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Change is the Only Constant

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Change is the Only Constant

Because of the nature of mine-action organizations and programs, they are often placed in post-conflict areas where humanitarian work faces several obstacles. It is important to consider possible setbacks before embarking on demining in a post-conflict country.

M
ine action mostly occurs in post-conflict and unstable environments. Always a turbulent period for a country, the post-conflict phase is characterized by abrupt changes and weak government institutions. In addition, a country may face a sluggish economy, fragile infrastructure, poverty, high unemployment and political instability, thereby creating a very complex situation for mine-action operations.

A realistic question might be why an organization would consider developing a mine-action program in such an unstable environment. Several reasons are fairly obvious: to prevent mine accidents or at least reduce their number; to provide assistance to and resettlement for refugees and internally displaced persons. These problems are persistent for those working in countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka and Sudan, to name a few.

Logistical Concerns

The challenges mine-action programs face in complex situations are enormous, including providing protection for personnel and assets, complex logistics, restricted movement, continual changes in deployment plans, and obstacles preventing removal of ERW in the field. These problems are persistent for those working in conflict countries. Organizations may find they are unable to access task sites, and that their field staff need additional protection, usually in a form of an armed escort. However, the organizations usually have to endure all costs related to this protection, such as fuel, food, daily wages and transport. In the case of Fondation Suisse de Déminage program in Burundi, assistance the authorities offered was in the form of a few indifferent, poorly equipped and unpaid police officers provided as armed escorts. Furthermore, the police forces were suddenly withdrawn when the local government felt their assistance was required elsewhere. Nevertheless, tasks need to be completed and deadlines met. While, mine-action organizations may be able to afford these additional short-term burdens on their budgets and staff, these programs can rarely afford to provide such substantial assistance for extended periods of time.

Economic Difficulties

Despite post-conflict government declarations and a genuine enthusiasm to assist with mine-action activities, many governments do not have the financial or organizational ability to assist with mine-action operations. This limitation often puts a strain on the finances of mine-action organizations operating in post-conflict countries. Organizations may find they are unable to access task sites, and that their field staff need additional protection, usually in a form of an armed escort. However, the organizations usually have to endure all costs related to this protection, such as fuel, food, daily wages and transport. In the case of Fondation Suisse de Déminage program in Burundi, assistance the authorities offered was in the form of a few indifferent, poorly equipped and unpaid police officers provided as armed escorts. Furthermore, the police forces were suddenly withdrawn when the local government felt their assistance was required elsewhere. Nevertheless, tasks need to be completed and deadlines met. While, mine-action organizations may be able to afford these additional short-term burdens on their budgets and staff, these programs can rarely afford to provide such substantial assistance for extended periods of time.

Political Instability

Conditions such as armed clashes1 and insurgencies2 can result in the termination of activities and mine-action programs. A significant number of disillusions ex-soldiers and armed insurgents will often resort to criminal activities and general banditry.3 Though unilateral support from the host country for humanitarian organizations would provide the best foundation for mine-action activities, post-conflict governments are often torn apart by rampant political corruption and are unable to address their country’s issues or provide the necessary support to those organizations operating in their country. As a result, mine-action organizations are often left to develop the programs and provide assistance with little or no cooperation from the local governments.

In post-conflict areas where humanitarian work faces several obstacles. It is important to consider possible setbacks before embarking on demining in a post-conflict country.

Conclusion

Post-conflict areas are generally unstable and require mine action to help return to normalcy. One can be certain that sudden, unpredictable changes are the only constants in this industry. The only way to help an organization cope with these complex situations is to carefully perform a pre-program analysis that sets realistic goals, deadlines and methods of evaluation. Furthermore, in choosing individuals with experience managing mine-action activities in post-conflict environments, organizations can increase the success of a mine-action program. Ultimately, organizations must learn to consider the lack of host-government support coupled with sudden and unpredictable change and work to avert these pitfalls, thereby helping to ensure the effective transition from a post-conflict situation to one of stability and safety.