

# Conferences: who needs them?

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**THE GLOBAL MINE ACTION** process seems to spawn conferences. During the past three years there have been at least 13 major gatherings which contained in their agendas major activities dedicated to improving demining operations. What have the three years of meetings, issue development, and projects produced? Have the conferences and attempts to frame operators' needs been a wasted effort, characterized by travel boondoggles of innumerable representatives to venues far and wide? Or have they driven real development and positive achievement?

## To Meet or Not To Meet

There are invariably those attending the conferences who have, formally or informally, decried the proliferation of these meetings and stated that the money spent to hold them would be better spent on direct support to a demining operation. While these utterances are viscerally tempting, and momentarily dramatic, I believe that this kind of blanket condemnation of demining workshops, conferences, and seminars is off the mark.

The MAIC at James Madison University has attended, hosted, and participated in numerous conferences and workshops, which have addressed the key issues of humanitarian demining, especially the core issue of how we discern and meet the needs of demining operators. JMU has reported the issues, concerns, and suggestions from these efforts and, in some cases, has processed that information for input into other events and venues where it has been developed further. I believe that the dialog, actions, learning, networking, coordination, learning and appreciation, which have resulted from these meetings have stimulated the demining process and facilitated much progress.



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## Focusing on the End User

Who is the end user? Three years ago, we would have said that he is the mine clearer; the "guy at the pointy end of the stick." Today there are still those who insist that the operator who performs mine clearance is *the* end user, and that technology is (or should be) aimed solely at his activities. There is a competing point of view defending the landmine clearer as the central focus of technology improvements and enhancements, while the wide range of activities which are encompassed by the concept of Mine Action have broadened the definition of an "end user."

Many in the demining community, acknowledge that those engaged in direct support of the "deminer" also require equipment and technology advances based on their unique needs. Personnel who mark and monitor mined areas, dog handlers, mine action center managers and medical support personnel (paramedics), are but a few of the non-clearance operators who are often included in the list of mine action end users. Whether advances toward better geographic information systems (GIS) packages, dog-handling techniques or MEDEVAC systems, technological advances which improve any aspect of the mine action project will enhance the entire demining program.

I believe that this trend reflects, not only the integrative and comprehensive nature of Mine Action, as it is now understood. It also accepts the reality that demining must be considered as part of a developmental process which must proceed in the context of other activities and infrastructure enhancement plans.

## Operators, Technologists, and Policymakers

As the international effort to identify operational needs was gearing up, several dynamics became obvious. Perhaps the most apparent was a gulf which

existed among the major demining groups. Operators did not feel that they were heard. Technologists did not understand the world of the deminer. Policy makers were trying to fulfill the demands of high politics while trying to understand the parameters of operators and technologists.

Worse, operators were not always in consonance with other operators. NGO operators were wary of "for-profits," while they were suspicious of the practices (motives?) of military elements assigned to humanitarian demining missions. It even turned out that deminers from various regions had different needs than those in other areas; e.g. deminers in Southeast Asia have a vastly different set of needs than those in Northeast Africa.

Nevertheless, the frantic conference and meeting schedule of the past three years has had an immensely beneficial effect on melding, if not the motivations, than at least their knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of each constituent group. What's more, it seems as if the suspicion, which once hall-marked the relationships among operators, "techies" and policy-makers, has largely dissipated, being replaced by a healthy respect for the tasks of each of the groups, and has engendered a feeling of kinship and empathy among groups working the demining issue.

## Coordination and Communication

Another set of commonly held beliefs early in the process, was that all that was needed was an accurate sense of what the operators needed and everything would just fall into place. Slowly the realization hit home that no one was, or could be, in charge and that testing, evaluation, selection and deployment do not just happen. Humanitarian demining efforts are not like unified military operations; humanitar-

ian demining embraces a host of very diverse functions, organizations, climates, societal needs and countries. Therefore, no one operator, technician, or decision-maker can declare what will be universally acceptable or appropriate.

In order to develop procedures by which needs are identified and fulfilled by a research program, which leads to efficient procurement and deployment, universally accepted means of communicating, coordinating, and collaborating are necessary. To that end, the International Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) is dedicated, as is the nascent Demining Technical Information Forum (DTIF), and indeed several formal and informal communications and coordination efforts which have been suggested at humanitarian demining meetings over the last three years.

Information among demining communities has blossomed during this time. With the increased communications networks (the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GIC), the MAIC at JMU, the Joint Research Center (JRC), the Canadian Center for Mine Action Technology (CCMAT), etc. have come increased understanding and collaboration of global partners who have been able to focus more effectively on improving the safety and effectiveness of the end user.

## The Expansion of Needs

Three years ago, a demining operator might create a list of needs, which would today look pretty modest. As mine action plans have become more ambitious and sophisticated, they encompass a greater degree of integration with other programs and are coordinated with other demining functions. The operator's needs have grown. He has also become aware of emerging and pertinent technologies and has



learned how to leverage his methods with others and with new capabilities. The deminer, in short, has learned to apply new methods and equipment to his requirements. We should applaud this development, because, while it makes pinning down his needs more difficult, it allows us to strive for ever more effective and dynamic ways of meeting the challenges of mine action operations.

End users now need effective mine dogs, reliable information and data base systems, dedicated GIS packages, better prostheses and procedures, and on it goes. The knowledge of these improvements and how they can be fitted to operational requirements has come about largely through the interchange of ideas which has taken place during the "show and tell" portions of the conferences and meetings summarized above.

### **Real Progress**

Perhaps one of the most encouraging and demonstrable sets of results of the actions of the Mine Action community, has been the creation of a number of programs and initiatives designed to facilitate identifying and satisfying the needs of the operator.

The DTIF is a collective and creative outreach, which should provide a universally accessible source for demining technology information.

The "Rapid Prototyping" program underway at Ft. Belvoir (under the auspices of the U.S. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict) is not only determining and verifying end user needs, but is putting the most promising technologies which are applicable to meeting them, on a fast-track.

The Survey Action Center (SAC) and IMSMA are programs aimed directly at meeting the information needs of deminers, which should make a significant impact on management and preparation for their plans and operations.

The demining management studies underway at Cranfield University should provide a very real way of ascertaining and fulfilling operators needs, and of developing a viable management training program.

The User's Focus Group assembled and working under the auspices of the UNMAS and GIC, allows for operators to make a direct and timely impact on demining standards and guidelines.

There have been times (many times!) during the past three years, when naysayers and friends alike, have been critical of the international approach to demining. They have glibly poked fun at the number of meetings, or scoffed at the seeming impossibility of it all. Some wags even talked about creating an organization for the ban of landmine conferences.

But such derision ignores the great strides that have been made in making the demining operator the center of a new and amazing cooperative effort to improve his lot, as well as the vast amount of work, good will, and thinking that has given rise to some rather remarkable international efforts. The advances are not only noteworthy for what they have accomplished (and promise to), but for the fact that they have come about purely voluntarily and without coercion. ■

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