Perspectives on Capacity Development

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Massive U.N. bureaucracies that (previously) ran mine-action programs ... have disappeared and they have not been replaced by an expatriate presence on the same scale. And that alone is indicative of the development of national capacity.

DR: Where do you see the greatest areas of hope or promise for future success in capacity development in mine action? What about the greatest challenges for the future?

RK: The future success for capacity development and mine action is primarily dependent upon the will of the mine-affected countries. Do they really want to develop capacity and are they prepared to make hard choices that come in an environment based on national management and national control. That’s both the hope and the challenge.

DR: Any other comments, quotes or important issues you would like to address in regards to capacity development and mine action that you would like to share with readers?

RK: I think this is a very important issue. One of the key challenges is for donors to try to think through what capacity they need to be in place after the majority of the mine impacts are removed. In other words, what will need to be there for the long term? Many countries in Europe are still affected by mines and ordnance from the First and Second World Wars. They do not have massive bureaucracies designed to search these out and remove them, as is the case of many current mine-affected programs. Instead, they have monitoring systems as well as response systems in place. So long after major industrial-scale demining ends in, say, Afghanistan or Cambodia, there is still going to be a need for a residual response mechanism, and what are countries doing now to prepare for that?

This also includes labor law and labor benefits. We’ve now reached the point where the capacities in terms of national clearance capacities were built up during the peak of mine action cannot be sustained. So what do you do with those deminers? It’s a matter of responsibility both for the donors and for the mine-affected countries. What in effect is going to be done with these men and women who spent 10 years doing dangerous work and now they are no longer needed?

The second issue, along the same lines is what is the role for the major humanitarian- de-mining NGOs? What about MAG, HALO Trust or Norwegian People’s Aid? They are tremendous humanitarian organizations, initially the first responders, the ones who have made, in many countries, the greatest contribution to public safety—but are they now becoming redundant as they basically work themselves out of a job and are they becoming an impediment to the transfer of skills, expertise and, most importantly, ownership? I think that is a fair question to be asked by the mine-action community.

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Perspectives on Capacity Development

Sara Sekkenes, United Nations Development Programme by Daniele Ressler [Mine Action Information Center]

On 30 March 2007, Daniele Ressler interviewed Sara Sekkenes, Senior Programme Advisor and Team Leader for Mine Action and Small Arms in the United Nations Development Programme’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. The interview was conducted to learn more about Sekkenes and the UNDP’s views on the role of capacity development in mine action. Lessons learned from past UNDP capacity-building activities are highlighted, as well as plans for future activities and the process of mainstreaming mine action.

Daniele Ressler: How do you, representing the UNDP, define or understand capacity development in the context of mine action and what are the underlying things that make this concept important to the UNDP?

Sara Sekkenes: In terms of definitions, a development need is the difference between current and required or desired performance. Capacity development would be an ongoing approach and process concerned with identifying and boosting and sustaining national capacity to enhance overall development. That’s the core mandate of what we do.

The whole idea of UNDP supporting mine action obviously stems from the fact that landmines are senseless remnats of war that create obstacles for development and access to social and physical infrastructures. Obviously, it’s something that lies very close to our mandate of promoting the Millennium Development Goals. What UNDP does is assist national mine-action programs. We may assist to actually establish them and then we work, in particular, with capacity development to support mine-affected countries’ ability to manage mine-action institutions and to oversee and coordinate mine-action activities in their respective countries.

In mine-action centers, there are many different aspects of capacity development that UNDP works with. Perhaps some of the more obvious aspects are technical and operational; for example, we can deploy a Technical Advisor who has mapping expertise if that is identified as a need in a mine-action center. Additionally, when we talk about mine action, we talk about many other factors that are linked to capacity development—such as a political framework for mine action; the national institution and its staff and personnel; administration and financial management; public awareness; special factors such as mechanical; do you have manual clearance; coordination and awareness-raising requirements for survivor and victim assistance; and resource mobilization to determine the plan and strategy for future sustainability of programs, to name a few.

We talk about how mine actions fit into the overall development planning of a country in order to facilitate the social and physical infrastructural rehabilitation and expansion. We talk about the ability to perform or to draft national mine-action plans, and to sound out into broader development planning agendas, the cooperation plans and budgets. Ultimately, mine action is a very resource-demanding, complex activity and until now remained quite donor-driven, which we’re trying to build down by leasing the dependency on foreign support to mine action.

Another aspect to consider in mine action is “mainstreaming.” The threat posed by mines should be mainstreamed in the sense that, where you have to build a road you also have to take into consideration other challenges or threats that might hinder or support why you should build that road there, as well as planning for any activities and costs these considerations may imply. And the landmine issue is just one of those threats. So, in that sense, I believe “mainstreaming” in and of itself needs some capacity development because the mine action community has no clear definition of what mainstreaming means or what we mean by mainstreaming mine action into development.

And, of course, with all these various facets of mine action, we need to define explicit goals. Where are we? Where do we want to go? This should obviously be done together with those who we are trying to assist; it’s not something that UNDP can or should do on its own. Rather, this is a constant and progressive dialogue with those affected governments that we assist. We should together draft and develop plans of how we’re going to achieve these goals, including supporting affected governments to abide by the international commitments they have undertaken, and mainstream mine action.

We need to establish meaningful relationships between advisors and counterparts. We need to develop and sustain collaborative working alliances. We need to work on counterpart abilities and readiness to change. Capacity development is not only to support change, but it’s also to help all stakeholders to understand what needs to be in place in order to lead to change.

DR: In your opinion, what are some examples of successful capacity-development initiatives in mine action and what are the key components leading to this success?

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We’ve significantly improved mine-action clearance operations, but during these 10 years, we’ve also become much better at questioning where we do mine action and why we do it.

time period, we have seen a narrowing in the gap between the professionals carrying out mine action and the professionals working in development. We’ve also watched a growing understanding of the need for measuring the impact of mine-action activities.

Ten years ago, you had a clear focus on measuring the results of mine action in terms of the number of mines and square meters cleared. However, we have found that you can have remote mountain areas and borders that are littered with mines and where you can have remote mountain areas and borders that are littered with mines and where you're talking 15, 18 years of humanitarian learning curve over the years. In countries like Afghanistan, Cambodia and Laos PDR, we’re talking 15, 18 years of humanitarian action or development. During that time, we will find very few today that would argue that you don’t need to prioritize where you carry out mine-clearance activities. You have improved every aspect of mine action. We have improved manual demining, mechanical demining, dog demining, the strategic planning, the survey work, the databases. In fact, we have significantly improved mine-action clearance operations—but during these 10 years, we’ve also become much better at questioning where we do mine action and why we do it.

SS: I think it’s very difficult to identify the greatest areas of hope or promise for future success in capacity development in mine action. What about the greatest challenges for the future?

DR: What, if any, innovative lessons learned has UNDP identified after working on capacity-development initiatives in mine action?

SS: One lesson learned by UNDP is that you have to document what you are doing, make plans and identify goals to be achieved. We are speaking to countries—often with UNDP—about what you can do. There are also a lot of cultural differences and other needs to be met, particularly in countries that are going through a major post-conflict phase and/or facing severe poverty problems with dysfunctional social services. Often, general and specialized education levels are low, health is poor, income generation is low and so on. For example, I worked with a mine-action center database where I had to learn how to switch on a computer and had no interest of learning to do so, either. Also, there is a general lack of awareness that faculties were not suitably trained or qualified. Hence, he spent more time abroad than at home pursuing other means of income-generating activities. That’s a challenge.

In terms of “capacity development” or “capacity building,” what if there isn’t a training center or training facility? Where do we start? Do we start by giving extremely basic computer-literacy training? Or do we count on at least computer literacy being one requirement in terms of requirements for recruitment? That didn’t mean that it’s impossible, but there are many challenges there that we have to be acknowledged.

SS: I think we’re talking about political and economic factors that have led to very little disinvestment in conflict-affected areas. In 1990, 11.1% of the world’s land area was heavily mined. Today, that number is only 0.2%. All countries that were affected have made progress in different ways. I think we are talking about optimal best practices with a justifiable and transparent environment in which these tasks are supposed to be achieved or carried out.

SS: Questioning where we do mine action and why we do it.

DR: Are there any projects, activities or general initiatives that you are presently doing or planning for the future to promote or sustain capacity development in mine action that you think are particularly interesting or edifying for our readers to know about?

SS: During the five years that UNDP has been placed in the Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery, we’ve been a sharp increase in the requests for assistance from mine-affected countries and a deliberate desire to determine what the end goals might be or what we’re looking at ahead; and, together with our national counterparts, use these indicators to identify their desired performance levels that will measure when we can phase out the capacity development support that we’re providing. The intention of this project is to come up with the indicators that will allow us to see different phases in drawing down our support in parallel to the increase of capacity in-country.

We also have to make up our mind on how far we want to go with our long-term commitment to projects and programs, as you can easily create expectations and dependencies if you aren’t able to end them properly. There is a consensus now that you’re going to stop. National governments in mine-affected countries also have to decide how they ultimately are going to address the mine-action program because many of them are under binding international obligations that clearly specify the end goal.

I think another lesson learned is that we still believe that mine action requires one specific expertise and educational training that most deminers commonly acquire in the military. I think military training is fully valid in terms of some of the tasks that are carried out in mine-action. But I think we have also learned that we need so much more than that as well. And I want to emphasize “as well” because there is no military clearance without the clearance and EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] capacity. And, we’re obviously a little bit lost. But we’re also lost if we don’t acknowledge the contributions from other sectors such as the affected communities themselves, development, administration and management sectors with specific expertise on community needs, management, administrative, financial, logistical and outreach skills, to name a few. I think that mine action would perform better if we just acknowledge that we do need a diverse pool of personnel to staff institutions that are going to address the mine-action problem.

DR: Where do you see the greatest areas of hope or promise for future success in capacity development in mine action? What about the greatest challenges for the future?

SS: Future success builds upon the acknowledgement of lessons learned and I think we’re getting there. Another facet of future success is the need to maintain a clearer focus on mine action because I think that’s the only way you can actually make it sustainable: ensuring that mine action needs are addressed within the broader development planning and implementation.

The future success of capacity development faces a great challenge in our limited understanding regarding diversification in mainstreaming of mine action. Also, one political challenge is of course that we don’t see the some of the successes that we see in 2008 and 2009 in terms of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention it might be difficult to argue for new strategies for future support. There are a number of examples where undesirable effects of political appointments and corruption stymied development. There has been a huge potential of those that don’t perform as well as they should for mine action over the last 15 years. That money has been made available, either bilaterally or multilaterally, to governments, non-governmental organizations and operators in various forms. With that amount of money comes a range of opportunities that can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, but which requires responsibility in ensuring the funds are used effectively and efficiently in solving the mine problem.

There are also a lot of cultural differences and other needs to be met, particularly in countries that are going through a major post-conflict phase and/or facing severe poverty problems with dysfunctional social services. Often, general and specialized education levels are low, health is poor, income generation is low and so on. For example, I worked with a mine-action center database where I had to learn how to switch on a computer and had no interest of learning to do so, either. Also, there is a general lack of awareness that faculties were not suitably trained or qualified. Hence, he spent more time abroad than at home pursuing other means of income-generating activities. That’s a challenge.

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DR: Any other comments, quotes or important issues you would like to address in regards to capacity building and mine action that you would like to share with readers?

SS: There has been a common understanding worldwide that the mine problem can be solved and will be solved within a foreseeable future and is the responsibility of all countries. We need to solve the mine problem through consensus—strong consensus—that is key to solving the mine problem in a responsible way that addresses both efficiency and effectiveness. We have to balance the mine problem vis-à-vis other challenges that many of the affected countries face… and acknowledge that mine action doesn’t necessarily have the exclusive right to be priority number one. While this does not negate the obligations under the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention, we need priority-setting and mainstreaming to ensure that the areas affected communities are the most dealt with as a matter of priority. We need to ensure that we clear the right minefields first and that we also need to be aware of other, perhaps larger, problems such as HIV/AIDS, malaria or even deadly traffic environments that need to be addressed. That’s what I mean by efficiency: addressing mine action in terms of the overall goal of development.

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