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Priority Setting for Mine Action

Due to a lack of resources to enable all mine-affected communities to be cleared, countries must prioritize mine action activities. The following article addresses prioritization and suggests a new model to help improve the process.

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Introduction

Mine action practitioners realized early on that there would never be enough resources to address the mine problem in a particular country in a short period of time. In response to this problem, programmes developed different models for prioritizing affected areas, and although everyone was trying to make his or her best effort, not all of these methods were equally effective. When the United Nations Policy on Mine Action and Effective Coordination was prepared in 1998, prioritization was recognized in the section of the policy document entitled "The Requirement for Prioritization and Accountability" as follows:

> "All programmes should have well-established mechanisms to set priorities for mine action activities on the basis of need and the most effective use of available resources. While it must be remembered that no two situations are alike, priorities for mine clearance will often include, inter alia, the following: provision of emergency assistance; settled land with high civilian casualty rates; land required for the resettlement of refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs); land required for agriculture; community development; access to and free operation of health services; reconstruction; and infrastructure development. Programmes should also incorporate clearly defined accountability mechanisms to ensure that priority needs are met and that there is cost-effective use of available resources. They should involve periodic review exercises in order to determine overall effectiveness in approach, orientation and implementation, and to advise on what changes, if any, need to be introduced."

The problem with this broad statement is that most demining sites can be placed into one of the categories identified in the policy document, but the difficulty becomes determining how to choose among the different tasks once they have been categorized. Some programmes assign assets to single tasks even though they would take years to clear, and in others, the aim is to locate and destroy as many landmines as possible, irrespective of the impact that the minefield may have on nearby communities. These tasks, witnessed by local authorities, donors and others, have resulted in comments that demining is slow, unproductive, costly and inefficient. In addition, a positive cost-benefit ratio for the programme will only be achieved much later during the programme.

Implications of the Landmine Impact Survey

After the first ever Landmine Impact Survey (LIS) was carried out in Yemen in 1999–2000, there was a belief that the output of the survey was a prioritized list of affected communities for carrying out mine action activities. This was not completely true; the output of the LIS was a classification of mine-affected communities ranked by the severity of the socio-economic impact caused by landmines and UXO. However, the impact survey report is not a substitute for national planning. The report improves national planning because the entire problem is defined in terms of scale, type, location, hazards, and social and economic impacts experienced by local communities, and it provides essential

information and knowledge that must be used to develop priorities and allocate resources in the most cost-effective and rational manner. What is needed is to go one step further to prioritize these identified areas into a list from which a programme is able to select tasks and compile a work programme. This process, which is carried out on an annual basis, should form part of the strategic and annual planning processes.

Priority setting should be used to ensure that the limited resources of a mine action programme can have the greatest possible impact in each planning cycle on the socio-economic blockages caused by landmines. If work sites are selected on their own, without application of deliberate priorities, it is likely that the programme resources will be expended with less positive results at the end of the year. That is, the resources (demining teams, mine risk education (MRE) teams) will be used, but they will not have been applied where they could have the greatest benefit.

Prioritization should also be part of a broader approach that uses the technical survey[1] to bridge the gap between the impact survey and the demining activities that follow. The socio-economic impact survey produces a priority classification of affected communities, and the technical survey confirms the existence and defines the demining requirement. The aim of prioritization should not only be focused on the effective use of demining assets, but rather at the whole mine action toolbox, including demining, MRE, victim assistance and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) resources. These assets should be integrated and focused on removing blockages to mine-affected communities rather than on individual minefields. Urgent needs should be targeted first and these scarce resources should be applied in such a way that they have the highest level of impact with regard to pre-decided objectives in a planning cycle.

Decision-Making Process

Managing a clearance operation with thousands of sites is a complex challenge under any circumstances, and doing so through a number of different mine action organizations, each with their own set of skills, preferences and supporters, introduces multi-dimensional decision requirements. Some of these are resource-driven; some respond to short-term tasks; and others respond to the desired end state. Therefore, the priority methodology should only be one of several considerations in determining how soon a confirmed contaminated area can be cleared. A programme should not necessarily assign dangerous areas for survey and clearance by starting with those with the highest impact score and subsequently working its way down by decreasing scores.

Since the magnitude of the problem is in most cases far greater than the programme resources for any given year, priority setting is a means to decide where to focus attention/resources, which also implies where they will not be focused in that cycle. In the early stages, appropriate priority setting is a means to reduce the large number of possible cases for consideration to a more manageable subset with the chance of the greatest impact.

Traditional Prioritization

Mine action programmes have generally applied some version of the prioritization categories in the UN Policy on Mine Action in good faith, with specific choices typically based on local knowledge, politics and efforts to make efficient use of resources to minimize lost time through redeployment, etc.

More recently, the process starts with the strategic planning process, which uses various sources of information such as the results of the LIS to determine what the scope of the problem is and what resources are required to address the problem in a given period. During this process, many political and operational factors are taken into consideration, and this planning process repeats itself over the life of the programme. This is followed by the annual planning process, with the purpose of developing an annual works programme with specific objectives. Prioritization is considered at both levels—at the strategic level, the principals are established; and at the work plan level, the principals are applied to select tasks for mine action from the high-, medium- and low-impacted communities. The following sections include some of the factors that have been considered.

Political Factors

In a large country with mine-affected communities spread out in different regions, it is important to deploy clearance assets to all affected regions, although there may be more assets in the most heavily impacted region. For instance, in northern Iraq, the Sulaimaniya governorate has the most high-impact areas of the three northern governorates, but it would not be politically acceptable to only carry out mine action in Sulaimaniya and not in the other two northern governorates. A stable security situation is also a requirement for effective mine action, and an unstable area thus becomes a lower priority.

Policy Factors

Priority should be given to places where refugees and IDPs are planning to repatriate. Local authorities and tribal leaders could help identify areas to which these persons will repatriate. In the Kosovo programme, prioritizing areas by munitions type was strongly influenced by the timing of clearance. Clearance during the spring of 2000 was focused on cluster bomb unit (CBU) areas in order to remove the maximum number of bomblets before vegetation growth would make them invisible. Afterwards, however, this policy was reversed and a new preference for dealing with minefields prevailed.

Operational Factors

Operational factors may include first clearing areas without dense vegetation or clearing areas with a slope of less than 20 degrees or adversely affected by weather during demining. Other operational factors could include:

- **Area**: Prioritizing small areas for demining could result in the efficiency of operations. This could result in the elimination of a large number of minefields but without significant socio-economic benefit. Other aspects such as effects of mined areas on the daily lives of populations, the effect on the economy, the area's proximity to the community, the occurrence of incidents, the frequency of land use, etc., will play a vital role in prioritizing mined areas based on their sizes.
- **Clearance Toolbox**: Expected clearance rates on a specific task can influence priority order.
- **Clustering**: Grouping sites together will increase the efficiency of operations, reducing time lost in commuting and setting up field camps.
- **Seasonal Variances**: Weather conditions could also play a significant role in planning demining operations. Extreme weather conditions could hamper demining operations (wet climate, heat, snow, frozen ground, etc.), suggesting a higher priority be placed on these areas when weather conditions permit.

Priority Setting to Maximum Programme Impact

All programmes strive to be productive and efficient, and the different approaches developed to assist in prioritization reflect those goals. However, there are lessons to be learned, and the following methodology proposes new processes that can be applied, based in particular on experience gained over the past few years with the programmes in Yemen, Kosovo, northern Iraq and through discussions with members of the Survey Working Group. Depending on what information is available, these models can be expanded upon to consider more factors. The methodology described below should also not be viewed in isolation, but rather as being part of a comprehensive process of planning and managing mine action activities.

The purpose of the proposed model is to ensure that the limited resources of a mine action programme can be applied in such a manner that they have the greatest possible impact in each planning cycle on the socio-economic blockages imposed on mine-affected communities. The LIS helps to clarify the approach to appropriate priority setting, since affected communities are now classified in order of socio-economic impact due to the number of recent victims, blockages and presence of mines and UXO. The classification can be done immediately upon visiting an individual community and does not require a full survey to produce useful impact scores. Based on results from the LIS, mine-affected communities are classified as follows:

- High Impact: score > 11
- Medium Impact: score 6–10
- Low Impact: score 1–5

Application of the following prioritization framework will allow different scenarios to be looked at and compared to determine which option would provide the greatest impact in a given period on the socio-economic blockages caused by landmines/UXO. It will also provide an upfront view of what the programme aims to achieve, which is not only defined in square metres, but more importantly is defined according to how impacted communities will benefit from the work to be carried out. Programmes will also be able to project benefits versus costs to show when benefits will start to outweigh the costs for carrying out mine action activities. Donors and government administrations in mine-affected countries will now be aware of what to expect as the work for an annual plan will be developed in conjunction with them and they will know in advance what the benefit of the mine action activities will be. In order to achieve the above results, mine action programmes should consider applying the following prioritization methodology:

- Focus for the short and medium term (two to five years) on communities with medium to high blockage impact.
- Focus on removing blockages that have a socio-economic impact on communities and apply the following principles.
- High-priority minefields should be carefully assessed so as to determine the minimum clearance activity required to remove the blockage caused.

This methodology involves an assessment of both the blockage and the technical aspects of the minefield. In many cases, this will not require clearance of the entire minefield, but rather opening an appropriate passage and marking the remaining area for eventual clearance. While it may be less efficient in logistics terms, the programme will have much greater benefits each year for the costs expended. In assessing the blockage and, thus, the positive impact of removing that blockage, it is important to confirm whether the removal of the blockage will be sufficient for the area to obtain its desired usage. That is, will the land be used as intended simply with the removal of the blockage, or does it require provision or investment of additional resources? If it does require further resources and they are already guaranteed, then this is a particularly high priority; if it requires further resources and they are not assured, then this should be considered a lower-priority site for clearance. Clearing these sites will actually constitute a waste, as the potential of the cleared area will not be realized immediately after clearance has taken place and the area may lay dormant until other inputs arrive. Blockages to funded reconstruction programmes would normally be high-priority for mine action, although demining should be included as part of the financing of the respective investment.

Potential Benefits of the New Prioritization Methodology

In the short term, the new approach will leave more minefields in the country for a longer period of time, but will be more beneficial because it will eliminate more of the blockages to daily life quicker than previous methods, which will result in the development of the community. This goes against the common inclination to wish to leave the high-priority communities (or minefields) to which resources have been sent "mine free," but it will leave more communities "impact free" much sooner. Here are some suggestions to add to the new method of prioritization:

- Minefields where there were recent victims should receive high-priority attention in order to remove the danger and alleviate the fear/trauma the community may have suffered with the incident. Most of the medium- and high-impact communities reach this level due to a recent history with several mine victims and/or blockages caused by a limited share of the associated minefields. All of these communities should benefit from MRE.
- The limited areas causing blockages should be cleared, while other areas should be marked for future clearance.
- In most of the countries where an LIS has been completed, over three-fourths of communities are ranked as "low" impact. Significant proportions (perhaps a majority) of mine-affected communities do not suffer blockage impact from the minefields—these communities should benefit from MRE and the minefields marked for eventual clearance.
- Significant proportions (perhaps a majority) of minefields cause no blockage—they should be marked for eventual clearance.

The suggested prioritization model will ensure that mine action resources are targeted at freeing affected communities from the socio-economic impact of mines. In addition, the model moves away from the traditional area reduction approach to a more integrated and systematic manner in dealing with the mines and other development and reconstruction issues. Measurement of success can now be shifted from square metres to quantifying the result of blockages removed.

**I would like to dedicate this article to the UNOPS Mine Action Team in northern Iraq who has, since the beginning of the programme, worked hard to find creative ways to deal with the mine problem.*

Endnotes

1. Refer to the article "Application of the Technical Survey in the Demining Process," published in the *Journal of Mine Action*, Issue 6.1.

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