The GICHD Land-release Project

In the past, inconsistent and inefficient methods of identifying and clearing mines and unexploded ordnance have wasted precious demining resources and left affected areas contaminated. In 2006, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Deming recognized the need for a more effective land-release process in the international mine-action community and subsequently developed the Land-release Project.

by Tim Lardner
[Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining]

Past efforts to improve and optimize mine and UXO clearance have revealed that clearance and survey assets are often used too conservatively, commanding significant resources to clear land with little or no actual mine/UXO contamination. There are limited demining resources available and, despite an acknowledged need, this is not likely to change. Using these scarce resources in areas that are not, in fact, mined leaves areas that are actually mined uncleared. This ultimately prolongs human suffering from landmines and prevents many countries from complying with the Ottawa Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.[1] The strict timeframes of the Convention oblige victim states and the international community to increase the effectiveness of clearance and develop more efficient ways to use scarce demining resources in the process of releasing land. The international community increasingly understands the mismatch between resources and the need for mine action. Some countries have benefited from major international mine-action efforts over the last decade, yet they still suffer considerably from the impact of landmines.

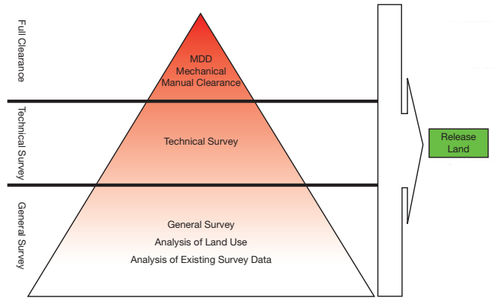

Figure 1: The process of land release
GRAPHIC COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR/MAIC

Projects exploring the use of risk-management principles were developed in the past but were isolated, and there was no general agreement on policies or principles that could be applied in order to make the land-release process more effective. On the contrary, in an attempt to make mine action more professional, the international community may have committed the mistake of focusing too much on the quality of mine clearance at the cost of efficient use of resources and increased speed of land release. This prompted the GICHD to implement the Land Release Project in 2006.

The Land-release Project

It is now widely recognized that the most urgent requirement in mine action is to develop more efficient methods of releasing land by both General and Technical Survey. This will free demining resources for the clearance of genuinely mined areas.

The GICHD has been working on the land-release process since the summer of 2006. This work has fueled discussions with the aim of creating political acceptance for challenging traditional methods when clearing suspected hazardous areas. It has been important to undergo this process because risk-management terminology and principles are potentially sensitive and could be rejected if misunderstood or put in the wrong context.

While it was initially feared that donors would be reluctant to adapt a more proactive approach to releasing land, the contrary has occurred and there is now broad agreement among donors that in many circumstances traditional clearance methods should be replaced in favor of more streamlined and effective land-release methods. These views are shared among most international mine-action organizations, although the discussion has only marginally taken place in most victim states. The process of land release covers the whole spectrum from survey processes through clearance. Please see Figure 1 for more details.

The GICHD has worked in the operational development of several land-release models. Draft models were developed for a road scenario in Sudan and a traditional area scenario in Angola. A complete model was developed and has been partially implemented in Lao PDR, addressing a UXO problem unique to that country.

In addition to developing models, the GICHD has also published the book, *Land Release: a Guide for Mine and ERW Affected Countries*.[2] The publication documents six program methodologies of land release using nontechnical processes that suit particular environments. The organization is also currently producing a publication focusing on the technical elements of land release, which will be published in early 2009.

Expanding Land-release Efforts

The GICHD undertakes work in several areas regarding land release, including research, operational implementation and the development of International Mine Action Standards.

Research. The Land-release Project focuses on three principal research elements:

1. Research the land-release process and subsequently develop concepts.
2. Focus more generic research on asset capabilities (machines, rollers, large loops, etc.), data gathering and analysis.
3. Develop the understanding of how land-release concepts, as identified in preceding steps, can and should be integrated into governmental positions *vis-à-vis* the AP Mine Ban Convention.

A field awaiting clearance before it is returned to locals for use.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Operational implementation. Two recent examples indicate the potential of land release methodologies. In Tajikistan, a basic set of procedures drawn from the recent publication on land release has allowed the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre to reduce areas that were previously listed as suspect to a defined, much smaller, area that is now manageable in terms of clearance and will allow Ottawa completion to be achieved in the next couple of years.

Secondly, in Angola, a model for nontechnical survey methods to release land has been developed which allows a more effective way of defining the degree of technical survey input and asset requirements. This has given the ability to either release land from suspicion, or clearly defined the further requirements for the work required on that land.

IMAS development. IMAS 8.10 and 8.20 currently outline the requirements for General Mine Action Assessment and Technical Survey. It has long been recognized that these two IMAS documents are among the weaker standards. The GICHD is currently working with the United Nations Mine Action Service to develop and implement a revised version of these two documents, and a set of three IMAS documents will replace the existing ones. The timeline for development and implementation is tight and draft IMAS versions are currently being reviewed prior to endorsement by the IMAS review board.

Expected Impact of Land Release

The approach of land release is an attempt to formalize structures and procedures that have been undertaken for a number of years and assist operators and authorities to define the problem more clearly. It is a critical focus for States Parties as Ottawa deadlines approach and should allow donors to ensure more effective use of their resources. The ongoing IMAS updates should also allow more clarity for actions to be undertaken and to provide operational capacities with security in undertaking land-release activities.

See Endnotes, page 113

Tim Lardner has been working in demining for more than 15 years. He is currently employed as the project manager for land release issues at the GICHD. Prior to the GICHD, he worked at Cranfield Mine Action and was a Technical Advisor in Cambodia and Mozambique. He holds a masters degree from Cranfield University.

Tim Lardner
Mine Action Specialist
Geneva International Centre
for Humanitarian Demining
7bis, avenue de la Paix
P.O. Box 1300
CH-1211 Geneva 1 / Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 906 1660
Fax: + 41 22 906 1690
E-mail: t.lardner@gichd.org
Web site: http://www.gichd.org