Capacity Building in Mine Action: Are We There Yet?

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As an independent journal, we provide topics that stimulate conversations. We give the mine-action community a place to sound off. Every issue brings us rants and raves—happily, usually many more raves than rants. We’re sharing some of them here.

I am writing to you in my capacity as Austcare’s Mine Action Officer. I have just read with interest your article in the Winter 2006 edition of the JMA. “TheMine Action Express … or the Wreck of the ‘09.” These indeed are the issues that are still mine-action practitioners, are having to tackle and it was very helpful to you in finding out about them, at the various seminars.

Thanks for your recent piece on cluster munitions in Lebanon. We’re finally beginning to make progress!

~ Elnur Gasimov, TQA Team Leader, ANAMA

The article was written in a very interesting and touching manner. I would like to express my deepest thanks to all of you for publishing my “Unsing Hero” profile in the Journal of Mine Action. The article was written in a very interesting and touching manner. I received positive feedback from many people who read the article, and this made me more motivated to do such an excellent job.

~ Sandra Komnic, Organizational Affairs Adviser CBMAC-Guatemala Mine Action Centre

The JMA staff also would like to draw our readers’ attention to the profile of Cambodia, which appeared in Issue 10.2 online version of the journal only. Julien Chevillard, former Mine Action Project Manager for UNDP Cambodia, let us know there were several incorrect facts in the original version, and we have not corrected the problems, but also greatly expanded the article. We wish to thank Mr. Chevillard and Mr. Steve Munroe for helping us correct this article. We encourage you to read the revised profile of Cambodia at http://jmaic.jmu.edu/gt/cambodia.

Editor’s Note: We apologize for putting in the wrong photo for this article. We corrected it in the online edition as soon as we were alerted to the problem. The correct photo appears to the right.

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Drawing on the emergent capacity-development literature, we find that concentrating solely on establishing organizations, constructing institutions and transferring skills might build capacity in the short term, but the pillars need to be rooted deeply if they are to remain relevant.

Conceptual Markers

The current literature argues that capacity development is, first and foremost, a process that builds on the local context.5-7 Thus, many practitioners and analysts have abandoned the term capacity building as they saw it denoting the construction of islands of excellence removed from broader reality. It is argued that capacity development should be measured in terms of outcomes and not merely in quantifiable outputs (e.g., number of managers trained, Geographic Information Systems courses attended, QA inspectors instructed, and so on). As we have indeed learned from national mine-risk education campaigns, accounting for the number of T-shirts does not accurately reflect the degree to which human behavior has changed.

Recently, it has been argued that the lens for analysis should include observations on the intersection of the institutional, individual and organizational environments in which the projects are set.8 Better understanding the relationships between these different fields of practice will provide the managers and Technical Advisors of capacity-development programmes a better perspective on what works, why it works and why it doesn’t. This insight, which if measured and evaluated properly throughout the duration of a project’s lifecycle, will also allow for innovation and broader understanding of the impact of mine action on national reconstruction (peace building) and development (governance) objectives.

Conclusion

Broadening the discourse on how we conceptualize, practice and, ultimately, report on capacity-development activities is critical from an applied perspective. Moreover, it is a discussion that we as a community have not moved forward on in a meaningful and robust manner. When capacity building is forever being shaped by the urgency of time (Ottawa Convention”) and depletion of resources. Undoubtedly, the “five pillars” of mine action have served as a useful superstructure—and communication tool—for thinking about what we want to help build. But the dearth of discussion on how we conceptualize and actually develop national capacity limits the potential to learn, innovate and contribute to building meaningful and robust national capabilities that benefit a country beyond the niche confines of mine action.

ECDPM’s study’s conception is useful as it provides us with a more comprehensive view for designing, implementing or concluding a capacity-support project—or, respectively of whether it is being undertaken in a fragile state or a stable middle-income country. Thinking more broadly—but systematically—about capacity development will allow us to be more flexible and innovative in our approaches. It will allow us as practitioners to speak a common language and use a common set of principles that ensure the results of our work add value to the society for which they are targeted. Mine action’s strength has been its dogged technical focus on getting the mines out of the ground; it is exactly this type of determination that is now needed in our approach to capacity development. The focus, initially, however, should be on surveying the field of capacity development as a methodology so we can better map and respond to the question, “Are we there yet?”

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Jordon. He was also the CTA of the National Demining Institute in Mozambique. Prior to joining UNDP he worked for the International Development Research Centre in Johannesburg and Ottawa where he focused on the issue of capacity development. He has a Ph.D. in Geography from Queen’s University, Canada.