Decade of Service: The MAIC is 10!

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Editorial

A Decade of Service:
The MAIC is 10!

The James Madison University Mine Action Information Center is celebrating 10 years of service to the mine-action community. Director Dennis Barlow looks back on 10 years of accomplishments.

by Dennis Barlow [Mine Action Information Center]

We at the center have seen and been a part of much that has transpired in the mine-action realm since that sunny day in 1996 when the U.S. Department of Defense decided to create an independent clearinghouse for humanitarian-demining information. Having faith in the passion and dedication of those in an academic setting, they asked for this center to be created not in a bustling metropolis like Washington or New York, but instead in the heart of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, at James Madison University.

Behind-the-Scenes Support

Like everyone else, we’ve had our ups and downs, but we feel pretty good about the efforts we’ve made and the fruits grown and harvested from those efforts. Unlike many of the larger and more powerful organizations involved in mine action, the MAIC at JMU has played the role of junior partner. We understood early on that the United Nations, sovereign nations, regional agencies, global nongovernmental organizations and large corporations would rightly dominate the play of humanitarian mine action. But we also felt that a university, with a passionate altruism tempered by an abiding neutrality, could—may—should—play an integral role.

So the MAIC was established as a public-policy center with a small central staff augmented by the part-time work of professors with key subject-matter expertise and students with unfailing energy and dedication. It has not been easy to maintain the balance of such a small vessel on a sea amid some very tall ships, but it certainly has been exciting.

As JMU reached this milestone, we hope to be forgiven the egotism of looking back over our 10 years and reflecting on some of our accomplishments. I do this knowing that sometimes the tall ships catch most of the wind and make it harder for the smaller MAIC craft to unfurl its flag.

MAIC’s Far-reaching Impact

We’re proud to say that we have inspired many of our students to become part of the mine-action arena. Several of our students and interns have gone on to bigger and better things in a variety of mine-action or humanitarian organizations. Stacy Smith is now working for RONCO Consulting Corporation; Keith Feigenbaum leans for Science Applications International Corporation; Juan Carlos Ruan is at the Organization of American States; Craig Finkelstein was the U.S. Department of State’s Humanitarian Demining Fellow; Kurt Chesko went to work for HALO Trust as a deminer in Afghanistan; and Erin Snader worked at Adapt-A-Minefield. Others are still looking for the right position.

Sarah Samsamant will move to Egypt in late summer 2006, where she will pursue a master’s degree in the American University in Cairo, and Owen Usher is currently evaluating several offers related to mine-action organizations.

Keeping Up the Standard

The MAIC was instrumental in getting the International Mine Action Standards process under way and maintaining it. At a global conference convened by JMU in 1997, we highlighted standards as an agenda item, and the UN. Mine Action Service stepped forward during that meeting to take the lead in establishing this very important program.

Since then, JMU has convened focus groups, maintained the IMAS Web site, and worked with the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining in updating technical notes, modifications and additions to the standards.

In the initial development of the Information Management System for Mine Action, the MAIC played a primary role by providing information and advice, working with the GICHD, and hosting seminars to determine the requirements for a mine-action information system, subsequently helping to determine these requirements. The MAIC again worked closely with GICHD to define and refine the need for and shape of casualty data within the framework of the IMSMA system.

Asking the Hard Questions

Given the independent nature of the MAIC, we have been able to ask politically sensitive questions or raise controversial issues and provide a forum in which they could be debated. The Journal of Mine Action is now in its 10th year and a personal of its index will indicate the breadth of topics covered. We note with pride that the JMA was cited over 100 times in the GICHD’s comprehen- sive book, A Guide to Mine Action. The JMA maintains many of the seminars and workshops convened by JMU have fo- cused on specific themes and topics critical to the effec- tiveness of mine-action campaigns and programs. This same openness to ideas drives our vision related to Web- based polling questions and our non-refereed lessons- learned database.

A Portal to Mine-action Information

We’ve found that many in the mine-action community use the MAIC Web site as a gateway to mine-action information and resources. Not only does the MAIC maintain an up-to-date registry of mine-action organizations, but it furnishes links to every significant mine-action group in the world, reports significant mine-action news on a daily basis, displays an up-to-the-minute review of “what’s new” in mine action, and provides “help desk” access to those who want to know more about mine-action activities.

GIS team first modified the best-of-the-shelf geographical software packages to make the products user-friendly, then added mine-action features to make them useful to the field. The same team created the Spatial Data Information Center, a database of GIS-related products available to landmine-affected countries. This product was issued in concert with an educational database that offered a comprehensive, easy-to-use online geographical tutorial.

Top-Level Training and Conferences

Of course, as a university-based organization, the MAIC at JMU has contributed as a source of mine-action training and education. Using a mix of best practices, a JMU team of clinical psychologists and health educators wrote and developed a mine-risk education curriculum, which was implemented by the Women’s Union and the Committee for Public Education in Quang Tri province of Vietnam in 1999. We foresee the need to revamp that curriculum to base it on community standards, while fostering collateral capacity-building projects in central Vietnam. The MAIC also sent a team of Geographic Information System professors to support the Southeast European Mapping Project and taught GIS skills to deminers in the Balkans. In May and June 2006, the center conducted its fourth Mine Action Senior Managers Course for the United Nations Development Programme.

Mine-action Software and Publications

The MAIC worked with an internally motivated team of JMU students and professors to create various global information systems. The MAIC produced an online mine-risk information system, including several key components.

A Campaign for Mine Action

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MAIC, the Catalyst

JMU’s MAIC is especially proud of the role it has played in facilitating partnerships and highlighting capabilities and contributions. Often, as in Bangkok or Miami, the MAIC has conducted conferences dedicated to bringing together various groups in a region who we feel could learn from each other. We try to spot these opportunities whenever we can and do our best to bring diverse groups closer together for integration and coordination. Such a meeting occurred in Tampa, Fla., in 2000, when militaries from 27 countries working on landmine clearance came together to share ideas and commonalities. It has also happened at every Senior Managers Course we have taught.

In Summary

As I sit here and allow the sights and sensations of the past 10 years to drift by, I realize two things; that in spite of my efforts to do so, I cannot possibly recall more than a few of JMU’s achievements. Most of them are not measurable—ah yes, the final obstacle to gauging effectiveness of our programs “can only be measured by the smiles on the faces of a reclaimed people.”

Secondly, our (all of us involved in mine action) efforts are indeed performing one action, one person, one event at a time, making the “whole” quite indiscernible from the component parts. Mine action is a little like looking at an American quilt. You can admire the details that go into its making, but when you step back to look at the whole, the component parts are lost in the overall beauty.

It is our hope that over the past decade we at the JMU MAIC have helped stitch this wonderful quilt together and that our contributions, as subjective as they may be, have helped give it shape, beauty and function.

An Alternative Perspective on Landmines and Vulnerable Populations

By offering a different view on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines’ dominant message concerning mine action, this article presents an argument for possible alternatives. The author brings up such points as a lack of discussion and an acceptance of facts without proper checking of research. In addition, suggestions of constructive use of landmines in the defense of vulnerable populations are made to refute the idea of a necessary worldwide ban.

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people living in areas infected with landmines are quite aware of the impact these mines have on their well-being. For those of us living in “the developed world,” public awareness of the impact of landmines is due largely to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. From this campaign we have learned of the physical, psychological, economic, and environmental damage caused by landmines left over from past conflicts. We have also learned of ways in which, contrary to the dictates of responsible use, landmines are used to terrorize civilian populations. That the most vulnerable populations in the world sustain much of this damage makes this senseless violence particularly heinous.

From what we have heard, we might easily infer that landmines are inherently problematic. However, focusing solely on these harms gives the false impression that only bad consequences result from landmine use. Furthermore, these arguments fail to consider that bad, perhaps worse, consequences can result from a failure to