Mine-action Capacity Development at a Crossroads

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Capacities development is a central part of sustainable mine action. As a concept, capacity development has evolved over time but even now there is not an agreed-upon definition. While the mine action sector has made progress in encouraging the development of national capacity in many countries, there is still much that can be done to promote strong, capable institutions—both within the mine-action field and beyond.

What is Capacity Development?
It is difficult enough to define specific things (e.g., metal detectors) and processes (mine-risk education) within the multi-functional environment that makes up the realm of mine action and ERW, but dealing with a topic as politically and socially charged as capacity development is positively daunting. Unfortunatel, capacity development is a widely used but not widely understood or agreed-upon term. It is treated as both a process and outcome, and it deals with both material applications (e.g., specific skills, knowledge, tasks) and human resources (e.g., ability, process, addressing the system within its environmental context).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines capacity development as “the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole, unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time.” While descriptive, this concept is operationally too general to guide programs, standards and contracts.

We believe that the United Nations Development Programme is helpful in this regard when it observes that capacity is “the ability of individuals, organizations and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve goals,” and that “capacity development entails the creation, utilization and retention of that capacity, in order to reduce poverty, enhance self-reliance, and improve people’s lives.”

Barakat and Chard, in Third World Quarterly, conclude that a review of the use of the term capacity gives the impression of “constantly shifting, unclear and contested definitions” and “has added to the confusion by masking contradictory aims under the banner of a common rhetoric.”

Capacity Development in the Mine-action Arena
Last we appraoch challes and unappreciative of efforts to come to grips with the term by the mine-action community in particular, we have observed that mine-action efforts have actually employed engagement processes that are markedly well and created models and approaches that the rest of the development community would do well to emulate.

In its beginnings, capacity building was seen as a technical process involving the transfer of knowledge about preferred concepts, such as certain organizations or models, or public-sector institution-building skills, from the global North to South. Typically, the broader political and social context was not considered. Since the 1990s, understanding of capacity building has emphasized the importance of country ownership, leadership and the role of political and governance systems. Each country is expected to define its own action and determine appropri- ate strategy and outcomes in partnerships with donors. The most recent change in terminology from capacity building to capacity development has reflected this shift to national ownership, rather than understanding capacity as “constructed” via externally derived models, it has been recognized that “capacity building would be ineffective so long as it was not part of an endogenous process of change, getting its main impetus from the context.”

It is here that we believe mine-action programs and plans over the last decade have played a key role in the evolution of capacity development as a central element in advancing goals and objectives of countries at risk. We credit the emphasis on capacity building to donors and organizations such as the UNDP, the United Nations Mine Action Service, the European Union and the United States Department of State. For instance, in Quang Tri province of the People’s Republic of Vietnam, two national committees—the Women’s Union and the Committee for the Care and Protection of Children—conducted a mine-risk education campaign assisted by James Madison University and sponsored by the United States Department of State, which made use of new software packages and from training skills and capabilities became core competencies of both Vietnamese organizations after the initial mine-awareness campaign had concluded.

However, many of the efforts involved in capacity development remain tied to specific mine detection and transfer of technical skills, without trying to relate and integrate these capabilities into broader segments of a host nation’s development or infrastructure. Perhaps even worse is the myopia of some mine-action professionals and donors who do not understand that in a country at risk from many threats, firing the capabilities developed for mine action to apply to other spheres of life is a misjudgment and not failure.

Liable and Feri observe in a report for the United States Agency for International Development that “much of capacity building has been designed around specific project- centric and short-term organizational programs are fund to implement with or for international partners and donors. This ‘project-focused capacity building’ stresses the building of capacities that will help pro- tect the donor from being made (such as financial management), not the acquisition of core capacities of donors (such as monitoring and reporting) or help complete the project successfully (such as with project planning and evaluation).”

We believe these comments are germane to some in the mine-action/ERW communi- ty including donors, NGOs, Technical Advisors, and host-nation government agen- cies, rather than seeing capacity develop- ment as a bridge to holistic societal development (on which national ownership of concerns, control, management and re- sponsibility) tend to keep certain key capa- 

It once knew someone who held a very passionate position on a certain issue,” says Dennis Barlow, Mine Action Information Center Director. “After he moved laterally within his organization, his opinions changed radically. I asked a mutual friend what had hap- pened to occasion such a change. He looked at me with one of those ‘Are you for real?’ looks, and said, ‘What you see depends on where you sit.’

Capacity development is one of those topics that changes shape and form depending on one’s perspective. And yet it is imperative that those of us involved in mine action and remediation of explosive remnants of war not only have a clear understanding of capacity development but also, by comprehending other points of view on the topic, derive a common approach to dealing with it.