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Blake Williamson
CISR

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Achieving Local Ownership in Mine Action

Sustainable development is key to maintaining a self-sufficient national mine action program. To achieve self-sufficiency, programs must build capacity and transition away from the international community's financial and technical support.

by Blake Williamson [CISR]



A deminer works in Cambodia.
Photo courtesy of Suzanne Fiederlein/CISR.

Until recently, the concept of a state's government owning a mine action program was a more speculative than achievable goal. Sustainable development is an important aspect of maintaining a national mine action program. To achieve a financially and technically self-sufficient program, national authorities must be willing to commit to mine action goals and claim responsibility for mine action issues within their countries. In *A Guide to Transitioning Mine Action Programmes to National Ownership*, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) asserts that sovereign

states are responsible for confronting issues that exist within their jurisdiction.¹ In a mine action context, these issues include landmine and explosive remnants of war clearance, mine risk education (MRE) and victim assistance.

To help facilitate the transition process for mine action authorities and mine action centers, GICHD has provided a guide to assist in identifying goals according to national circumstances. Instead of using procedures that correspond to specific situations, GICHD recognizes that circumstances vary by country and provides "a structured series of processes, questions, suggestions and tools" to achieve a transition by



Mechanical demining in Laos.
Photo courtesy of MAG/Sean Sutton.

assessing country-specific conditions, designing a transition plan, developing an implementation plan and monitoring progress throughout the process.¹

Although the degree of control transferred from a mine action program to national authorities can vary, GICHD defines transition as “the process through which the international community reduces its financial and technical support, as the affected state develops the required national programme management capabilities that lead to national ownership.”¹ Notably, the transition process is not an end goal, nor does it mark the end of international cooperation. From the U.N.’s point of view, transition simply characterizes sustainable development, which is often a prerequisite for meeting mandate objectives.

H. Murphey (Murf) McCloy, an expert on post-conflict and conventional weapons destruction with the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), explains that the overall goal of centralizing control of mine action within the state is threatened by the issue of multiple mine action programs. This can be remedied through the presence of an organization acting as a coordinating authority.² According to McCloy, this means that “the arrangements/compromises necessary to centralize control of mine action within the state and keep separate programs from operating independently are easier to achieve.”² In the event that local authorities or non-state actors exercise control in a loosely defined area independent of national authorities, non-state actors may maintain more influence in their local domains than authorities acting on behalf of the national government and will often see the financial benefits of independent programs, therein rendering the centralization of control impossible.² While otherwise counterintuitive, a program truly seeking self-sufficiency must be

integrated into the government structure. GICHD explicitly states that “transition requires a commitment of more national resources with a parallel reduction of external assistance.”¹ In other words, states must consciously decide to support transition while compensating for reduced international funding to become successfully self-sufficient.

After making the decision in April 2001 to transition, Azerbaijan successfully transferred its mine action capacity to national ownership by 2004. Through its experience, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) suggested that transition processes require three basic elements: “a decision as to what should be developed as the capacity of the programme, ... a government decision to nationalize the programme, with a reasonable timeframe in which to gain experience under supervision and then assume responsibility,” and “a strong national manager who understood the process.”³ According to PM/WRA, ANAMA’s ability to fund program needs internally and on a long-term basis is perhaps the strongest indicator of the organization’s success.

In most countries, transition may take longer than in Azerbaijan. In very impoverished countries, national authorities may not consider national ownership of a mine action program to be a priority. For countries suffering from devastated infrastructures and crippled economies, compensating for the withdrawal of external support from mine action programs is never easy. However, when international community partners recognize and respect the host nation’s sovereignty, authorities will often feel empowered and remain more disposed to develop their own capabilities in a constructive partnership with the international community.² Alternatively, in situations where the relationship between the host nation and international partner was formed under highly autocratic conditions, local ownership becomes significantly more difficult to achieve.²

On behalf of the state, leadership must be interested in and capable of fulfilling clearance obligations.¹ Hence, to achieve a local buy-in, international donors should first select implementing partners that can empower local national leadership.² Authorities must also possess a clear understanding of implementation challenges as well as the financial, technical and human resources necessary to fulfill Article 5 of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*.¹ Therefore, donors benefit from communicating with implementing partners and enforcing



A deminer defuses a landmine in Sri Lanka.
Photo courtesy of MAG/Sean Sutton.

compliance through regular reporting.² A practical, purposeful plan to complete implementation of Article 5 and a significant financial commitment to the national mine action program are also necessary.¹ Moreover, the implementing partner must hire local nationals capable of growing with and providing leadership to the program. Notably, while the skills local staff learn from the international community will create desirable employees in and outside of the humanitarian mine action (HMA) sector, donors recognize that, when dedicated to local self-sufficiency, local authorities retain the ability to minimize the negative impact this causes within the local context.² While these components will not ensure the success of the transition process, they will certainly improve the chances that those in need will receive support from those who can provide it.

Once national circumstances are identified, a transition plan and implementation strategy can help mitigate a country's shortcomings. GICHD divides the transition process into multiple phases: assessment and analysis, devel-

opment, and implementation.¹ While international donors may not prioritize the same objectives as their respective host nations, emphasis is placed first on core values and the mission of their respective organizations followed by the affected host nation's needs.² Particular political environments may also affect the priorities of the host nation as well as the maturity of the local HMA infrastructure, amount of available funding and conditions the providing authority places on the expenditure of funds.

To ensure a successful transition, appropriate measures must be taken to monitor the success of the process. By assessing the program's internal conditions, authorities can identify potential issues or constraints in the transition process. Similarly, when analyzing the program, national authorities are able to evaluate the current state of the transition process. Notably, key components of a successful assessment and analysis will include a "consensus on the nature and size of the residual contamination and requirements for MRE and victim assistance that the post-transition structures will have to



Blake Williamson is assistant editor at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR). He joined CISR staff in October 2010 as an editorial assistant. He graduated from James Madison University in 2012, earning a Bachelor of Science in writing, rhetoric and technical communication with a concentration in computer information systems.

Blake Williamson
Assistant Editor
Center for International
Stabilization and Recovery
James Madison University, MSC 4902
Harrisonburg, VA 22807 / USA
Tel: +1 540 568 2718
Email: willi4bm@jmu.edu
Website: <http://www.jmu.edu/cisr>

address, government commitment (which is absolutely essential) and an effective advocate who will drive and protect the transition process."¹ ©

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