Time to Steady the Pendulum

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The "Ca'd'oro"

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Standards for Mine Clearance Operations; 3

The global need to respond to the social, economic, and humanitarian impact of anti-personnel landmines will soon enter its third decade. From one perspective, the expanded development of the global mine-action programme appears dramatic and positive; yet from another, it may appear quite the opposite. Emergency mine action, designed to alleviate suffering and improve socioeconomic situations, is a critical post-conflict response. International and national responses, however, should also be aimed at addressing short- and long-term objectives, maximising utilisation of limited financial resources and implementing efforts quickly.

Standards were introduced initially on rapid response rather than on standards. This trend started to change in the early 1990’s with an emphasis on safety and quality standards. It was often accompanied by resistance to productivity (and therefore not actively addressing effectiveness, efficiency or delivery in a timely manner).

In 1995 the standards pendulum was initiated with the production of International Standards for Mine Clearance Operations by the Mine Action Information Center (MAC). These, however, were not actually ISO-styled capability. It is difficult enough to work productivity or any phrase closely associated with it, so how do other industries manage to instigate an ever-increasing number of standards to fully comply; it would be encouraging.

The IMAS, the standards pendulum began to swing with the continuing development of the International Mine Action Standards. With the continuing development of the IMAS, the standards pendulum began to swing even further to the right, concentrating solely on standards to improve and implement a quality and a safety regime. While the IMAS provide a very sound foundation for clarity and consistence in the standardised development of an International Standards Organisation. Based system could be in danger of losing sight of the humanitarian response.

The close coordination of a multitude of players in a different task. Donor organisations, however, have spent more than 10 years addressing policy, standards, advocacy and the fundraising role so that implementing organisations (both governmental and commercial) can provide (if rules and regulations permit) operations that function efficiently. If the rules, regulations or external factors restrict the implementing organisations, then efficient, effective and timely objectives become difficult—if not impossible— to achieve.

The IMAS—The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Since 1997, the concept of operating an ISO-style standard has become popular and the momentum to instigate an ever-increasing standard regime has been clearly identifiable. While many argued for standards that address humanitarian needs and complied with the increased costs and donation depletion, the need for comprehensive standards is understandable. Yet, while comprehensive standards have raised standards of quality, it has become obvious that the IMAS have developed lives of their own, raising the question of whether this is an acceptable cost.

While the IMAS are not actually ISO-based, the two are now so close together that they are seen as one. Several mine-action centres and individual nongovernmental organisations are now preparing to become ISO-certified due to the pressure to be ahead of the game. Few may understand the time, effort and cost needed to comply and maintain an ISO-style capability. It is difficult enough for large commercial companies and international NGOs to fully comply; it would be impossible for most small companies, almost all of them indigenous organisations.

The productivity issue. The three key elements of most contracts are:

1. Performance (certainties related to safety and quality)
2. Work conducted within an agreed budget or contract cost
3. Execution of the task within the contractual time

Many of the land areas that have been undertaken before the IMAS were established has been accepted as cleared and returned to communities. In many cases, IMAS fail or the momentum to instigate an ever-increasing number of standards to fully comply; it would be encouraging.

The inclusion of risk assessment in a 2006 study by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining is one of the most progressive and innovative, tools to come from the establishment; therefore not automatically mean operating efficiently. Delivered in a timely manner is a meaningless phrase; it is too general and cannot be measured.

The IMAS are about standards that can be measured, so productivity data (operationally and commercially) as guidelines for outputs provide something that is measurable. IMAS should be a guideline to monitor quality control on-site, or a basis for assessing site work (by daily reports). If rules and regulations are available, the statement should be something with more meaning, such as “operating to defined safety and quality standards and to known production outputs.”

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The Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre spent months assessing a productivity table, taking into account the variety of factors that affect productivity. While this process may not be considered perfect, Wijnands and his colleagues believe that productivity is a critical issue. The productivity data (operationally and commercially) as guidelines for outputs provide something that is measurable.

While other industries, none of which have a major humanitarian element, demand error-free standards, the humanitarian response may differ. The humanitarian budget makes unrealistic standards hard to justify from a humanitarian perspective. Standards need to be tailored to most three basic requirements in present day mine action:

1. Humanitarian: Humanitarian standards must exist to achieve safety and what is important for the humanitarian response—efficiency and timeliness.

2. Commercial: Commercial standards should be based on the same format and basic principles as humanitarian standards, but the commercial clients must be able to select additional work standards to achieve a level of confidence for which they are willing to pay. In mine action, IMAS fail or the momentum to instigate an ever-increasing number of standards to fully comply; it would be encouraging.

3. Health, safety and environmental: Final, there are those components that may be used to justify the additional costs and that may be required to produce a product that can be sold.

The emphasis on safety and quality alone has resulted in an environment where the output is reduced to a non-essential item. This situation results only in increasing longevity and costs. Standards and guidelines cannot address all on-site situations; therefore, common sense and the development of a tiered system of guidelines and, site-specific risk assessments, are essential requirements.
The Financial Implications

Standards cost money. They are expensive to write and maintain, and they cost considerably more to implement. Little information has been provided since the initial writing of the IMAS about their real costs. Certainly there are some commercial contracts for which the cost of IMAS implementation is significantly higher than for other contracts.

As standards become increasingly stringent, they will become more expensive to implement. Those standards that are more expensive to implement are more likely to be overridden or altered in the field, resulting in higher costs for the military and civilian agencies that are supposed to comply with them.

Standards are necessary for any mine-action activity, but standards must reflect actual need. The authors of the IMAS are attempting to balance humanitarian with commercial needs, and they must ensure that this intention is not subject to different interpretations. Currently, evidence suggests a widespread lack of understanding on how to interpret the IMAS—this could potentially lead to failure of the standards.

As less money is available, standards could be blamed for prolonging the period that many communities have to wait to be cleared. If this is the case, then standards will be responsible for making the term humanitarian mine action an oxymoron. It is time to carry out mine action in a more (cost) effective, efficient and timely manner.

Summary

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The Parable of the Two Sons

by Dennis Barlow [Mine Action Information Center]

T he biblical parable of the two sons illustrates a great human dilemma, often repeated in literature and life. It is a story of two brothers, each with a different perspective. The first, who chose to work in the vineyard, allows the second son to idle. The second son, on the other hand, is content to work hard and make a profit. The first son, who chose to work, is rewarded, while the second son is punished.

In spite of the overwhelming good being accomplished by the Ottawa Convention ban on anti-personnel landmines, there are several indications that actual accomplishments and adherence to its tenets are sometimes ignored in favor of doctrine. Worse is the tendency of some observers to turn a blind eye to the shortfalls, not wishing to be accused of being negative toward follow States Parties. The “other sons” (in this case, nongovernmental organizations) have acted variously Countries that decided not to ban APVs via the Ottawa Convention are not intrinsically evil; they felt that they had a larger responsibility in defending their allies (the U.S., for example). The brutalized chemical border provinces necessitated APVL reliance (e.g., Finland), or they placed a greater emphasis and reliability on more traditional armed conflict zones (e.g., India).

It may surprise some to learn that the United States has adhered to the spirit of the Ottawa Convention since it was signed by the first States Parties and whose last significant use of APVs took place in the 1991 Gulf War in order to defend Saudis Arabia, the same year in which the United States signed the Mine Ban Convention. This was a significant commitment, as the United States already had, in 1998, developed an extensive program of humanitarian mine action projects under the leadship of the Mine Action Support Group, managed a robust mine-detection and clearance research and development program, and has destroyed well over 3.3 million of its stockpiled APVs.

Most of the 50 nonsignatories have endorsed the concept of elimination of APMs and 19 attended the Eighth Meeting of States Parties in Jordan. Most have also endorsed nonstockpiling and nonexportation of APLs, as well as cessation of production and export. If one were to assess the use of APVs today, it is generally not states who are the culprits, but factions, insurgents, drug lords, criminals and terrorists.

A review of national mine action globally reveals some interesting trends, if predictable conclusions. Since the early 1990s, virtually every government and country has come to understand the insidious nature of APLs. Some countries could quickly sign the Ottawa Convention because they had no landmines; others were not disposed to use landmines, or were so impressed by the need to ban landmines that they decided to do so for moral or military necessity. APLs are rendered—perhaps they were not previously recognized as a humanitarian threat. However, the situation differs between those two sets of countries—signatories and nonsignatories—who have been overblown, Finland and Norway, the United States and Canada, and Turkey and India are more alike in this regard than they are different. All but the most egregious states have realized the end of indiscriminate APL use. There are, however, some commercial APV users who continue to engage in global mine-action community to accept all who wish to see the humanitarian impact of landmines—as well as other explosive remnants of war—eliminated.

The authors of the IMAS are attempting to balance humanitarian with commercial needs, and they must ensure that this intention is not subject to different interpretations. Currently, evidence suggests a widespread lack of understanding on how to interpret the IMAS—this could potentially lead to failure of the standards. As less money is available, standards could be blamed for prolonging the period that many communities have to wait to be cleared. If this is the case, then standards will be responsible for making the term humanitarian mine action an oxymoron. It is time to carry out mine action in a more (cost) effective, efficient and timely manner.