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The Mine Action Express... or the Wreck of the '09

The author discusses current challenges relating to an effective global mine-action strategy; he considers approaches and policies that could enhance or impede demining efforts worldwide. There are many emerging concepts to consider in order to improve mine action, such as mainstreaming, risk management and national ownership. The author discusses potential future plans of action the community must undertake regarding these issues in order to deal effectively with landmines and explosive remnants of war.

by Dennis Barlow [Mine Action Information Center]

In the 20th century, railroad lines became famous for highly efficient, progressive and dependable travel—or for dramatic accidents, which epitomized the height of negligence and bad planning. Whether these railroad events are agonizing or amazing, the images and emotions they evoke—similar to mine-action accidents or accomplishments—are indelibly etched into our minds.

At the Mine Action Information Center, it seems to us that the rapidly developing state of mine action has reached the point where it can, like great and majestic train lines, combine the best of many technologies and innovations to provide effective and secure service—or it can force together conflicting strategies and mechanisms to cause its own “great train wreck.”

Over the past year, some of the best practitioners, policymakers and pundits involved in mine action have developed some thought-provoking and timely concepts that should be considered for integration into mine-action campaigns. I will discuss a few of those ideas here, not only with a view to their validity as specific ideas, but also more with an eye to integrating them into a total system that will yield the greatest overall efficiencies.

National Ownership

While sustainability of nationally owned mine-action programs seems to be a universal goal, it is becoming evident that it is an elusive condition. Studies by Mssrs. Kjellman and Harppviken of International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)¹ and others suggest it is not just the non-functioning state that finds national ownership difficult to achieve. In spite of the positive connotations of the term, there are murky and even conflicting implications just below the surface.

Effective national ownership implies a string of interrelated conditions. It suggests a strong national will; an integrated set of government agencies; the ability to recognize, build and maintain capacities; and a skill and willingness to engage the populace. These characteristics have proven difficult for countries emerging from crisis situations. Therefore, the mine-action community has bit-by-bit crafted an informal set of global support networks available to the landmine-impacted countries. Donor states, the United Nations, major non-governmental organizations, regional organizations and corporations have formed a complex network of interrelated activities to help these countries. But the concept of building national independence from without—that is, by external forces—is touchy at best. National ownership implies sovereignty and independence; yet foreign technical advisors, donor representatives, U.N. field workers, guest militaries and diplomats are often inserted into the process, sometimes ironically clouding the issue of national independence even while striving mightily to help develop strong national capabilities.

The above situation is the best-case scenario. Reports at both the most recent International Meeting of Mine Action Programme Directors and U.N. Advisors in July and Ottawa Convention States Parties Meeting in September suggest a significant number of impacted governments are just “not there” when it comes to

accepting national ownership. The United Nations, United States, European Union and other donors and advisers would like to hop off the engine, but often they are alone in the cab and cannot take the risk of leaving the engine unattended.

Mainstreaming

If mine action is a viable and valid humanitarian endeavor, fit for intensive global efforts, it is because it is tied to the concepts of development, infrastructure, stability, confidence and security. In other words, the individual tragedies of landmine accidents, while emotionally compelling, pale in numerical comparison to other threats (AIDS, malnutrition, factional violence, motor vehicle accidents, etc.) which individually claim far greater numbers of victims than landmines.

Landmine action, therefore, should be given priority consideration among other national programs, to the extent that it supports socioeconomic development. Ah, but the rub comes when trying to disengage the highly successful mine-action juggernaut, which has carved out such a huge niche in defining its role among donors, non-governmental organizations, diplomats, journalists, governments and a worldwide public following, and fit it into a larger and less discrete development program. Many in the mine-action community are afraid to turn the throttle over to development officials and move toward the back of the train, out of sight of the engine, gauges and view ahead. Their motives may range from the altruistic to the purely selfish, but their concerns are real nevertheless.

Development plans and officials are not always enamored with or cognizant of the complexities of mine action, nor are donors necessarily eager to pledge funds to support activities other than those specifically earmarked for mine-action projects. It remains for those in the global community to foster vehicles such as the Millennium Development Goals² to provide settings that will promote an environment of trust and comfort in which mine-action activities can be integrated with other projects and programs.

Landmines and Other Explosive Remnants of War³

To achieve any end, we must first determine what is impeding our way. The great railroad planners were able to scout ahead and surmise the challenges that terrain, indigenous populations and climate would pose. In the area of mine action, we were forced to add more and more threats to the initial concerns that began with the singular task of finding anti-personnel landmines.

We realized that battlefield clutter also usually contained unexploded ordnance. Then we had to accept that caches of ammunition,

small arms and light weapons, booby traps, and improvised explosive devices could each be part of a post-conflict environment. While the Ottawa Convention⁴ is concerned solely with APLs, countries at risk have had to deal realistically with all potential explosive remnants of war. The landmine strategy has been successful, but it still needs to address the question of the growing threat of other ERW.

Some, such as Tim Carstairs of Mines Advisory Group, argue that the mixed weapon consideration must be taken into account and that donors and policy makers must be made to understand the concept that landmines, small arms and light weapons, UXO, etc., must be considered and planned together in order to assure that the land is indeed safe and preparation for subsequent development is assured.

The good news is that many organizations, such as the European Commission, the U.N. Mine Action Service and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining have taken the pragmatic step of including broader ERW considerations into mandates to support mine action, and some countries such as Cambodia have adopted a holistic approach to post-conflict ERW threats. The bad news is that international policy must deal separately with APLs and ERW as defined by the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.⁵

Release of Land

When humanitarian demining was beginning as a new movement, it developed an admirable method for trying to identify mined areas—which after all, is the precursor to dealing with the landmine threat. Impact surveys were instituted in most countries at risk from APLs. Based on these surveys, suspected mined areas were identified. Predictably, in an effort not to pass over contaminated areas, many more suspected mine areas were identified than in reality were seeded with mines. It now appears that upwards of 90 percent of operators' time and resources are being spent in areas where there are no mines.⁶

It will require imagination and courage to deal with this situation, but the cold, hard fact is massive quantities of usable land are declared out of bounds, which is a major factor keeping developing countries from expanding education, trade, agriculture and other development. Per Nergaard of Norwegian People's Aid suggests identifying and releasing the wrongly identified land will require considering such ideas as tolerable risk, implementing new and improved techniques of information gathering and management, and re-classifying land under review, immediately placing land declared “released” from threat into productive use. Nergaard recommends greater use of technical research and geographic information systems polygon-control measures to take some of the guesswork out of release. He accepts the fact that liability, risk and standards will come into play but insists these are concepts that simply have to be faced. Others will not accept such an interpretation because they believe that tolerable risk conflicts with a perceived “mine-free” scenario called for by the Ottawa Convention.⁶

More consideration of these concepts, especially the various aspects of risk management and risk tolerance, is being undertaken by Havard Bach and Tim Lardner of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and we eagerly anticipate their further research.

Mine-free; Impact-free

Perhaps the most basic prerequisite to having a safe and effective railroad journey is fixing a definite schedule and timetable. While it is laughable to think of boarding a train without either passenger or engineer aware of its destination, this is the plight that many



Mine action needs to get its train on track by seriously addressing issues like national ownership, development, and common goals in order to avoid disastrous consequences.
PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO

mine-action managers find themselves faced with today. In the simplest of all strategy formulas, we ask “Where are we? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?” If we do not know where we want to go, no effective strategy can be planned, and we will surely never reach our goal.

Many signatories have emphasized their position at each of the seven Convention Review Conferences that “impact free” just does not measure up to the specific requirements of Article 5. However, the European Community’s policy “is to drastically reduce the lingering threat and impact of land-

action program is set out in Bob Keeley’s article, “Are We Setting the Wrong Target?”¹⁰ After reaching the conclusion that the literal application of Article 5 would be impractical, he makes a logical assumption that an end-state should be defined as being “the point where there is no economic demand for the land left uncleared and where all reasonable and practicable steps have also been taken to prevent casualties in the areas that remain contaminated.” Keeley implores us to have the courage to face this issue head on and modify Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention.



The mine-action train can be efficient and effective with better cooperation and confluence within the community. PHOTO COURTESY OF GEOFF CRYER, WWW.GEOFFSPAGES.CO.UK

Whither the Mine-Action Express?

Never before in the short history of mine action have there been so many emerging ideas and opportunities for improvements and enhancements to mine action. But neither have there been so many distractions and competing ideas. There is no authoritative monolith to make these decisions for us. Just as we have had to build mine action through coordinated and sometimes informal actions in the past, we will have to achieve consensus in the future. Selecting, combining, designing and engineering the way ahead will be difficult—and probably painful. The goal is to stay calm, stay focused, and construct an engine that will operate efficiently and powerfully in dealing with one of the great pervasive threats of the 21st century: post-crisis recovery. ♦

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There are various guideposts for global mine action, but none so universally applied as the requirements of the Ottawa Convention. Article 5 (Clearance) of that document appears to be unambiguous: “Each State Party undertakes to destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines.”⁴ Thus the Convention seems to call for what some (such as the *Landmine Monitor*) define as a “mine free” world. And yet the very first words of the Convention imply that the reason for the formal agreement is that the States Parties are “Determined to put an end to the suffering and casualties.”⁴ This suggests the reason for implementing the Convention was to alleviate the practical threat of landmines. Some have taken that position under the rubric of “impact free.” Sara Sekkenes of the United Nations Development Programme points out that neither term—*mine-free* nor *impact-free*—is found in the Convention.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find champions for each point of view. Richard Kidd of the U.S. Department of State provides a sharp and succinct explanation of why he believes that a “mine free” global endstate is impractical: “No donor, lending institution and no major impacted country has indicated a willingness to put up the huge amounts of resources required to find and clear every last mine.”⁷

mines.”⁸ It has therefore articulated a “zero-victim target.” In a situation in which many nations at risk receive support and advice from many different quarters, they are often given conflicting or nebulous guidance.

What is clear is that the differences among the approaches will be vast. Clearing all landmines from all affected countries by 2009 or 2010 will not only be daunting but resource-intensive. Just as in curing any social ill (pollution, extreme poverty, HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, unemployment, etc.), erasing the very last vestiges of the threat often requires the largest application of resources. This comes at a time when there are indications that donor funding will become more difficult to obtain. Alistair Craib of the United Kingdom gave a sobering discussion of this trend at the Mine Action Directors Meeting in July 2006.⁹

We at the MAIC further note that only 12 countries are on a pace to complete their Article 5 requirements by 2009. This alone suggests that the absolute position of Article 5 may be unrealistic. If Belgium is not ready to declare itself free of all landmines, how can we expect that Laos, Cambodia, Mozambique and the many other impacted countries will be able to do so within the specified time period?

A clear and compelling explanation of the ramifications of the decisions of a mine-



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