

Priority-setting in Mine Action: Getting More Value for the Investment

This article presents an overview of the main elements and key challenges involved in implementing sound national prioritization systems in mine-action programs. Since all mine/explosive remnants of war-affected countries are different, the article does not provide a standard blueprint; rather, it introduces the basic principles, components and considerations involved in prioritization. This will be valuable when implementing and designing priority-setting systems that cater to national and local contexts in each mine-/ERW-affected country.

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Few topics are as hotly debated within the mine-action industry as prioritization. What actions should be done first? Which tasks should receive the most resources? Who should set the priorities: mine-action experts, government officials, people in affected communities or perhaps donors? How should the quality or effectiveness of prioritization be assessed?

This debate is warranted. The aim of priority-setting is to get the most value-for-money possible. The most important issue determining whether a national mine-action program performs well—whether it delivers good value-for-money—is not the quality of its survey and clearance technology, how hard its staff works or even how well-trained its managers are; rather, the most important issue is whether the program is doing the right tasks. Prioritization is about selecting the right actions and dedicating the necessary resources on a timely basis to ensure tasks are accomplished as efficiently as possible.

A number of programs have experimented with approaches taken from decision theory and risk management, including Multi-Criteria Analysis and the PROMETHEE method—the most sophisticated technique applied to mine action thus far.^{1,2,3,4,5} Through such experimentation and debate, many mine-action centers and operators have developed what appear to be good systems for setting priorities, with well-conceived criteria and opportunities for input from multiple stakeholders, including people in mine-affected communities.

However, an examination of how well mine-action priorities match country needs often leads to very disappointing outcomes, even in well-established programs in which each

operator has seemingly sound prioritization procedures. For example, in one country, only 4 percent of a recent year's demining efforts took place in the most-affected communities (i.e., those that experienced multiple casualties in the previous three years). How could this occur in a country with experienced operators and a consensus that casualty reduction should be one of the most important criteria for determining demining priorities?

In Cambodia, for example, Mine Action Planning Units are provincial government units created in the most mine-affected provinces to assist in the identification of demining priorities and the formulation of provincial mine-action plans. The main task of MAPUs is to work with villages and communities to identify local demining preferences, but the actual pattern of clearance has little relationship to community preferences. As a result, in 2000, only 56 percent of the area planned for clearance was actually demined; the number increased in 2001 and 2002.^{6,7}

What's the Problem?

Prioritization is an effort to match resources with people's preferences, aimed at delivering the greatest possible benefits with the resources available. A key problem in mine action is that those providing the resources generally are not the ones who will benefit from mine-action services. Most resources come from donor countries and are delivered through a chain of intermediaries (United Nations agencies, international firms, nongovernmental organizations, local governments, etc.) before reaching affected communities and individuals.

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Train-the-trainer workshop in Cambodia.
Photo courtesy of Elke Hottentot.

Even if each donor, U.N. agency, operator, etc., in the chain effectively sets its priorities, the national program's results are almost certain to be disappointing, unless national authorities (or the U.N. where it has been asked to take overall responsibility) can create and enforce a prioritization system for the overall national program.

Put simply, sound priorities for individual projects or programs will not add up to a sound set of national-program priorities, unless some agency has the authority to assess the overall package and convince or require individual donors and operators to make adjustments.⁸ Achieving value-for-money demands a coordinated program-wide approach.⁹

Toward National and Regional Prioritization Systems

Most national mine-action programs already have sound procedures for making decisions regarding which tasks to complete first. Local or regional prioritization deals mainly

with identifying tasks that will produce the largest expected benefits and assigning resources to those specific tasks. While this local prioritization is crucial to ensure a national mine-action program's tasks are carried out effectively and efficiently, it will not deliver high value-for-money unless a broader system is in place to ensure the bulk of resources are allocated to the most heavily impacted areas.

National prioritization is concerned with how resources will be allocated among geographic areas, program components, operators, etc., whereas local prioritization is the determination of which specific tasks to complete first, once the resources are allocated at the national level. If a national mine-action program delivers value-for-money, the processes and procedures put in place for national and local prioritization must be interlinked and coordinated. Therefore, prioritization must be viewed as a system of inter-connected decisions across different levels. After all, assigning resources



Site visit outside Battambang, Cambodia.
Photo courtesy of Pehr Lodhammar.

to any one task will invariably make them unavailable for other tasks, so a broader perspective is required to ensure each piece fits together.

A national priority-setting system invariably includes actors, resources, information, a structure, processes (i.e., where, when, by whom and how decisions are made) and policies. A good priority-setting system must be informed by the following:

1. Consideration for the interests of relevant actors to make the right decisions
2. High-quality, relevant and complete data
3. Regular analysis of the data to guide decision-makers

Strategic, operational and task requirements are the three necessary levels of prioritization. Strategic priorities should be established at the headquarters of the national mine-action program and should take into account the preferences of all stakeholders; however, allocations must also be in line with national development priorities. Mine action is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Therefore, strategic priorities should be set according to broader political, economic and social priorities in the country as a whole. Operational priorities should be determined by the relevant program manager, who should identify priorities using relevant data from analysis of non-technical or technical surveys and the expressed perceptions of at-risk communities and landmine victims.

Afghanistan offers an example of successful prioritization. In 2009, the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan found hundreds of minefields close to communities. These minefields were known as “low hanging fruit,” because mine

removal was considered an easy task—MACCA had the necessary equipment available. However, these areas remained for more than two decades without clearance. The minefields’ small size deterred teams from clearing the area, since the fields would lower their productivity targets. However, after realizing this problem, MACCA instructed operators to establish small teams and created new productivity standards for small fields, giving “low hanging fruit” locations a priority.

Different program components and operators sometimes have diverging priorities, but in order for the national mine-action program to operate in a sensible and coordinated fashion, headquarters is responsible for ensuring that all three priority levels add up and fit well together. Ensuring these requirements are met usually depends on clear guidance from the national mine-action authority of the national government; a clear-cut list of strategic objectives will allow decision-makers at all levels to understand essential tasks. A national policy, even a simple one, is crucial to determine who does what, by which processes and through which structure.

Sustainability and National Ownership

Sustainability is key to ensuring that a priority-setting system continues to function beyond the presence of the international community. The most important governmental processes for prioritization are planning and budgeting, but many mine-/ERW-affected countries lack proper planning and budgeting systems, particularly in the immediate post-conflict period. As a result, many mine-action programs are

set up as “parallel systems” (i.e., separate from the host government’s own planning and budgeting systems), making the eventual transfer to national authority long and expensive. For this reason, mine-action officials need to understand that, even in cases where proper national planning and budgeting systems are not in place, they should align the priority-setting system with whatever national structures exist or ensure that this alignment occurs in the very early stages of transition to national ownership. If not, the essential capabilities of the mine-action program will probably not be sustained.

Establishing and Adapting a Prioritization System

Mine-action officials need to be aware that a country’s mine-action program will encounter significant changes as it transitions from post-conflict to reconstruction and eventually, development. As the political, social and economic environment evolves, people’s needs change and priorities need modification.

Mine-action organizations should always focus on directing the most resources to support the most strategically important efforts identified by all relevant stakeholders at any given point in time, which may mean that during post-conflict stabilization, mine-action services will center on clearing roads or key infrastructure. However, as life returns to normal and previous mine-action efforts have helped return children to school and enabled access to key roads, priorities should align with longer-term development requirements, including shifting resources to demining agricultural land or land for natural-resource extraction (e.g., mining).

International actors will also play a smaller role as transition progresses. In a conflict’s immediate aftermath, outside

funding and expertise may be crucial for emergency clearance and risk-education services, but as a country moves from conflict into reconstruction and development, national ownership becomes increasingly important. Mine-action officials should expect rising levels of national ownership and more input from different government levels, from the national to the provincial, with local governments gradually assuming more responsibilities. As a result, international actors must switch from an operational focus to a capacity-development focus and should prepare for the mine-action program’s full indigenization, including by providing operations and senior-management training to local mine-action and government officials.

Conclusion

Achieving good value-for-money is essential for an effective and efficient national mine-action program to meet a country’s strategic goals. In an environment where international donors try to get more results for money spent, well-coordinated program-wide priority-setting systems are critical to a national mine-action program’s performance.

For a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of prioritization, see the first four of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining’s “Priority-Setting in Mine Action” Issue Briefs series, available on the GICHD website (<http://snipurl.com/23jixsi>). The objective of the series is to assist mine-action programs in achieving greater value-for-money by designing and implementing sound priority-setting systems. The Briefs enable mine-action officials to design and implement prioritization systems suitable to their respective place and time and adaptive to their changing national contexts. 🌐

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