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Redefining Success: Whose Reality Counts?

This article redefines how the mine-action community should measure accountability and effectiveness, suggesting that more thoughtful effort should be taken to measure success. It discusses recent developments in evaluating mine-action activities, examines the increased role of local communities as stakeholders and details the use of Mines Advisory Group's impact-assessment tool in Sudan.

by Åsa Massleberg [Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines]

What is success? How is it measured, what indicators are used to determine it and who determines it? The traditional focus in mine action has been on the clearance of landmines, with the subsequent success determined, to a large extent, by the quantitative outputs of square meters cleared. In the past, landmine-clearance activities were commonly carried out by all-male survey and clearance teams with very little or no interaction with affected women, girls, boys and men living and working in the contaminated areas. Similarly, until fairly recently the success of risk-reduction activities like mine-risk education was measured by the number of targeted beneficiaries, with little consideration of the actual impact of the MRE and its potential to positively change people's behavior and risk-taking activities.

Donors and implementing organizations, however, increasingly recognize the necessity to critically assess long-term impacts, in addition to immediate quantitative outputs. Numerous mine-action practitioners have started taking into consideration the socioeconomic aspects of affected communities and have highlighted the need for doing so in order to be able to allocate mine-action resources where the need is the greatest, and to prioritize areas where the anticipated long-term impact is likely to be the most significant.

How mine-action success is defined and measured depends on numerous factors, such



Unexploded ordnance in Liriya Payam, southern Sudan.

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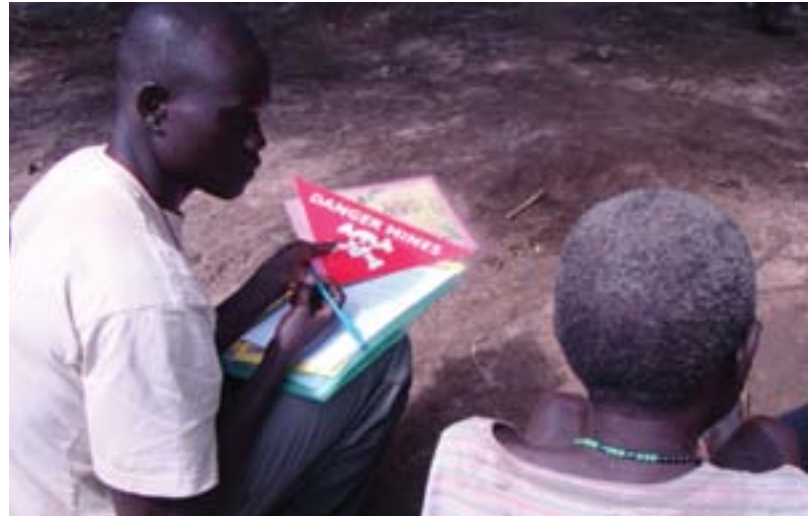
as the country-specific context (for example if the project is implemented in a conflict or post-conflict setting), the type of project activities and the specific project goals of those activities. However, generally speaking, it can be argued that "because the true measure of success of mine action is based on its impact on the local population, mine-action planners and managers must verify that what their projects are producing is reaching, and is useful to, intended beneficiaries."¹ Hence, it is the positive impact on women, girls, boys and men af-

fectured by landmines that should determine success. An important question to consider, however, is: **Who** determines if a project is successful or not? Is it the donor? Is it the implementing organization? Or is it the affected communities and the beneficiaries themselves? Surely, if the indicator of success is the extent of positive impact on affected communities, the beneficiaries themselves should have a say in determining if the project has been a success.

Community Participation

The English academic and development practitioner Robert Chambers focuses on the importance of community participation in his groundbreaking work on participatory rural appraisal. Chambers places emphasis on the need to ask the question of whose reality counts, and underlines the necessity for the “uppers” (the powerful and dominant) to take a step back, enabling the “lowers” (the “weak” and subordinated) to be at the center of all activities.² PRA is a highly regarded tool in the development field, and its potential to empower marginalized community members has been well-documented. As expressed by Chambers: “The essence of PRA is changes and reversals—of role, behavior, relationship and learning. Outsiders do not dominate and lecture; they facilitate, sit down, listen and learn. Outsiders do not impose their own reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own.”² As the Linking Mine Action and Development approach is gaining momentum, more focus needs to be placed on methods along the lines of Chambers’ ideas of PRA to ensure that affected communities participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of activities.

The importance of involving affected communities in mine-action projects from the start of the project cycle has increasingly gained recognition. Numerous publications, such as the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining’s *A Guide to Land Release: Non-technical Methods*³ and *Mine and ERW Risk Education—A Project Management Guide*⁴ highlight the significance of community participation to achieve positive project goals. As stated in the latter publication: “There is a growing body of evidence since the late 1980s that community participation leads to more positive project outcomes.”⁴ Likewise, the GICHD’s *LMAD Guidelines for Policy and Programme* underlines the necessity to “empower mine-affected communities to identify their own development needs as well as plan and



Community liaison with affected community members in southern Sudan, 2008.

implement activities. Unless the capacity of affected communities is strengthened, development investments will not be sustainable.”⁵ Community participation is a precondition for measuring positive impact on affected communities. However, simply adopting a socio-economic perspective is not necessarily sufficient. It is imperative to adopt a gender perspective from the initiation of the project cycle. This perspective needs to concretely influence all actions to ensure that the specific, often diverse and sometimes conflicting capabilities, needs and priorities of all affected persons are recognized and taken into consideration. The ultimate aim of adopting a gender perspective should be the maximization of positive impacts on all community members in an equitable way.

MAG and Impact Assessment in Southern Sudan

MAG is well-known for having pioneered community liaison, which essentially is a participatory, community-focused approach, placing community needs and priorities at the center of all mine-action activities while enhancing their developmental impacts. As an extension of this approach, MAG developed an impact-assessment tool, which has been implemented in the organization’s southern Sudan program since 2008. The detailed, age- and sex-disaggregated data obtained from the household surveys provide MAG with valuable information in terms of the **present impact** of landmine contamination on livelihoods, the various land uses, and the **anticipated future impact** of any potential clearance activities, all from household perspectives.

The IA is implemented by multi-skilled, mobile, gender-balanced CL and MRE teams with previous cultural and linguistic knowledge of the operational areas. What is unique about the IA tool is its household focus, rather than simply a community focus. Donors and implementing organizations often have a tendency to approach a community in a romanticized manner, assuming it to be a unified entity that represents the same capabilities, needs and priorities. However, communities consist of highly diverse groups of people, and deeply embedded power relations influence their structures and decision-making processes. Age, gender, tribe, social and economic status, and religion are a few factors that greatly influence power relations between people in communities. The household focus enables MAG to more effectively reach out to all the affected people living in contaminated communities and to take into consideration the needs and priorities of community members that might be easily neglected or marginalized in “standard” community meetings. In order to ensure a gender-sensitive approach, MAG takes special care to interview an equal number of women and men to the extent possible. Particular attention is also paid to the importance of including female-headed households, as they often face particular challenges related to livelihood activities.

MAG was funded by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in 2009 to conduct surveys (Non-technical or Technical, depending on the need) of all high- and medium-impacted suspected hazardous areas⁶ as identified by the Landmine Impact Survey in two states of southern Sudan. The organization surveyed 23 out of 36 confirmed hazardous areas⁷ during the course of eight months, with the remaining 13 to be surveyed during 2010. A total of 923 households were interviewed: 48 percent of the respondents were female and the remaining 52 percent were male.

The pre-clearance household surveys revealed the following land uses to be the most severely affected by the contamination:

- Fertile agriculture land
- Access to water
- Housing
- Education (school buildings)

Gender-sensitive Approach

The significance of letting the IA process be guided by a gender approach was very obvious during the IA trial period. One initial consultation meeting with an impacted community, attended by men only, clearly illustrated the need to adopt a gender approach. The male village chief called on other influential male community members to attend the meeting and to share their views on the contamination impact in the village with MAG.

These community members shared substantial information and highlighted a number of land uses they believed were the most severely affected by the minefield. However, it was all from the perspective of influential, senior, male community members. No women were present. Can this correctly be referred to as “community participation?”

Once this drawback was recognized, MAG revisited the village and held a second meeting with a number of women, during which additional land uses not previously identified by the men were brought to light. This new information had huge implications for prioritization processes, as these additional land uses meant that the impact level of that particular village was considerably higher than the initial data obtained from what the men had suggested. Even though this meeting represented only the first component of the IA process, it is still vital to ensure the participation of women and men throughout the process. This example hopefully sheds light on how important it is to actively include and con-



Female CL staff on deployment in Liriya Payam, southern Sudan, 2008.

sult with both women and men in affected communities. MAG found that its gender-balanced teams greatly facilitated the access to both women and men, and it was clear that these teams also encouraged the active participation of female community members. The identification of additional land uses by the women in this example was an outcome of the distinct responsibilities and activities they were involved in as daughters, mothers, sisters and wives. In other words, their responsibilities led to very gender-specific tasks and activities, which resulted in unique knowledge and distinct information related to the mine-field's impact on specific land uses.

IA Measures Success

The benefits of implementing the IA tool have been very clear to MAG. The most obvious advantages identified so far are the following:

- Prioritizing clearance based on impact and future land uses
- Being able to prove the link between mine action and development to donors
- Integrating CL and clearance operations
- Enabling a clear gender perspective in its community work
- Identifying challenges and implementing strategies to increase the positive impact on the community⁸

In April 2010, MAG began conducting the post-clearance household surveys. When the surveys are completed, it will be possible to assess the **actual** impact that can be attributed to clearance activities and to analyze if the anticipated impacts, as identified by the households themselves, have been achieved. The IA process has proven to be more

time-consuming than initially anticipated. Recognizing the significance of being clear and transparent to avoid creating misunderstandings and/or false expectations in the communities, MAG staff members had to dedicate more time to explain the purpose of the surveys to leaders and households in affected communities. MAG has developed a system of electronically recording all the pre-clearance data to be used for prioritization purposes and subsequently in the post-clearance phase to assess the impact. Ensuring that the data is correctly managed and analyzed so the information from the various phases can be accurately evaluated and compared in order to gauge the intended and actual impact is essential for the success of the entire process. Once the post-clearance data is available, it will be possible for MAG to determine if the activities have been successful in the sense that the anticipated impacts have been achieved. The IA tool will also enable MAG to identify challenges and to understand any negative impacts that its activities might have on communities. Lessons learned will be highlighted and adequately dealt with throughout the process, and necessary changes will be made to the tool in order to make sure that the data that is obtained adequately reflects the reality in the communities.

Conclusion

In essence, the notion of success in mine action needs to be questioned and more effort needs to be made to critically assess how success is determined and against what indicators it is measured. Organizations should refer to the positive impacts on communities when talking about

mine-action success stories, and the processes and procedures that result in project outcomes must be scrutinized and appropriately adjusted in order to maximize the benefits for affected communities. The diverse capabilities, needs and realities of women, girls, boys and men living in mine-affected areas need to be recognized, and their voices must be heard throughout the different phases of the project cycle. Only then can organizations really claim to have taken a socioeconomic perspective, and only then can the extent to which activities have led to positive impacts be measured in a credible manner. ↴

See Endnotes, Page 81



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