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

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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—or 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 aid firms, nongovernmental organizations, local governments, etc.) before reaching affected communities and individuals.

“Achieving good value-for-money is essential for an effective and efficient national mine-action program to meet a country’s strategic goals.”

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

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.

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What must the prioritization process accomplish?

1. The process must be viewed as a system of inter-connected decisions across different levels. After all, assigning resources 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.

2. 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

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.

by Albert Souza Mülli and Ted Paterson (Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining)
In 2009, the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan offered an example of successful prioritization. Afghanistan offers an example of successful prioritization. Afghan 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 structures.

Sustainability and National Ownership

Sustainability is key to ensuring that a prioritization 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 what, by which processes and through which structure.

![Site visit outside Battambang, Cambodia. Photo courtesy of Pehr Lodhammar.](http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol16/iss2/25)

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 Brief 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 that are relevant to their respective place and time and adaptive to their changing national contexts.

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