NGOs working on demining issues, particularly in the advocacy, education and information sectors struggle to mobilise resources, and are often funded through short-term limited scope projects. The process of empowering local NGOs must now start in earnest. International support for demining needs also to factor in this need when designing projects.

### **7. Landmine victims must remain a main point of focus; they remind us that this is first and foremost a humanitarian issue; Marking the 30 November as the day of solidarity with landmine victims in the South Caucasus**

Across the South Caucasus thousands of people have been killed or were injured by landmines or other unexploded remnants of war in the last three decades. This has left a huge scar on affected individuals, their families, and communities. Support by governments, and the wider community has not been consistent. The campaign Landmine Free South Caucasus made efforts to raise awareness of this problem in its work and activities, and in 2022 marked for the first time a “day of solidarity with the victims of landmines and UXOs in the South Caucasus”. This was marked again in 2023.

It was inspiring and humbling to see how the mood in meetings with officials and other stakeholders changed when landmine victims were allowed to take the floor and share their experiences. This work must continue, and the Day of Solidarity now needs to be endorsed officially by the governments of the region as a way forward.

Central to this needs to be the depoliticization of the humanitarian aspects of demining, and of dealing with landmine victims and their families and communities.





## **8. Learning from the experience of other regions**

In the consultation process, a number of local partners raised the need to have a mechanism to learn from the process of demining, and post-demining issues, in other countries where similar problems exist, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This learning process should be factored into future work.

## **9. Monitoring progress and developments on landmine action in the South Caucasus; the need for more media engagement**

The campaign Landmine Free South Caucasus helped increase public awareness of the ongoing landmine contamination issues in the South Caucasus.

Media attention to the problem however remains inconsistent. More efforts need to be exercised to engage the media in focusing on landmine issues, on the plight of victims and their communities, on the benefit of rehabilitating landmine-contaminated land, and on the policy issues surrounding the matter.

Specialised publications such as the online newsletter South Caucasus Landmine Observer should develop to become user-friendly online sources that the media can tap into.

## **10. More international support and solidarity is needed; the response so far does not reflect the scale of the problem**

International support for landmine clearance in the South Caucasus has been ongoing for many years, and a lot of good work has been done thanks to the generosity of donors. But the stark reality is that the level of that support has been minuscule compared to the extent of the problem.

In Geneva in June 2023, LINKS Europe proposed the holding of an international donors conference on the landmine contamination problem in the South Caucasus. We feel the European Union is best placed to convene such a meeting. In the consultation process, this idea was positively received by a number of key stakeholders.

## **11. COP29 offers an opportunity to focus on the importance of increasing resilience of communities as they juggle problems of landmine contamination.**

There is increasing realisation of the synergies between climate action and mine action. The report of the Geneva International Centre on Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), “Mine action and the resilience of communities to climate change”, pub-



lished in December 2023, highlights the interrelation between mine action and climate resilience. It points out that 60 per cent of the 20 countries ranked most vulnerable to climate change are contaminated by explosive ordinance.

The fact that COP29 will this year take place in Baku offers an important opportunity to contribute to raising awareness of this topic. As the process of clearing the South Caucasus of landmines and other unexploded remnants of war continues in earnest, the question of how to rehabilitate the land and turn it for the benefit of the community, in a way that it will also benefit climate action and the environment, arises. This is the first time that COP is being held in a country with high landmine contamination and the issue should not be ignored.

LINKS Europe will seek ways to address this issue in the framework of the theme Climate Change, Peace and Security in the COP agenda, and will be informed by recent UN Security Council discussions on the topic, including in June 2023 and February 2024.

## **12. Funding and resourcing landmine action in the South Caucasus for the next five years**

Apart from the funding required for landmine clearance, and post-clearance rehabilitation in the South Caucasus, much smaller but no less important resources are needed to support landmine action advocacy in the region, including through:

*(a) In-country information and education campaigns through local NGOs;*

*(b) In-country dialogue between CSOs and MODs and National Demining Agencies;*

*(c) Work with the victims of landmines, and the regional Day of Solidarity with the victims of landmines in the South Caucasus;*

*(d) Increasing awareness of landmine issues in the mainstream local media;*

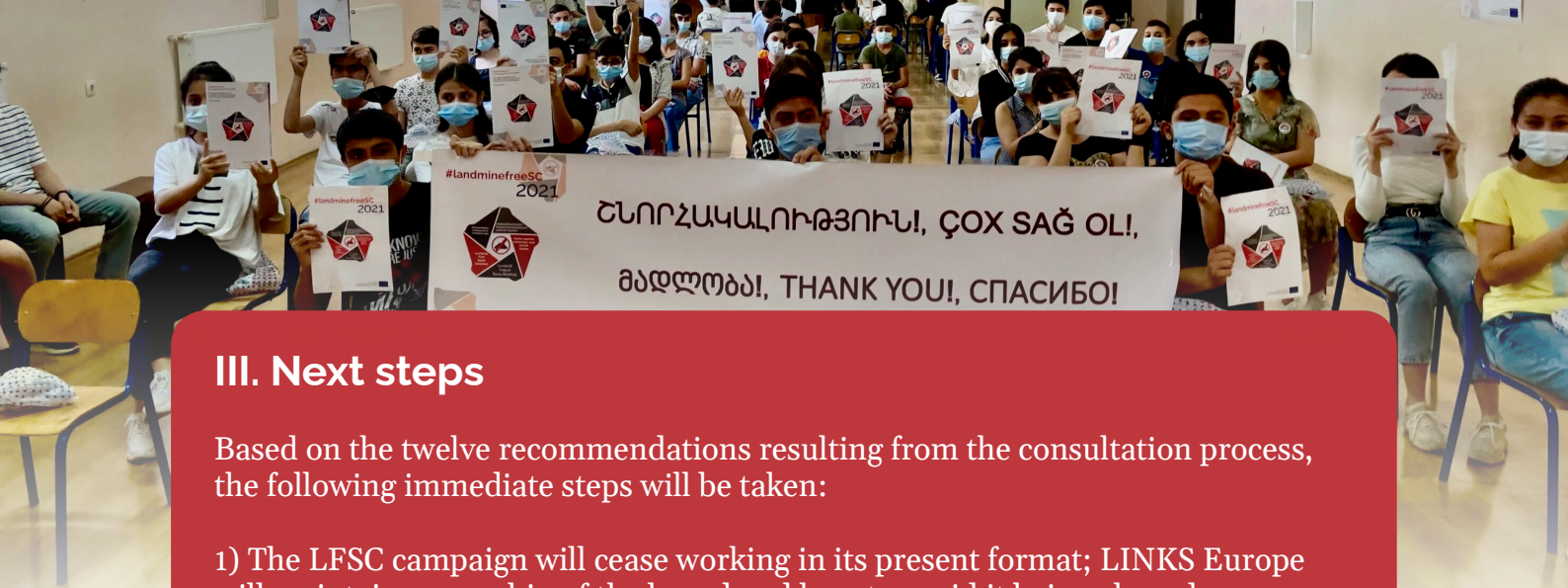
*(e) Engagement with the governments on policy issues, dialogue, sharing information; capacity building; promoting the regional approach and demining action as CBMs;*

*(f) Monitoring the process of demining in the South Caucasus and disseminating accurate and timely information;*

*(g) Promoting landmine action in the framework of COP29.*

Donors need to integrate funding for landmine action advocacy in the South Caucasus into their consideration of the wider problem, and develop flexible tools to support such action.





### III. Next steps

Based on the twelve recommendations resulting from the consultation process, the following immediate steps will be taken:

- 1) The LFSC campaign will cease working in its present format; LINKS Europe will maintain ownership of the brand and logo to avoid it being abused;
- 2) Work with the grassroots, education, and awareness raising, and media capacity-building will be separated from policy development and advocacy. LINKS Europe will forthwith focus on the latter.
- 3) LINKS Europe will before 30 June 2024 identify a focal point for the work on the Day of Solidarity with the victims of landmines in the South Caucasus to take over that work so that the day can be marked for the third time in 2024.
- 4) LINKS Europe will increase the frequency of our electronic newsletter, South Caucasus Landmine Observer, initially to bi-monthly, and develop the newsletter so it can be a resource to other stakeholders.
- 5) LINKS Europe will focus its work going forward on working with the three governments, the international community, and other stakeholders – local and international – on developing policy issues related to landmine action in the South Caucasus. It will do this through a new regional initiative – the Landmine Free South Caucasus Regional Platform which shall be open to stakeholders from the three countries of the region and the international community.
- 6) LINKS Europe will work with the current COP Troika countries (United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, and Brazil) to support the inclusion of global landmine action in the agenda of COP 29 and COP 30 in the framework of the theme “Climate Change, Peace and Security”.

**The Hague, 1st March 2024**

You can download and read the compendium of the activities in 2019 [here](#)

You can download and read the compendium of the activities in 2021 [here](#)

You can download and read our latest leaflet on landmines, which provides information on our work in Geneva in 2023, [here](#)

Read more general information about the campaign LANDMINE FREE SOUTH CAUCASUS [here](#)

**Related websites:**

[www.links-europe.eu](http://www.links-europe.eu)  
[www.commonspace.eu](http://www.commonspace.eu)

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