

Plays Nicely With Others:

Some Thoughts on Issues Raised at the 6th International Meeting of Mine Action Directors, Geneva, March 17–20, 2003



by Dennis Barlow, *Director*

How many times have we been cautioned to hoard valuable information; to share it only at the risk of watering down our organizational—or personal—power? Our altruistic inclination to give and (hopefully) receive information has all too often been beaten back by vague suspicions of those who may want to use our information as a way to marginalize us. Oft times, this imperative is reinforced, at least indirectly, by our own organization.

At the Mine Action Information Center (MAIC), we have tried to drive this demon away and to deal in (to paraphrase Woodrow Wilson), “open information, openly arrived at.” We were gratified at the directors’ meeting when someone from outside the mine action community (Niels Harild of the UN High Commission for Refugees) suggested that the paradigm has now shifted. To share information in today’s world, he asserts, is to increase—not diminish—one’s power. It is through that hopeful and re-polished lens that we would like to review two critical issues facing the mine action community—strategic planning and coordination, which were raised at the recent meetings in Geneva.

Strategic Planning

The recent efforts, notably of Cranfield University and the Geneva

International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), to apply a more structured and goal-oriented approach to mine action planning has resulted in a methodology that requires discrete and logical actions based on goals, levels of analysis and decision-making strategies. Each of these decisions—whether to determine objectives or tasks, analyze various courses of action, implement the plan or evaluate it—requires a different set of informational inputs.

Even more daunting, the information needed for each set of requirements will probably be vastly different. Some required data can be very technical information such as soils taxonomy and landmine specifications. Other types of data will deal with economic factors including land use, commerce, trade, markets and distribution of goods. Some necessary information will deal with societal considerations such as education, gender roles, and customs, while other phases of strategic planning will require information relative to other supporting agencies and organizations involved in work in the region. In other words, the need for accessing and properly using information becomes more critical as the necessity of strategic planning becomes more evident.

Reflecting on the information needs of a mine action strategic plan, it can be concluded that the requirements are much more complex than planning an event to be conducted by a very controlled organization (e.g., military operations) concerned with a short-duration event (e.g., a disaster relief operation), or a very specific task (e.g., capping an oil well). Even worse from the planner’s perspective is that mine action functions are very diverse, often calling for capabilities residing in organizations that do not usually “play well together.” A mine action campaign, therefore, should acquire data to support phases over a considerable period of time, involve a number of unrelated functional specialties, support the well-being

of all segments of a threatened region and facilitate the integration, or at least cooperation, of diverse—perhaps even antagonistic—organizations. This last requirement quite naturally leads us to the second major topic of the directors’ meeting,

Coordination

The words communication, cooperation, coordination, collaboration and integration cause entirely too much confusion in the world of mine action. They should be terms that merely connote “playing well together,” but they have become mired in semantics. The result is that we all too often stop and ponder carefully the intended and perceived use of these terms. In the end, whichever word we use can hint at authoritative, directive, superior, subordinate or other kinds of relationships.

Nevertheless, the concept of coordinating plans, and finding and utilizing congruencies both within mine action campaigns (internal coordination) and outside the realm of mine action (external coordination), has become a major discussion point within the humanitarian mine action community. Discussions about how to integrate the various functions of mine action as well as the advisability of “mainstreaming” mine action activities into socio-economic development plans are healthy—and critical—trends.

Mine action coordination requirements, just as with planning requirements, need more information and communications support than other more traditional humanitarian endeavors. Anyone with experience in the mine action realm is aware of the great diversity of functions found under the demining umbrella. Bringing order out of that system of chaos is hard, especially given that in most mine action programs there is no single line of authority. When the mix is made up of UN support, technical advice, training assistance, donor wishes, military aid, bilateral agreements and a host country typically beset with

many developmental problems, the goal of a unified approach may be more of a hope than a reality.

Furthermore, it becomes increasingly difficult when trying to effect linkage with external authorities. Communications with "outside" agencies usually involve talking with officials who do not understand the landmine issue, who do not comprehend what it could possibly do with them, and who would probably like to avoid at all costs dealing with an issue as volatile—politically as well as technically—as landmines. Officials who are responsible for humanitarian assistance actions, peacekeeping missions and development programs could potentially have a great need for integration with mine action activities, but they are not typically included in demining planning or informational distribution, nor do they, as a matter of course, initiate such coordination.

The Keys to Effective Information Sharing

Bringing about the kind of effective strategic planning and coordination that should be at the heart of many mine action initiatives is the problem touched on by Mr. Harild at the Mine Directors' meeting. Mine action practitioners must do a better job of identifying, processing and above all, sharing information. The following are common-sense guidelines that could take some of the sting out of information sharing and bring in a little daylight.

Be Proactive

I once had a boss who said, "When in charge, take charge! When not in charge, take charge!" While overstated, the idea of mine action planners taking the initiative in offering information-sharing techniques is right on the button. Whether a mine action organization is in the lead, in support or situated laterally in the organizational "wire diagram," the important thing is to cast widely about you to find out who is involved. Even if the Ministry of Health, for instance, *should* be in charge of landmine casualty data, that fact should not preclude mine action victim assistance staff from visiting that ministry to discuss and decide on the preferred method of sharing

information and helping reach an agreement on such a methodology.

Refine Information Needs

When "brokering" information, you should be willing to do two things. One is to have clearly in mind what information you need and would find valuable. Do not go on a fishing expedition and make potential information sharers suspicious by rooting around in their information treasure chest hoping to turn up a serendipitous gem. Asking for specific information needs will be the quickest and most professional way to get what you need. Conversely, if you do your homework and find out what information other organizations need, you may be able to create a "win-win" scenario by trading information that you need for information that someone else needs.

Use Common Platforms

One of the great success stories in mine action is the advent of the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA), an information software system that has allowed most of the mine action centers to interface in a practical and reliable way. For this, the mine action community (and the GICHD, in particular) should be lauded. However, this does not mean that the goal has been reached. The greater challenge remains of making mine action-related information interface with information systems utilized by peacekeepers, humanitarian organizations, host governments and commercially accepted electronic vehicles. The more related platforms mine action operators and managers can "talk to," the more information they will be able to capture, share and process.

Keep It Simple

The world may be getting smaller, but it is not getting any simpler. Data measurement, data input, analysis, programming, etc., are skills that are still in great demand and are not accessible or sustainable in many parts of the world, including developed countries. Not only operators but also managers and, yes, even policy makers, are not necessarily capable of processing all the information that they see or are presented. Therefore, every form,

every input mechanism and every display needs to meet the "Napoleon's Corporal" acid test. There is an apocryphal story that Napoleon, before sending a message to his subordinate generals or field marshals would first have it read by a lowly corporal. If he understood the message, it was sent; if he did not, it was re-drafted. So it should be with all information systems. If they are not logical and as simple as they can be, they may be counterproductive.

Sandboxes are for Sand; Ricebowls are for Rice

Every organization seems to want to prevent others from encroaching into its area of interest, to maintain (ideally to enlarge!) its sandbox or protect its ricebowl. This zero-sum approach to mine action can be its death knell. Mine action depends on a multitude of varying organizations, functions, players, philosophies, resources and motivations to somehow be applied in a complementary way. We do not suggest a world in which all simply reduce their organizational boundaries to rubble, nor do we believe that an autonomous entity should direct mine action actions. But we do believe that many different capabilities can be applied in a most ingenious and cooperative way in which those skills are maximized when used in the proper mix, at the proper time and with proper support. To this end, we believe that endless discussions concerning precise definitions of subjective terms (e.g., "development"), the precise moment for "mainstreaming" to occur and the precise term to be applied to describe an ideal relationship are inhibitors to real and desperately needed action.

Share your information. Tout your successes. Let others learn from your trials and errors. Maybe it will not work, but it would be such a noble way to fail—certainly better than watching landmine accidents mount because we could not learn to play nicely with others. ■

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