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Capacity Building in Mine Action: Are We There Yet?

This article flags some of the major debates within the broader development literature and introduces concepts that might help to better define and identify what is meant by “capacity development.”

by Olaf Juergensen [National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation, Lebanon]

The mine-action industry has made major strides in supporting national efforts to gain ownership and capacity to manage local problems with mines and explosive remnants of war. For more than a decade, the international community has poured significant human and financial capital into developing local capacity to deal with the different problems the presence of landmines poses. So what have we learned as a global community of mine-action practitioners and advisers?

For quite some time now, we have divided our thinking and approach to mine action and capacity development into two operational realms. The first realm is the post-conflict theatre where humanitarian relief and infrastructure renewal require an emergency rapid response. Financial and political resources are quickly scrambled, often under the guise of a U.N. peacekeeping mission and all it entails. Capacity building in a war-torn society is seen as a third or fourth rank-order concern—the immediate concern is to provide the “space” for the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation to take root. The great obstacle during this fragile phase is the lack of personnel, institutions and time needed to reconstruct local capacity.

The second operational realm is capacity development in what have been termed more stable “development” contexts. This type of capacity development faces hurdles similar to those of post-conflict situations. In the normal transition of things, the United Nations Development Programme will partner with a local government to help establish long-range national capacity to handle the residual mine problems hampering reconstruction and mainstream development efforts. Presently UNDP has capacity support programmes in over 25 mine-affected countries.

At an operational level, the division between what we do in complex emergencies

and what we do in “normal” development contexts holds some merit, but from a capacity-building perspective, we should ask ourselves if the gulf is really as wide as we think. The objectives of the institutions or the skills enhanced might have different applications in the different scenarios, but the processes of developing national capabilities do have commonalities that are worth exploring if the mine-action community is intent on learning from past successes and failures.

Mine action in general has benefited from adopting a “best practices” approach in many operational areas; however, for the “practice” of capacity development, we have no organized conceptual or technical body of work to draw upon. We do have a great deal of descriptive/historical information reporting quantifiable “outputs” achieved (e.g., national plans completed, standards established, the Information Management System for Mine Action operationalised, etc.), but we have scant work on the capacity-development outcomes of our work (direct and indirect) and the vitality of the institutions and systems established to help modernise and enhance national capacity to realise its ownership and leadership responsibilities.

Defining the Scope of Work

Any well-trained Operations Manager understands the need to do a reconnaissance on a minefield prior to throwing scarce resources at the problem. If done properly, and with application of the “toolbox” method,¹ the task will be done safely, expeditiously and economically. The context (topography, duration, cost, etc.) is skillfully calculated and start and end dates are established. The scope of the task is known.

Technically and methodologically, the mine-action industry has made tremendous progress over the past 10–15 years; today we are better at clearing land more quickly

and cheaply. The reason for this is the considerable effort that has gone into trying to understand the nature and nuances of mine clearance and how to perfect it as a technique. Can the same be said of how we assess and develop national capacity?

Understandably, developing national capacity to lead and own the problem in many ways can be more difficult than removing mines from a stretch of road. As we well know when new demining techniques are developed and introduced into the field, geography matters. Not surprisingly, clearance techniques and procedures that work in Afghanistan might not always be transferable to Colombia; mine-risk education programmes can be limited by culture and values; and commitments to landmine survivors are beholden to leaderships and budgets. Anecdotally, none of this is new, but how do we make sense of these vagaries from a broader perspective?

The concepts of “capacity” and “capacity development” remain hazy. Perhaps this obscurity is why as a community we have become divided to the point where their definitions have become synonymous with erecting the five pillars of mine action.² Drawing on the emergent capacity-development literature, we find that concentrating solely on establishing organizations, constructing institutions and transferring skills might build capacity in the short term, but the pillars need to be rooted deeply if they are to remain relevant.^{3,4} However, as the general capacity-development community recognized years ago, a focus solely on technical progress or systems creations misses the “softer” side of the process since technical advancements, networks and systems all need to be maintained and nurtured (at the minimum) and are thus dependent on nontechnical capabilities (relations, learning, coordination, etc.) that play a major role in determining the success and impact of a project.



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Colombian Armed Forces and Police receive training from a member of the OAS-IADB. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUAN CARLOS RUAN.

Analogous to why operations departments undertake reconnaissance, there is more to capacity development than simply providing the tools to start activities. Indicators and benchmarks need to be established that reflect the human context (political-economic) in which things are to be enhanced. Meeting the responsibility of fielding a quality-assurance team, one that can ensure national standards are being applied, is not the same as recruiting and training the QA team and drafting national standards. In other words, a project output (QA team) does not operate in a vacuum and the institutional home (mine-action centre) and organizational setting (society) play the most significant roles in determining the real outcome and impact of the QA team. Measuring its performance, then, is tricky. Capacity might have been built and even unleashed but its potential not fully realised due to local circumstances (political, economic, staff turnover, etc.). So how do we define change, progress and even success?

Conceptual Markers

The current literature argues that capacity development is, first and foremost, a process that builds on the local context.^{5,6,7} Thus, many practitioners and analysts have abandoned the term capacity building as they saw it denoting the construction of islands of excellence removed from broader reality. It is argued that capacity development should be measured in terms of outcomes and not merely in quantifiable outputs (e.g., number of managers trained, Geographic Information Systems courses attended, QA inspectors instructed, and so on). As we have indeed learned from national mine-risk education campaigns, accounting for the number of T-shirts does not accurately reflect the degree to which human behavior has changed.

Recently, it has been argued that the lens for analysis should include observations on the intersection of the institutional, individual and organisational environments in which the projects are set.⁸ Better understanding relationships between these different fields of practice will provide the managers and Technical Advisors of capacity-development programmes a better perspective on what works, why it works and why it doesn't. This insight, which if measured and evaluated properly throughout the duration of a project's lifecycle, will also allow for innovation and broader understanding of the impact of mine action on national reconstruction (peace building) and development (governance) objectives.

Analyzing a cross-section of non-mine-action case studies provides further food for thought.⁹ For example, robust institutions can be handcuffed by a lack of authority (political leadership or vague legal status) or highly trained individuals remain leaderless and thus their hard-earned technical skills remain idle. This raises the issue of scale, impact, sustainability and a raft of other terms that are bandied about in the development literature without much precision. Despite demonstrable progress being made on a case-by-case basis, there have been ebbs and flows to capacity development in mine action when viewed from a macro perspective. Are individual actors to blame? Economics? Politics? Donor interest? What are the cross-cutting dynamics at play?

A recent study released by the European Centre for Development Policy Management identified several useful elements to the concept of capacity, which provide a good framework for dealing with the messy reality in which capacity development takes place.¹⁰ The study notes the importance of properly aligning the development of an institution or system within the national or regional context in which it is to function. But it also makes the important point that institutions grow and adapt to engage emerging, more complex realities than originally envisioned and therefore the job of learning (developing) is continual.¹⁰ In other words, capacity is elusive and ephemeral—it is not only the ability to perform a function; it is seen as a latent potential that is hard to stimulate and map, given the number of outside forces that can affect its outcome. In a sense, it can be measured by looking at a combination of attributes (values, relationships, networks, systems, skills) that form a potential response to a development problem. The response to any problem will also be shaped by the degree to which an institution and its staff are empowered to act and apply their collective skills to solve new, and often more complex, problems.

Conclusion

Broadening the discourse on how we conceptualize, practice and, ultimately, report on capacity development activities is critical from an applied perspective. Moreover, it is a discussion that we as a community have not had in any meaningful or sustained way. Capacity building is forever being shaped by the urgency of time (Ottawa Convention¹¹) and depletion of resources. Undoubtedly, the "five pillars" of mine action have served as a useful superstructure—and communication tool—for thinking about what we want to help build. But the dearth of discussion on

how we conceptualize and actually develop national capacity limits the potential to learn, innovate and contribute to building meaningful and robust national capabilities that benefit a country beyond the niche confines of mine action.

ECDPM's study's conception is useful as it provides us with a more comprehensive view for designing, implementing or concluding a capacity-support project—irrespective of whether it is being undertaken in a fragile state or a stable middle-income country. Thinking more broadly—but systematically—about capacity development will allow us to be more flexible and innovative in our approaches. It will allow us as practitioners to speak a common language and use a common set of principles that ensure the results of our work add value to the society for which they are targeted. Mine action's strength has been its dogged technical focus on getting the mines out of the ground; it is exactly this type of determination that is now needed in our approach to capacity development. The focus, initially however, should be on surveying the field of capacity development as a methodology so we can better map and respond to the question, "Are we there yet?"

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