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Mine-action Capacity Development at a Crossroads

Capacity development is a central part of sustainable mine action. As a concept, capacity development has evolved over time but even now there is not an agreed-upon definition. While the mine action sector has made progress in encouraging the development of national capacity in many countries, there is still much that can be done to promote strong, capable institutions—both within the mine-action field and beyond.

by Dennis Barlow and Daniele Ressler [Mine Action Information Center]



What is Capacity Development?

It is difficult enough to define specific things (e.g., metal detectors) and processes (mine-risk education) within the multi-functional environment that makes up the realm of mine action and ERW, but dealing with a topic as politically and conceptually complex as capacity development is positively daunting.

We have noticed that in mine action/ERW development and funding circles, the term *capacity development* (and its precursor, *capacity building*) is as popular to use as *sustainability*, *good governance* and *transparency*. Unfortunately, capacity development is a widely used but not widely understood or agreed-upon term. It is treated as both a process and outcome, and it deals with both material applications (e.g., specific skills, knowledge, tasks) and human resources (e.g., ability, process, addressing the system within its environmental context).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines *capacity development* as “the process whereby people, organizations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time.”¹ While descriptive, this concept is operationally too general to guide programs, standards and contracts.

We believe that the United Nations Development Programme is helpful in this regard when it observes that capacity is “the ability of individuals, organizations and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve goals,” and that “capacity development entails the sustainable creation, utilization and retention of that capacity, in order to reduce poverty, enhance self-reliance, and improve people’s lives.”²

Barakat and Chard, in *Third World Quarterly*, conclude that a review of the use of the term *capacity* gives the impression of “constantly shifting, unclear and contested definitions,” and has “added to the confusion by masking contradictory aims under the banner of a common rhetoric.”³

Capacity Development in the Mine-action Arena

Lest we appear churlish and unappreciative of efforts to come to grips with the term by the mine-action community in particular, we have observed that mine-action efforts have actually employed capacity-development techniques remarkably well and created models and approaches that the rest of the development community would do well to emulate.

In its beginnings, capacity building was seen as a technical process involving the transfer of knowledge about preferred concepts, such as certain organizational models or public-sector institution-building skills, from the global North to South.¹ Typically, the broader political and social context was not considered. Since the 1990s, understanding of capacity building has emphasized the importance of country ownership, leadership and the role of political and governance systems. Each country is expected to take responsibility and determine appropriate strategy and outcomes in partnerships with donors. The most recent change in terminology from *capacity building* to *capacity development* has reflected this shift to national ownership; rather than understanding capacity as “constructed” via externally derived models, it has been recognized that “capacity building would

be ineffective so long as it was not part of an endogenous process of change, getting its main impulse from within.”⁴

It is here that we believe mine-action programs and plans over the last decade have played a key role in the evolution of capacity development as a central element in advancing goals and objectives of countries at risk. We credit the emphasis on capacity building to donors and organizations such as the UNDP, the United Nations Mine Action Service, the European Union and the United States Department of State. For instance, in Quang Tri province of the Peoples’ Republic of Vietnam, two national committees—the Women’s Union and the Committee for the Care and Protection of Children—conducted a mine-risk education campaign assisted by James Madison University and sponsored by the United States Department of State, which made use of new software packages and computer skills.⁵ Those capabilities became core competencies of both Vietnamese organizations after the initial mine-awareness campaign had concluded.

However, many of the efforts involved in capacity development remain tied to specific mine detection and transfers of technical skills, without trying to relate and integrate those capabilities into other segments of the host nation’s development or infrastructure. Perhaps even worse is the myopia of some mine-action professionals and donors who do not understand that in a country at risk from many threats, fitting the capabilities developed for mine action to apply to other spheres of life is a measure of success and not failure.

Liebler and Ferri observe in a report for the United States Agency for International Development that “much of capacity building has been designed around specific projects that nongovernmental organizations are funded to implement with or for their international partners and donors. This “project-focused capacity building” stresses the building of capacities that will help protect the investment made (such as financial management), support the requirements of donors (such as monitoring and reporting) or help complete the project successfully (such as competencies in project planning and evaluation).”⁴

We believe these comments are germane to some in the mine-action/ERW community including donors, NGOs, Technical Advisors, and host-nation government agencies. Rather than seeing capacity-development efforts as a bridge to holistic societal development, some groups (for very valid concerns of control, management and responsibility) tend to keep certain key capa-



bilities under their control so as not to “lose” them to other organizations. Donors and directors of national mine-action centers, in an effort to manage, monitor and measure applications that were attained after a hard-fought effort, may not be keen to see these applications and skills redirected elsewhere. This is perhaps the heart of the problem: How does one assure that a capability that has been developed by a small staff or national entity is not simply snatched from its “birth” organization?

Many mine-action programs now work to shift from technical skill transference to institutional reform and improved management in particular. This shift can be viewed as part of a long-term process that should result in increased sustainability and national ownership of any number of skills and capabilities. It is now up to the senior leadership of the major mine-action and ERW organizations, donors and decision-makers of the sovereign countries to facilitate rather than inhibit the application of advances in mine-action capacity development to other spheres of development and prosperity in the host country.

In this regard, the UNDP has developed strategies and documents related to capacity development: capacity assessment and diagnostics, knowledge services and learning, leadership development, institutional reform and change management, mutual-accountability mechanisms, multi-stakeholder engagement processes, and incentive systems.² The U.S. Department of State’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement is also emphasizing the long-term sustainability and integration of capabilities developed as a result of mine-action programs.

Mine action is a challenge with an end in sight—mine-action programs will not continue indefinitely. The legacy of any mine-action program should be to strengthen and promote skills and institutions that can outlast the finite technical demining tasks. This long-term goal requires that attention be paid to assuring capacities are designed and

sustained for a specific mine-action or ERW program but also applied to other challenges in the national or local context if their applications may be helpful. This situation is not one that will happen without deliberate analysis, nor will it likely happen with only one stakeholder “buy in.” Its occurrence will depend on a concerted effort of all major organizations involved in mine-action and ERW programs. ♦

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