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Russell Gasser
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD)

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Quality Management in Vietnam: Building a National ISO 9001 System

Vietnam's pilot quality management (QM) project in Ha Tinh province has proven successful in its implementation of the international QM standard ISO 9001. The next step for GICHD and partners will be to support Vietnam in establishing ISO 9001 QM on a national scale.

by Russell Gasser [GICHD]

Vietnam has taken on the challenge of systematic quality management (QM) for mine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) action, and established a successful pilot project in Vietnam's Ha Tinh province. In 2014, the project worked toward compliance with the international QM standard ISO 9001. This standard establishes criteria for a QM system and can be utilized by any organization, regardless of size or field of activity. Currently, ISO 9001 is used by over one million companies and organizations in more than 170 countries.¹

BOMICEN (Vietnamese Technology Centre for Bomb and Mine Disposal Technology), which works closely with the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense, is very pleased with the results. The experience gained will be shared with wider stakeholders and policy makers in order to advocate for rolling out the systematic QM to further provinces, and then nationwide.² The QM systems developed for the pilot will be the basis of the national system. There is a clear intention to make Vietnam one of the leading countries for systematic and coordinated QM of nationally funded and implemented mine and ERW clearance work.

Quality Management and ISO 9001

Quality is often defined as **fit for purpose** and in mine action this includes making sure that all operations are carried out in accordance with International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). There is another important aspect of quality in mine action: making sure that the prioritization, planning and



Field visit with ISO auditor and QMS team at start of a clearance task, checking equipment compliance. Photo shows from left (standing) GICHD consultant, VVAF consultant, APAVE ISO 9001 auditor, BOMICEN staff, clearance team staff.

All photos courtesy of the author.

resource allocation are also fit for purpose. These two parts of QM are often called **doing the job right** (performing a task in accordance with IMAS) and **doing the right job** (prioritizing the tasks that will make a real difference to local people).

Systematic QM takes an overall approach to ensure that all aspects of mine action reach a minimum standard and is recognized as a better approach than isolated **quality assurance** (accreditation and in-progress inspections) and **quality control** (post-clearance inspection). IMAS are based overall on an ISO 9001 approach to QM.

The ISO 9001 QM standard can be applied to the production of goods and supply of services, including mine action.



Field visit with ISO auditor and QMS team at the start of a clearance task. Clockwise from lower right: VVAF staff and consultant, BOMICEN staff in uniform, Apave ISO 9001 auditor (standing), and QMS pilot project staff.

Mine action organizations are increasingly using ISO 9001 to demonstrate their quality—a web search in October 2014 shows several dozen ISO 9001 accredited organizations including MAG, HALO, BACTEC, Pax Mondial and MineTech International. ISO 9001 is one of several international QM standards but has the advantage of being used by a wide range of organizations, from one-person consultancies to giant corporations. Independent auditors who certify compliance are available worldwide, including Vietnam, and these local experts can help with compliance and certification without language and cultural problems or long-distance travel.

Case study: Ha Tinh

The Ha Tinh project started in 2011 when a QM Systems (QMS) project was launched by BOMICEN and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), together with a key local partner in Vietnam, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF). The 2011 and 2012 funding was received from the U.K. Department for International Development and in 2013 and 2014 the funding was

provided by the German Federal Foreign Office, with additional support from the Australian government.

The approach taken by the GICHD was to provide initial technical training for a small number of Vietnamese staff in systems level QM, and to support technical visits to study the QM processes in other mine-affected countries. This created a baseline of QM knowledge on which the design of a Vietnamese system could be started by BOMICEN, with further technical support from GICHD. Later in the project, the local Hanoi office of the French international consultancy Apave was contracted to provide ISO 9001 compliance support.³ Ha Tinh province was chosen as the location for an initial pilot project and GICHD committed to identifying donors interested in supporting the project.

An important reason for the success of the project was the ability to accommodate Vietnamese public project management procedures and the extended time lapses involved in working through complex layers of administrative approvals. Completion of the project was possible due to the flexibility shown by the donors, and the ability of GICHD to continue



Sr Col (ret'd) Tuan, VVAF consultant, briefs the GICHD team about the project in the QMS office in Ha Tinh city.

with other projects while waiting for Vietnamese administrative approvals and returning to the project at a later date. A rigid project timescale would have led to failure. The project required approval by the Vietnamese Prime Minister's Office, and obtaining this took about nine months. The local partner, VVAF, was able to advise that this was not unusually slow (indeed it was the norm) and that the delays do not indicate any lack of interest or commitment. Having a local partner capable of translating not just the language but the entire cultural context was another important element leading to success.

Once the approval process was underway, the pilot project could be prepared and implemented in the province of Ha Tinh, 350 km (217 miles) south of Hanoi. In Ha Tinh province, like most of Vietnam, clearance is done by military personnel or local contractors who are linked to the military.⁴ Inspections of clearance tasks were conducted in accordance with ISO 9001 guidelines

by QA officers from Engineering Command. Once the pilot project started, the commitment, skills and enthusiasm of the Vietnamese staff made a significant contribution to a successful outcome. GICHD staff and consultants continued follow up and advisory work in support of the locally-driven process. QM often relies on a chain of compliance with requirements that can be traced from activities and reporting at field level through to accreditation and certification. In June 2014, the entire human chain met in the field: GICHD staff and consultant were present as an Apave ISO 9001 auditor reviewed the work of QM staff inspecting local staff who were checking compliance at the start of a clearance task.

Next Steps

Understanding the reasons for success and learning lessons that can be applied in other mine- and ERW-affected countries is the next step in the project. By the time this article is published,

GICHD will have the report of a lessons learned evaluation which will focus on identifying the factors that were unique to Vietnam and not easy to transfer, and the elements that can be applied to promote national level QMS in other countries. Promoting systems-level QMS, and using the worldwide resources linked to the ISO 9001 standard, will lead to mine action that can show it is indeed fit for purpose. ©

See endnotes page 65

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Russell Gasser joined the GICHD in 2013 as advisor on quality management systems and results-based management. An engineer by training with a Ph.D. in mine action technology, he became interested in landmine issues while working in Nicaragua in the 1980s where he met mine survivors at an International Red Cross prosthetics workshop.

Russell Gasser
Advisor, Quality Management Systems
and Results Based Management
Geneva International Centre for
Humanitarian Demining (GICHD)
Chemin Eugène-Rigot
2C, P.O. Box 1300
1211 Geneva / Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 730 93 19
Fax: +41 (0)22 730 93 62
Email: r.gasser@gichd.org
Website: www.gichd.org