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It's Mine and You Can't Have It

Joe Lokey
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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IT SEEMS TO BE A GIVEN in the mine action community that you are acknowledged as an "expert" simply because you have stood up and declared it so. As with many humanitarian pursuits, there is no process to credential, certify, or license individuals, processes, or procedures in mine action. There is no guild or professional body to oversee and validate the veracity of performance claims. This is frustrating to donors and funding organizations that have little upon which to base outcome expectations. The answer is an open information system and process, transparent reporting, and contributions from the scientific community that are based on solid testing and unbiased findings that are performance to expected outcomes.

In this issue of the Journal of Mine Action, we have solicited a variety of articles on manual deminers and their personal protective gear. As you will see with many of the articles, this segment of the community seems to use basic information about what it can and cannot do more than the other segments of the landmine community. Numbers are important. Decisions are made from them. It seems, however, that information, though wanted by everyone, is shared by few. Curious? Not when you consider the nature of the mine action.

For example, where is this empirical support to the preposterous claims accompanying mechanical equipment releases and developments? Why don't the mine-detecting dog people publish the results of their dog teams efforts in detail? Even those organizations working with victims are reluctant to publicize numbers and data that support their level of effort. Colin King once observed that "view of the greatest obstacles to progress in mine action..." and posited the concept of "information non-cooperation." There are a variety of reasons behind this such as:

**Sensitivity**

In spite of the well-intentioned proclamations of most groups and governments, many are sensitive to reporting of casualty rates, number of deminer accidents, causes of accidents, and number of people receiving effective mine awareness education. Sometimes simple nationalism takes over and raw data is frequently manipulated or held in order to either minimize the appearance of incompetence or overstated to influence a more positive message. This reluctance to open organizational or governmental performance data is regrettable and leads to suspicions that can be even more harmful and less productive. Trust needs to be established between those owning the data and those using and basing decisions on that data.

**Competition**

NGOs competing for programs and for the funding that goes with them, as well as commercial companies competing for contracts, frequently view the donor pool as a zero-sum entity in which giving to one somehow takes away from another. The fear of "donor fatigue" is as of yet, unfounded as funded programs seem to be bigger and bigger and donors are still actively seeking solid, outcome-based proposals. Although the Canadian Mine Action Investment database provided for UNMAS is a start, more donor information needs to be made public after tender awards are made so that the mine action community begins to feel there is plenty of work to go around and funding to support that work.

**Silver Bullet Syndrome**

Research facilities protecting their inventions and developments are the absolute worst at sharing incremental achievements in technology fearing the cross-flow will result in others capitalizing on their work. Hopes for commercial exploitation of new technologies (including parenting) is driving a considerable amount of useful information, technology, and data underground waiting for some opportunity to synthesize it and give it utility. It's like everyone has a small piece of a jigsaw puzzle but no one wants to connect their piece with anyone else so that the picture ("answer") may be revealed to all. There will never be a single technology that "does it all." Any metaphorical silver bullet will necessarily be a multi-sensor platform with a complex but reliable data integration and fusion routine. However, this will be impossible to achieve as long as everyone sits on their own little part of the solution.

**The Politics of Ego**

Personal and professional competitiveness is a part of any discipline and this is no different. Without a clear distinction among professionals, their worth is built on their backgrounds and experiences though they are frequently embellished because few are the wiser. Few resumes and CV's receive the attention and scrutiny that they should because this inflation of fact permeates the industry in general. On the brighter side, this is a small community and the less capable and charlatans are known to most and don't last long on the more significant projects. See also, "Cowboy Chic."

**Donor/Corporate Expectations**

Expectations of success are generally overstated because of the inability to anticipate clear and measurable goals and outcomes. The data required to determine if goals have been met is rarely released therefore companies will be at least skeptical of operations to the reality of demining or mine action outcomes is difficult at best. Corporations also have an expectation that off-the-shelf technologies unable for other purposes can somehow be adapted to current demining needs which explains their inability to produce widely useful tools and equipment.

**Cowboy Chic**

Information that could be used to benefit the entire community is frequently held by the ex-patriots and international workers who feel that they have the experience and expertise and don't feel like the hordes of newcomers are worthy of their time. Some have signed on with larger contracts that force them to act like adults while others continue to claim an absolute position of unquestionable authority based on frighteningly little true experience. Some of these are independent consultants who feel their "longer-in-the-business" around landmines grant them some sort of right to withhold data and information unless a sizable check accompanies the request.

**Welfare**

Less common, but typical of smaller NGOs who have built long-term relationships with donors, are situations in which agencies seeking to sustain long-term government funding (too incentive to complete a program) are reluctant to pass information to anyone other than their benefactors. Some larger donors, and even governments, have their "favorites" or trusted agents to whom a disproportionate share of tenders and contracts are awarded in this quasi-welfare system that keeps less-than-efficient actors on the mine action stage.

**Cost-Benefit Malady**

A relatively new disease striking donors of large sums is the paralyzing ability of under-funded and poorly funded organizations to ask for a clear relationship between dollars spent and outcomes produced. Governments are apparently stricken more
These Things I Keep Inside

You never really think of religion.

It just doesn’t go with this kind of work.

You just believe that most people are good.

But when we entered that village something changed my mind.

It was an idyllic setting, surrounded by hills and mountains of green.

But when those shots were fired, I realized then that this human race has a great propensity to evil.

Where the desire to cause such pain comes from, I don’t know.

First we saw the mosque with its minaret fallen at a grotesque angle.

Who could do this? I thought.

For what purpose to damage a place of worship.

If this was bad, how could I cope with what was to follow?

The orders were to clear the mosque, so cautiously we went inside.

It was empty—no bodies, no bodies in the floor.

Bloom up where it lies, the sheik says.

But you can’t do this in a church, so carefully take it outside.

I remember thinking that to do this in a place of worship, whether a mosque or mosque or whatever, was something terribly wrong.

If only I had known what was to come.

But nothing could prepare me for that.

In the briefing the night before we were told:

“You are to clean the village for the press...

Make sure that it’s safe for them to film...

They must show the rest of this world the destruction.”

But I still wasn’t prepared for what I would see.

As we moved into the village all was quiet.

All the young men were away fighting the war.

They thought that their homes and families were safe, the front line was miles from their village.

And, anyway, the elders are there to protect the wives and children.

The village now safe for the press to come in.

The old men and the women and the children—we feel no more pain.

New our palm.

Nothing can prepare you for this sort of job.

You do this work because you are dedicated, not because it is fun.

When we left the village I prayed.

I can’t remember praying before that day or since.

Then I cried real tears and sad tears.

I fought in wars and seen many of my friends die and never cried before.

But that day I cried.

I will never forget that day.

I still cry inside for three people.

I see them every day.

I have never prayed for them since that day.

But I have cried for them many times.

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Chris North

Photo by L. V. Jolivet

A Bosnian mine expert surveys the area where three Bosnian children were killed in April 2000. The news of their deaths made headlines worldwide. The circumstances were tragic—neighborhoods; villages; and communities are powerless to help an wounded little girl after cying stepped before a safe love could be opened in her.

Photo: by L. V. Jolivet

The first thing I noticed in the village—all the dead were old men.

They died where they fought, in the streets, in the gardens and houses.

They died protecting women and children.

We moved amongst this scene some of death, checking each room and each body for bodies traps.

So joy in doing this task well.

Check around and under each corner and limb.

Make sure there are no trip wire to catch you out.

Search each room slowly, carefully, systematically.

Where are the dangers?

Concertinas.

Don’t be drawn to the body.

Are there mines in the rubble?

What will happen if it opens this door?

Thank God, another room clear.

Now it’s time to go into the cellar.

I wonder what all the women and children ate.

Did they give away?

As the cellar door is slowly, carefully opened a strange smell.

Sort of familiar and sweet.

Light enters from the doorway and our torches find where the women and children were being.

Cellars reinforce in grinding, snarling, grinding, lanced and each a fragment, a fragment.

A place of safety became their tragic tomb.

The snarling forces had closed the cellar with steel.

Women and children too scared to come out.

Dead inside, some burnt to death.

Some had suffocated gasping their last breath.

Mothers died vainly trying to protect their children.

We moved amongst these bodies, each one searched and checked for body traps.

We moved showing no emotions, feeling numb.

We were professionals, we did our job well.