

July 2007

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Recommended Citation

Ressler, Daniele (2007) "Perspectives on Capacity Development," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol11/iss1/16>

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Perspectives on Capacity Development

Sara Sekkenes, United Nations Development Programme
by Daniele Ressler [Mine Action Information Center]

On 30 March 2007, Daniele Ressler interviewed Sara Sekkenes, Senior Programme Advisor and Team Leader for Mine Action and Small Arms in the United Nations Development Programme's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. The interview was conducted to learn more about Sekkenes' and the UNDP's views on the role of capacity development in mine action. Lessons learned from past UNDP capacity-building activities are highlighted, as well as plans for future activities and the process of mainstreaming mine action.

Daniele Ressler: *How do you, representing the UNDP, define or understand capacity development in the context of mine action and what are the underlying things that make this concept important to the UNDP?*

Sara Sekkenes: In terms of definitions, a development need is the difference between current and required or desired performance. Capacity development would be an ongoing approach and process concerned with identifying or boosting and sustaining national capacity to enhance overall development. That's the core mandate of what we do.

The whole idea of UNDP supporting mine action obviously stems from the fact that landmines are senseless remnants of war that create obstacles for development and access to social and physical infrastructures. Obviously, it's something that lies very close to our mandate, in terms of promoting the Millennium Development Goals.¹ What UNDP does is assist national mine-action programs. We may assist to actually establish them and then we work, in particular, with capacity development to support mine-affected countries' ability to manage mine-action institutions and to oversee and coordinate mine-action activities in their respective countries.

If you look at the mine-action centers, there are many different aspects of capacity development that UNDP works with. Perhaps some of the more obvious aspects are technical and operational issues; for example, we can deploy a Technical Advisor who has map-drawing expertise if that is identified as a need in a mine-action center.

Additionally, when we talk about mine action, we talk about so many different factors related to capacity development: the legislative framework for mine action; the national institution and their staff and personnel; administration and financial management; public relations; operational factors such as mechanical, canine and manual clearance; coordination and awareness-raising requirements for survivor and victim assistance; and resource mobilization to determine the plan and strategy for future sustainability of programs, to name a few.

We talk about how mine action fits into the overall development planning of a country in order to facilitate the social and physical infrastructural access, rehabilitation and expansion. We talk about the ability to perform or to draft national mine-action plans, and to integrate these into broader development planning and reconstruction plans and budgets. Ultimately, mine action is a very resource-demanding, complex activity and has until now remained quite donor-dependent, which we're trying to build down by lessening the dependency on foreign support to mine action.



Sara Sekkenes.
PHOTO COURTESY OF UNDP

Another aspect to consider in mine action is "mainstreaming." The threat posed by mines should be mainstreamed in the sense that, where you have to build a road you also have to take into consideration other challenges or threats that might hinder or support why you should build that road there, as well as planning for any activities and costs these considerations may imply. And the landmine issue is just one of those threats. So, in that sense, I believe "mainstreaming" in and of itself needs some capacity development because the mine action community has no clear definition of what mainstreaming means or what we mean by mainstreaming mine action into development.

And, of course, with all these various facets of mine action, we need to define explicit goals. Where are we? Where do we want to go? This should obviously be done together with those who we are trying to assist; it's not something that UNDP can or should do on its own. Rather, this is a constant and progressive dialogue with those affected governments that we assist. We should together draft and develop plans of how we're going to achieve these goals, including supporting affected governments to abide by the international commitments they have undertaken, and mainstream mine action. We need to establish meaningful relationships between advisers and counterparts. We need to develop and sustain collaborative working alliances. We need to work on counterpart ability and readiness to change. Capacity development is not only to support change, but it's also to help all stakeholders to understand what needs to be in place in order to achieve change.

DR: *In your opinion, what are some examples of successful capacity-development initiatives in mine action and what are the key components leading to this success?*

SS: I think we're talking about optimal activities where we've reached the level of desired performance. I can mention many, many good examples of activities that have reached a level of performance to the full satisfaction of those involved, including national institutions, operational counterparts conducting the programs and donors funding the activities. This requires taking into consideration the challenges and the conduciveness of the environment in which these tasks are supposed to be achieved or carried out. Clearance activities may or may not have been to a full level of the International Mine Action Standards, which require a level of resource mobilization many affected countries will not be able to obtain in the long run. Desired performance, however, will be along the lines of best practices with a justifiable and transparent level of efficiency and effectiveness.

International, national and local mine-action actors have had an extremely steep learning curve over the years. In countries like Afghanistan, Cambodia and Lao PDR, we're talking 15, 18 years of humanitarian or development mine action. During that

will find very few today that would argue that you don't need to prioritize where you carry out mine-clearance activities. We've improved every aspect of mine action. We have improved manual demining, mechanical demining, dog demining, the strategic planning, the survey work, the databases. In fact, we've significantly improved mine-action clearance operations—but during these 10 years, we've also become much better at questioning where we do mine action and why we do it.

DR: *Are there any projects, activities or general initiatives that you are presently doing or planning for the future to promote or sustain capacity development in mine action that you think are particularly interesting or edifying for our readers to know about?*

SS: During the five years that UNDP has been placed in the Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery,² there's been a sharp increase in the requests for assistance from mine-affected countries and a deliber-

to determine what the end goals might be or what we're looking at ahead; and, together with our national counterparts, use these indicators to identify their desired performance levels that will measure when we can phase out the capacity development support that we're providing. The intention of this project is to come up with the indicators that will allow us to see different phases in drawing down our support in parallel to the increase of capacity in-country.

DR: *So it sounds like this future project is going to be one of the major focal points of your UNDP Mine Action Office.*

SS: Yes, it will. We haven't established indicators for capacity development in the past in UNDP, as I understand, and I don't think any other operations are doing this either. This idea was introduced recently at the annual program managers' meeting and it was very well-received.

Of course, the process of measuring indicators and progress is not purely scientific and absolute, but this project is definitely

"We've significantly improved mine-action clearance operations, but during these 10 years, we've also become much better at questioning where we do mine action and why we do it."

time period, we have seen a narrowing in the gap between the professionals carrying out mine action and the professionals working in development. We've also watched a growing understanding of the need for measuring the impact of mine-action activities.

Ten years ago, you had a clear focus on measuring the results of mine action in terms of the number of mines and square meters cleared. However, we have found that you can have remote mountain areas and borders that are littered with mines and high-density minefields, and you can clear as many square meters and mines there as you wish, but there may be little or no impact in terms of facilitating for, or directly improving, the living conditions for civilians and mine-affected communities. Exceptions occur, of course, where border areas contain high levels of cross-border activities such as the heavily mined K5 belt on the border between Cambodia and Thailand.

So over these 10 years, that whole notion has completely changed. I think you

ate expansion of the mine-action activities. It's always been said that we're supporting national authorities to address the mine problem with capacity development and transition, to help them reach desired performance levels and have national ownership of progress. But we have not necessarily clarified what is really meant by capacity development at large in the international community and, even more challenging, identified how we mean to systematically achieve these goals associated with capacity development.

To that extent, we now have a project in the UNDP Mine Action Unit where we're trying to establish benchmarks for all the countries we've worked in, to gauge where these countries are now in terms of the level of capacity development achieved within a huge range of activities as well as determine together with [country] authorities where we are going. The goals of this project are to look at a country's actual performance and projected performance to gauge where we're at now; establish common indicators

something that will create a uniform methodology and approach to capacity development to achieve desired outcomes in the various countries even though the expectations may differ between countries, depending on how a country wants to address its mine problem.

As of today, I can't really say that we have anything that proves we've achieved what we said we endeavored to try to achieve, even though, as mentioned, huge improvements have been made.

DR: *What, if any, innovative lessons learned has UNDP identified after working on capacity-development initiatives in mine action?*

SS: One lesson learned by UNDP is that you have to document what you are doing, make plans and identify goals to be achieved. If that's not done, you will never be able to answer a question of what you have achieved from your counterpart, a donor or your boss.

We also have to make up our mind on how far we want to go with our long-term commitment to projects and programs, as you can easily create expectations and dependency if you aren't able to say when you're going to stop. National governments in mine-affected countries also have to decide how they ultimately are going to address the mine-action program because many of them are under binding international obligations that clearly specify the end goal.

I think another lesson learned is that we still believe that mine action requires one specific expertise and educational training that most

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deminers commonly acquire in the military. I think military training is fully valid in terms of some of the tasks that are carried out in mine-action. But I think we have also learned that we need so much more than that as well. And I want to emphasize "as well" because without the clearance and EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] capacity and experience, we're obviously a little bit lost. But we're also lost if we don't acknowledge the contributions from other sectors such as the affected communities themselves, development, administration and management sectors with specific expertise on community needs, management, administrative, financial, logistical and outreach skills, to name a few. I think that mine action would perform better if we just acknowledge that we do need a diverse pool of personnel to staff institutions that are going to address the mine-action problem.

DR: *Where do you see the greatest areas of hope or promise for future success in capacity development in mine action? What about the greatest challenges for the future?*

SS: Future success builds upon the acknowledgement of lessons learned and I think we're getting there. Another facet of future success is increasing acknowledgement of the need to mainstream mine action because I think that's the only way you can actually make it sustainable: ensuring that mine action needs are addressed within the broader development planning and implementation.

The future success of capacity development faces a great challenge in our limited understanding regarding diversification in mainstreaming of mine action. Also, one political challenge is if we don't see some of the successes that we want to see in 2008 and 2009 in terms of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention³ it might be difficult to argue to donors to continue supporting mine action directly.

Another challenge is how to ensure that counterparts are qualified, and not political appointees who are less capable and perhaps even less interested in constructively addressing the mine problem. There are a number of examples where undesirable effects of political appointees and corruption stymied development. There has been a huge amount of money—well over US\$2.5 billion—readily available for mine action over the last 15 years. That money has been made available, either bilaterally or multi-laterally, to governments, national

or international organizations and operators in various forms. With that amount of money comes a range of opportunities that can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, but which requires responsibility in ensuring the funds are used effectively and efficiently in solving the mine problem.

There are also a lot of cultural differences and other needs to be met, particularly in countries that are going through a major post-conflict phase and/or are facing severe poverty problems with dysfunctional social services. Often, general and specialized education

levels are low, health is poor, income generation is low and so on. For example, I worked with a mine-action center database once where my counterpart literally did not know how to switch on a computer and had no interest of learning to do so, either. He was also rarely present as the state salary he received was not enough to sustain his family. Consequently, he spent more time absent from the job and pursuing other means of income-generating activities. That's a challenge.

In terms of "capacity development" or "capacity building," what if there isn't anything to build on? Where do we start? And at what level do we start? Do we start by giving extremely basic computer-literacy training? Or do we count on at least computer literacy being one requirement in terms of requirements for recruitment? That doesn't mean that it's impossible, but there are many challenges out there that have to be acknowledged.



Working group considering the process of capacity development and transition in Geneva in March 2007 during the Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Program Advisors meeting.
PHOTO BY MELISSA SABATIER/UNDP

DR: *Any other comments, quotes or important issues you would like to address in regards to capacity building and mine action that you would like to share with readers?*

SS: There has been a common understanding worldwide that the mine problem can be solved and will be solved within a foreseeable future and is the responsibility of affected countries to do so. Having concluded by consensus—strong consensus—that that is the case, capacity development is a must. We will not solve the mine problem without capacity development.

During the program managers' meeting in Geneva [22–27 March 2007], there was an overall understanding amongst donors and practitioners that capacity development is key to solving the mine problem in a re-

sponsible way that addresses both efficiency and effectiveness. We have to balance the mine problem vis-à-vis other challenges that many of the affected countries face ... and acknowledge that mine action doesn't necessarily have the exclusive right to be priority number one. While this does not negate the obligations under the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention, we need priority-setting and mainstreaming to ensure that the areas affected communities the most are dealt with as a matter of priority. We need to ensure that we clear the right minefields first and we also need to be aware of other, perhaps larger, problems such as HIV/AIDS, malaria or even deadly traffic environments that need to be addressed. That's what I mean by effectiveness: addressing mine action in terms of the overall goal of development. ♦

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News Brief

"Helpful Friend" Establishes Eco-friendly Rehab Center

Helpful Friend, an organization working to address the problem of landmines and meet the needs of mine victims in Nepal, is establishing an eco-friendly rehabilitation center outside the capital city of Kathmandu. The center will be based on HF's property in Kakani village. Construction work will be finished by the end of August and the property open for business in January 2008.

Landmines have been a persistent problem in Nepal since its war with the People's Republic of China. Hundreds of Nepalese citizens are injured or killed every year. Many of these victims become jobless, and the HF rehabilitation center hopes to provide much-needed assistance.

Initially 20 people will be admitted to the center, where they will produce organic vegetables to make the center self-sustainable and provide meaningful labor to the patients. Traditional Nepali cottages from different ethnic groups will be constructed on-site to cater to local expatriates, tourists and other travelers. The center plans to be an eco-tourist site, expanding its appeal with opportunities for bird-watching and pony-trekking.

Residents will not only work on the organic farm but also take advantage of the center's fishery. They will produce handicrafts and other products such as pottery, jewelry, bamboo products and handmade Nepali paper for center use and profit. Power at the center will be provided by solar panels and cooking will be done using bio-gas.

For more information on the Helpful Friend rehab center or the organization itself, visit www.helpfulfriend.org or contact info@helpfulfriend.org.