

Amendments to the IMAS Land Release Series

The International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) review board formally endorsed amendments to the Land Release IMAS in April 2013 that clarify and standardize the language and practices in the series.

by Helen Gray [GICHD]

Land release is the effective and efficient application of survey and clearance to remove the threat of landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination. Within and between countries, this contamination can vary widely based on a range of factors. The type and timing of conflict, number of warring parties and physical terrain, among other factors, determine the nature of contamination and the necessary response.

By definition, the land release process involves non-technical survey (NTS), technical survey (TS) and clearance activities. A land release pyramid, which emphasizes the value of survey activities, illustrates the land release process (Figure 1). In addition to allocating sufficient resources for high-quality survey, an efficient process relies on accurate information, risk management and the ability to maintain a clear record of past achievements and outstanding tasks.

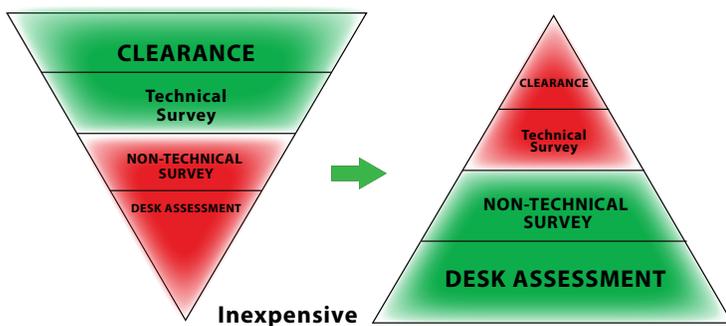


Figure 1. Evolution of the land release pyramid.
All graphics courtesy of the author/GICHD.

The land release pyramid illustrates the transformation from the traditional approach of clearance. Many governments employ clearance by default to eradicate suspected explosive hazards. Modern land release methodology provides a more efficient approach.

IMAS

The Land Release International Mine Actions Standards (IMAS) were reviewed and updated since their original introduction in 2009.¹ In April 2013 the IMAS Review Board formally endorsed the amendments. Arguably the most important IMAS, changes within the Land Release IMAS are prompting further changes across the rest of the IMAS series as well as to national mine action standards (NMAS) and standard operating procedures (SOP).

In addition to changes within the documents, the Land Release IMAS were reorganized within the IMAS series structure. The now broader Land Release IMAS were promoted to the operational management level and provide a more consistent approach to distinguishing between standards relating to the broader management of activity and to those addressing requirements of specific activities. This series now examines the interrelationship between survey and clearance more clearly, alleviating some of the confusion surrounding the use of the term **land release**. The Mine/ERW Survey Series and the Mine/ERW Clearance Series cover the specifics of NTS and TS.

Principal Changes

The main purpose of the amendments is to provide greater clarity and consistency. The standards adopted language more compatible with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). While setting out principles applicable to global landmine and ERW settings, these amendments allow for further elaboration in NMAS, Technical Notes and SOPs. National authorities are responsible for describing how the land release process should be applied within their country context.

The spirit of IMAS is to promote operational efficiency by allocating expensive resources to legitimate areas of contamination and to improve data collection and reporting through

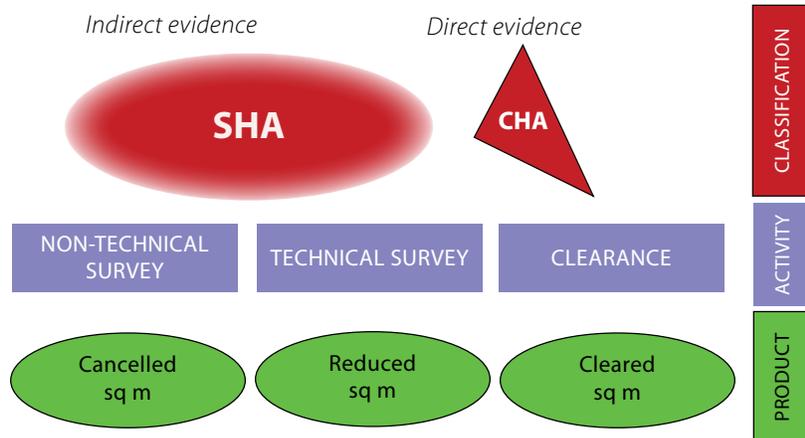


Figure 2. The land release process.

greater standardization and transparency. Although the terminology was largely maintained, the definitions were clarified. Figure 2 summarizes the components of the land release process.

A two-tier system of land classification has been promoted: Hazardous areas are either suspected hazardous areas (SHA) or confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) according to the availability and quality of evidence. The classification of defined hazardous areas was removed, as it was not globally applicable and could only be identified retrospectively in many cases.

SHAs should be classified based on indirect evidence of contamination, whereas CHAs should rely on direct evidence. Furthermore, this evidence-based approach discourages the creation of SHAs unless credible information can justify such a decision. This does not exclude countries or organizations that use more complex land classification schemes, as long as the schemes can be simplified to the industry standard.

NTS, TS and clearance are the activities used to identify mine and ERW contamination and return safe land to productive use. When applied to a hazardous area, the products of these activities are measured in square meters and labeled cancelled, reduced or cleared

land. In locations where no hazardous areas are recorded and NTS confirms that no suspicion exists, the result of the NTS should be recorded to confirm there is no current contamination. Yet, this does not result in cancelled square meters, because square meters can only be cancelled from already existing mapped SHA/CHAs.

The land release process prevents the full clearance of areas when the less expensive, more rapid NTS or TS methods could be employed to cancel or reduce land contamination. This puts greater

emphasis on finding the best sources of information and identifying evidence to improve operational decisions and efficiency. In particular, this process highlights the importance of high quality and continuous NTS activities, which better define where TS or clearance should start and how best to support decision-making when operations are underway. Where possible, a dynamic approach should be taken in which survey and clearance plans can be changed and updated as better information becomes available (Figure 3).

NTS should be conducted by trained staff who can gather and critically analyze information from a broad range of stakeholders in affected communities and map hazardous areas as accurately as possible. As a guide, these maps can help plan clearance activities; however, there should be leeway to edit, update and redraw boundaries of hazardous areas when more credible information becomes available. Work should be planned based on up-to-date information and not solely on existing maps. Where appropriate, TS can

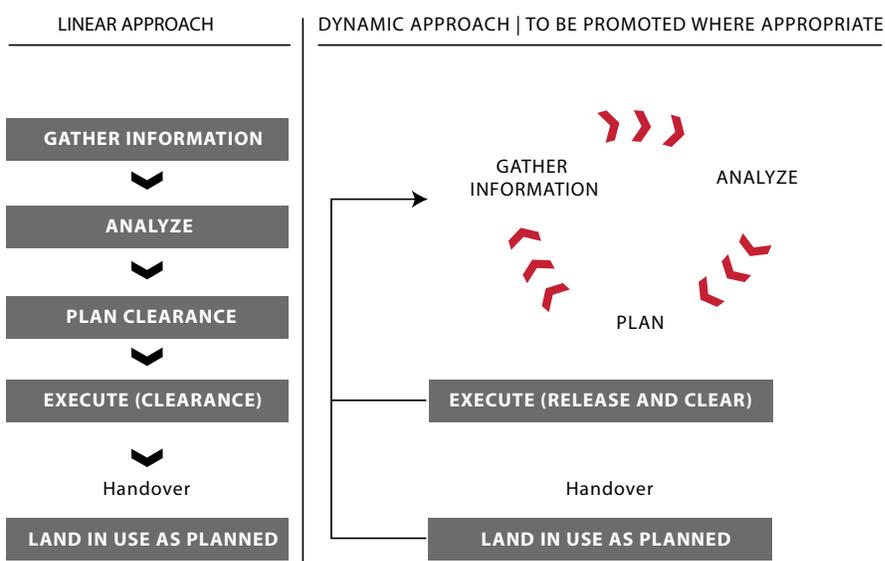


Figure 3. Linear versus dynamic approach to information gathering and operational adjustment.

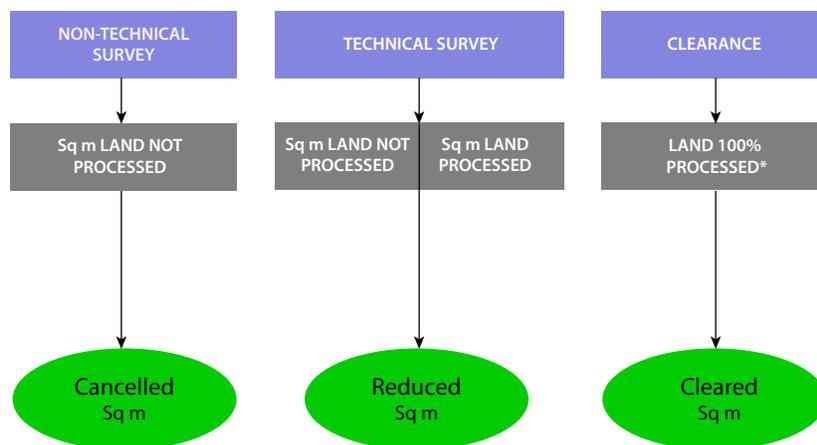


Figure 4. Minimum reporting requirements reflecting the effort made to release land. *Land processed by an accredited clearance asset.

facilitate the process of gathering better information and limit instances where hazardous areas are unnecessarily exposed to full clearance.

Information Management

Since their publication in 2009, the Land Release IMAS have had a lack of reporting clarity. The tendency to group activities together and report them as land release fails to reflect the effort and genuine benefit of activities on the ground, such as NTS, TS and clearance. Instead, the different survey and clearance components need reporting and disaggregation in databases to better reflect efforts and to enhance clarity when comparing work undertaken. To make this possible and improve activity analyses, quality hard data needs to be collected throughout the survey and clearance process. Capturing activities undertaken, the location and, if possible, degradation level of contamination is vital. This does not necessarily require the application of high-tech solutions but rather the proper use of basic mapping tools.

Data collection should also reflect reporting requirements: national reporting, operational analysis, donor reporting and reporting on treaty obli-

gations. Where appropriate, data should be disaggregated by age and sex. Unnecessary data collection should be avoided. If data collection cannot be explained, it should be reconsidered.

The drive for improved data collection and clarity also has implications when considering data quality in national databases. Poor quality data persists. A pragmatic approach should be taken to clean up national databases, so that false data is removed and is not used as a benchmark for planning or measuring progress.

Following TS, statistical reporting of the reduced area should reflect the reality of the situation on the ground. Where TS is applied to a percentage of the area, the statistics should be separable and reflect the area processed by a TS asset instead of the area that was not processed but was reduced after technical intervention. Figure 4 illustrates the minimum standard for data collection.

The updated IMAS therefore promote improved data analysis for more informed decision-making, allowing operators to learn from experience.

Conclusion

In a sector with decreasing funds, more must be done with less. Learning

from past experiences helps improve efficiency while meeting beneficiary needs. The land release process enables pragmatic decision-making to better target clearance assets and minimize residual risk. ©

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