

Reframing the Collective Understanding on Landmine Awareness Day



by Heidi Kuhn, Founder & CEO, Roots of Peace
Author, *Breaking Ground: From Landmines to Grapevines, One Woman's Mission to Heal the World* (April 28, 2020, foreword by Her Majesty Queen Noor)

On December 8, 2005, the General Assembly declared that April 4th of each year shall be observed as the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action. Last year, I was in Kabul, Afghanistan as an entire family of survivors bravely walked without limbs to the podium and shared the horrors of these hidden killers. Together, we planted an apple tree on the grounds of the Palace as a symbol of planting the Roots of Peace. Each year, this date serves as a sobering and inspiring reminder of the work ahead of us as we work to clear the earth's surface of these insidious, deadly devices.

This year, however, Landmine Awareness Day finds us all navigating political, economic, and social "landmines" due to the scourge of COVID-19. For some, it has simply pushed us into our homes and isolated us from our neighbors. Many have been left without jobs, without access to adequate medical or financial resources. Others still have endured the disease's ravages, and many thousands have lost their lives.

This year it finds our organization, Roots of Peace, almost completely halted in its practical, on-the-ground efforts to protect the brave staff, officials, and farmers who put "mines to vines" philosophy into practice across the world. However, our global

communications have continued to coordinate the Spring planting season leading with the shovel, not the sword as the U.S./Taliban Peace Deal is at a tender crossroads. But as we protect ourselves, our families, and our communities, we also understand that the seeds we reap this spring will bear a harvest of hope in the fall.

We will get through this. My hope is that the global response to this crisis reframes the collective understanding of other global crises. I hope that it illuminates the power of mass response and shows us how we must protect each other—and the incredible power we have to do so. To this end, I must urge that the United States reassess its January 2020 decision to expand its use of landmines in battle. The Obama-era ban on the use of landmines outside of the Korean Peninsula inhibited the President’s “steadfast commitment to ensuring our forces are able to defend against any and all threats,” the current administration has said.

While the story did garner fleeting national attention, it was predictably churned into the news cycle and has understandably disappeared from the headlines. Having spent over 20 years leading demining awareness operations in the most landmine-affected countries in the world as the founder of *Roots of Peace*, I must urge readers to consider the real ramifications of this decision.

Renewed deployment of landmines will dramatically undermine US peacekeeping efforts by placing a burden of fear and violence on civilian populations. Opposing military forces benefit from access to detection technologies that civilian populations lack. There are an estimated 60 million landmines in over 60 countries that maim/kill innocent farmers and children long after the guns of war have silenced. Today, over 70 percent of landmine victims worldwide are civilians. Over half of those are children.

I have seen the way landmines paralyze civilian efforts in times of war and times of peace alike. I have seen schoolhouses full of landmine victims in Afghanistan. On one trip to Croatia, where the country operated under the constant threat of an estimated 1.2 million landmines and unexploded ordnances following the Balkan War, I watched my young son kick a soccer ball with two local boys his age, both of them playing on happily despite the prostheses they would wear for the rest of their lives after their legs were severed in landmine blasts.

Earlier this year, I began the new decade in Quang Tri, Vietnam, where millions of remain buried in the ground, nearly 45 years since The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975. In the first week of the new decade, I detonated a landmine with an all-women team of deminers from MAG (Mines Advisory Group). Since the war ended on April 30, 1975, over 100,000 innocent Vietnamese footsteps have been maimed or killed long after the guns of war have silenced.

Roots of Peace has done extensive work in Afghanistan, To this day, Afghanistan is the most heavily mined country in the world. This, in a land where over 80% of the population is dependent upon agriculture to survive, represents a crippling threat. I have

seen the way that Afghan communities are forced to reckon with the ravages of war as they fight for localized economic sustainability.

Operating in Afghanistan since 2002, we have removed over 100,000 landmines, planted over 5 million fruit trees in all 34 provinces, and impacted over 1 million farmers and families with support from USAID, DOD, USDA, ADB, EU and the World Bank. Despite a Taliban attack on our facility in 2014, we are proud to have remained a positive force as Afghanistan has increased agricultural exports from \$250 million in 2014 to over \$1.4 billion in 2020. Increased use of landmines threatens to disrupt this progress. Business does not thrive in places where overland travel is an act of peril, as we strive to export fresh fruits and spices to new markets.

Roots of Peace's vision of transforming mines to vines—replacing the scourge of landmines with bountiful vineyards and orchards worldwide—is based upon the belief that landmines are not simply tools of war. They are perpetrators of war. Much as COVID-19 has ground global economies and infrastructures to a disastrous halt, the scourge of landmines completely freeze the progress that ensures lasting peace. Like the disease, landmines carry no flag and know no color.

We will continue our humanitarian efforts to plant the roots of peace for future generations to thrive once this disease has ended. We will do everything within our power to ensure that the lessons we take away from the ordeal advance global peace. We hope that governmental decisions on weaponry and tools of war are made with similar forethought.

Heidi Kühn is Founder and CEO of Roots of Peace, a humanitarian-nonprofit organization founded in September 1997 with a vision to transform MINES TO VINES--replacing the scourge of landmines with sustainable agricultural farmland. Her pioneering work empowers families living in war-torn regions with hope leading to the economics of peace through export and trade. To date, Roots of Peace has impacted over 1 million farmers and families, spanning eight countries – Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Croatia, Iraq, Israel, Palestine and Vietnam. Roots of Peace has facilitated the removal of over 100,000 landmines and unexploded bombs, restoring the land for agricultural bounty.

Kühn's numerous awards include the: Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, World Association of Non-Profit Award, and The National Jefferson Award for Public Service — the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Award, and the Gandhi Global Family Seva Award. Her supporters include the United States Government, the United Nations, World Bank and other international governments and organizations. She has been recognized by numerous world leaders including U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis and many heads of state and government.

A graduate of the University of California, and recipient of the Cal Alumni Award for Excellence and Achievement, Kühn has been married to her husband Gary for 39 years. They have four children, Brooks, Tucker, Kyleigh and Christian, and three grandchildren Jai, Laila and Amaya.

To learn more: www.heidikuhn.com www.rootsofpeace.org, [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#).

Breaking Ground: From Landmines to Grapevines, One Woman's Mission to Heal the World is available for pre-order now and will release on April 28, 2020 in hardcover and eBook at booksellers nationwide and online retailers including amazon.com, [Barnes & Noble](#), and [IndieBound](#).