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Learning Takes Many Forms During Mine Action Managers’ Course

by Nicole Kreger Neitzey [Mine Action Information Center]

In the summer of 2005, 19 senior-level managers from mine action programs worldwide descended on James Madison University in the heart of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley to develop and improve their toolbox of management skills at a course sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme. Five weeks later, they left with a wealth of new knowledge, new friends and fond memories of their learning experience.

At first glance, it looks like your average classroom at any American university. A professor is at the front of the room, loading a PowerPoint presentation for viewing on a projector screen. A few notes are scrawled on the blackboard visible on either side of the screen. Several tables occupy the center of the room, with 20 or so empty chairs awaiting their occupants, who are in the hallway for a short break between sessions. But once the room begins to fill again, it is quickly apparent these are not your average college students.

The first tip-off is that all the room’s languages are intermingling all at once—English, Arabic, French, Portuguese—giving a vibrant air to the classroom. And the sight of this diverse crowd makes it more apparent that this class is unique. They represent 15 countries from across the world—Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans—and for most of them this is the first time in years they’ve been in a classroom as well as their first time in the United States.

Yet for five weeks during the summer of 2005, these 19 managers of mine action programs left their homes and families to hit the books again, attending the Mine Action Senior Managers Course—given by James Madison University’s Mine Action Information Center and sponsored by UNDP—to hone their management skills. They studied everything from identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses to budgets oversight and risk management techniques, learning from JMU faculty members whose expertise includes economics, international law, media relations and ethics.

Guest lecturers also taught modules on mine action-related topics such as data management, U.S. government assistance, mine surveys and international standards. UNDP representatives Sayed Aqa and Mohammad Younus facilitated the participation of the students and greeted them personally at the opening and closing of the course.

Valuable Lessons Learned

Participants in the managers’ course agreed that they learned valuable information during the course that they will put to use at home. Col. Antoine Nimbedha, assistant chief of operation of the Mine Action Coordination Centre in Onu, Burundi, said that before he came here, he didn’t possess many solid skills for management. “Previously, I worked based on logical understanding the professors, especially those with an accent. He did feel that his skills improved while here, though, and Gonçalves agreed that although he was a bit out of practice with his English, “at the end you start to go quicker, things come to you more quickly,” he said.

Culture Shock

Spending five weeks in a foreign country can be a big adjustment, especially if it is your first time in that country, as it was for many of the course participants. Even everyday tasks like communicating with others and eating can turn out to be more difficult than they may seem.

Being from such different backgrounds, the students’ levels of proficiency in English varied, and the language barrier was difficult for most at some point. Although he seemed very comfortable speaking in English, Nimbedha confessed he sometimes had trouble. “It may [have been] better to have some more English skills beforehand,” he said. In particular, Nimbedha sometimes found it difficult to understand the professors, especially those with an accent. He did feel that his skills improved while here, though, and Gonçalves agreed that although he was a bit out of practice with his English, “at the end you start to go quicker, things come to you faster.”

To accommodate those who needed some assistance with English, professors made an effort to slow their speech and articulate their words more clearly. Also, the MAIC provided a weekly English class in the evenings for interested students.

Food was an even bigger issue than language for many of the visitors. Their taste buds were not accustomed to the taste of American food, and even served at foods they don’t have in their countries. Still, most found something from the variety of foods in the campus dining hall that suited their taste. It was a bit more difficult, though, for those with specific dietary needs, such as those participants who are Muslim. “It was hard being a Muslim to find Halal meat,” Habib-ul-Haq explains. Eating fish was one option, but the selection in the dining facilities does not usually include fish. Javed and some of the other participants found a way around this, though, by befriending the dining service staff. “One of the servers in the dining hall would save some fish just for those people so we could have some meat,” he said.

The MAIC staff also provided transportation to the Halal Food Market in Harrisonburg for Muslim participants.

One of the participants’ favorite pastimes during their stay was shopping. Often the prices in America were much cheaper than they could find at home, and they took advantage of this at as often as possible, purchasing local Wal-mart and shopping mall. Participants were impressed by how “you can find everything.” Some, however, were expecting more to meet their shopping needs. “I expected to have more choice of stores. Wal-Mart is good—they have everything you need—but more variety would be nice,” said Gonçalves.

Personal Connections Erase Stereotypes

At home they are military officials, politicians and high-ranking government workers, but here they were students, and while they held positions of considerable power and importance, they were incredibly gracious and humble, especially when speaking of their hosts. “I want to thank all the JMU/MAIC staff greatly for everything they’ve done,” said Gonçalves. “The MAIC staff was very supportive,” agreed Habib-ul-Haq.

Some participants admitted, though, that they’d originally had some reservations coming to America, partially because of pervasive stereotypes about Americans. Director of the Cambodian Mine Action Authority’s Regulation and
Legislation Department Thor Chetha, in America for the first time, explained his misconceptions. "I first thought the people were very proud. I thought before they were very controlling and wanted power. I felt scared at first; I came alone and thought people would not accept me," he said. "But in contrast, the people I met provided help with my problems. I'm very happy for all of this." One example of this support, he recalls, was when his computer electrical adapter didn't work; staff from MAIC found a replacement adapter and took him to the store where he could buy it.

Habib-ul-Haq agreed, saying the people he met were "friendly, supportive, helpful, honest, clear—opposite to what people often think of them abroad." González's words were even stronger. "I have been to over 30 countries. American people may be the best in the world—the way they are, the way they interact. That was made more clear by coming here. ... I did expect to see some attention from people, but not as much as we did. We were all surprised with the way you have arranged this and been so supportive. You've been so kind and so supportive that we won't forget." The participants were also eager to share their cultures and traditions with their fellow students as well as the staff running the course. Many brought gifts representing their home countries to present to their colleagues and the JMU staff. Many discussions were had during and outside of classes on differences in culture and religion, and in that respect, the students were teachers, too.

Jennifer Schlaf, a student employee of the MAIC, shared an experience she had that had a profound impact on her. The Muslim participants invited her to attend one of the prayer services at the mosque they went to once a week during the course. "I was surprised at how closely the message resembled what I grew up hearing in a Methodist church. It was amazing to experience another culture, yet find so many similarities," she explained. "Throughout the entire course I was pleasantly surprised by the participants' basic morals and desires, and how they reflected mine.

Indeed, what was intended to be a chance for mine action practitioners to study management tools and techniques turned out to be a learning-experience for everyone involved.

For more information on the Senior Managers Course, please visit http://maic.jmu.edu/managers/ or contact Project Manager Amy Burkhardt at burkhaam@jmu.edu. See "References and Endnotes," page 107.
Humanitarian Demining as a Precursor to Economic Development, Lundberg [from page 53]\n

The Road to Mine Action and Development: The Life-Cycle Perspective of Mine Action, Patterson and Filipino [from page 55]\n
1. This phrase is from The World Bank, which has been in the forefront of planning, managing and financing post-conflict reconstruction since the wars arising from the break-up of Yugoslavia. The central role played by The World Bank is in the design of features of peace reconstruction efforts, and during each period the Bank may be an important source of financing for demining.
2. Bogolix workers revises a strong similarity to Figure 1 in this text from Issue 9.1 (Chip Burton). “The Mining Link in Strategic Planning: ALAB and the Endstate Strategy Concept for National Mine Action Planning,” which was developed independently in 1998 by Chip Bownes to illustrate the “Endstate Strategy” approach to developing a national mine action strategy for Cambodia. GCID personal development the life-cycle perspectives to illustrate not only that the size of a programme would eventually diminish, but also that the principal purposes of and partnerships for a mine action programme will evolve in a manner that can be understood and planned for.
3. Raw data not help decision-makers unless it is “analyzed” into information. Information is the right data presented in the right format at the right time to the right people.

Mine Action and the Millennium Development Goals, Van Der Linden [from page 58]\n

Environmental Applications in Demining, McLean [from page 60]\n
4. Editor’s Note: Some countries and mine action organizations are urging the use of the term “mine-free,” while others are opening the term “mine-safe” or “impact-free.” “Mine-free” connotes a condition when all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms “mine-safe” and “impact-free” refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.

6. The PB 8499 is a plastic-bonded, low metal content, circular anti-personnel mine.
8. Editor’s Note: Some country and mine action organizations are urging the use of the term “mine-free,” while others are opening the term “mine-safe” or “impact-free.” “Mine-free” connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms “mine-safe” and “impact-free” refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.

11. From Interventions to Integration: Mine Risk Education and Community Liaison, Durham [from page 80]\n
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Becoming Part of the Hope, Begley [from page 65]\n
1. ISALO Trust is supported through donations by private and public donors. This includes the governments of Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Iceland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. Other donors include Anti Landmine Stichting, the European Commission, Foundation Pro Vrede, The Association to Aid Refugees, The Prince of Wales Memorial Fund and the United Nations. More information can be found at http://www.isalotrust.org.

Steel Wheels in Mozambique, Van Zyl [from page 69]\n
5. USRSM manufactured anti-personal mines that contains a large amount of explosives, and the injury effects are often fatal. It is designed in such a way that it is practically impossible to neutralize. http://www.halotrust.org/mines.html. Accessed Oct. 17, 2005.
7. Convensional tank that has been made and used more than any other type of tank since World War II. For more information, visit http://www.eng.warwick.ac.uk/DTU/pubs/wp/wp591/minesandordinance.html.
10. USRSM-manufactured rudimentary pressure-activated blast device in a wooden box. For more information, visit http://www.eng.warwick.ac.uk/DTU/pubs/wp/wp591/minesandordinance.html.
12. USRSM-manufactured fragmentation-bomb mine whose结果 blast shatters into more than 1000 metal splinters. For more information, visit http://www.eng.warwick.ac.uk/DTU/pubs/wp/wp591/minesandordinance.html.

Learning Takes Many Forms During Mine Action Managers’ Course, Netby [from page 72]\n

Suriname Demining Mission, Raun [from page 75]\n