

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 7
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 45

October 2003

Lessons-Learned: A Learning Process

CISR JMU
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

JMU, CISR (2003) "Lessons-Learned: A Learning Process," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 45.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol7/iss3/45>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.



Issue 7.3, December 2003

Lessons-Learned: A Learning Process

During the summer of 2003, we were tasked with soliciting information regarding experience and lessons learned from the mine action community while interning for the Mine Action Information Center (MAIC). We were highly enthusiastic throughout our project while learning the many rigors of data collection and information sharing.

by Robert Burritt and Carrie Smart, *MAIC*

Development

In the latter half of the 1990s, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) began to develop the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) in an effort to homogenize mine action procedures. Before UNMAS emplaced these standards, they commissioned Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) to ensure the standards reflected the experiences and current operations of the mine action community. In October 2001, UNMAS published the first version of IMAS.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) provided the initial funding and development for the Lessons-Learned Project at the MAIC. Its purpose was to share and disseminate wisdom and "lessons-learned" among the mine action community. In 2002, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) provided additional funding to increase usage of the Lessons-Learned database. Dr. Kenneth Rutherford—Professor at Southwest Missouri State University and member of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize team—was hired to increase the number of lessons in the database. Using open source material, he managed to add over 100 lessons, which became accessible on the new Lessons-Learned website. Starting in the summer of 2003, UNMAS joined the project to explore the possible expansion and further development of IMAS. The importance of expanding this information database prompted the MAIC to hire two interns who would focus on the solicitation of more context-specific lessons directly from mine action professionals.

Getting Started

After the database was edited for content, we began to create a list of individuals who had been actively sharing information over the Menschen Gegen Minen (MgM) network. By researching their work, we composed individualized e-mails that outlined the project and hinted at possible information for potential lessons. By familiarizing ourselves with these individuals' mine action backgrounds, we hoped to initiate a more personal dialogue. While waiting for replies, we became a little worried because there was not a high number of postings on the website. After closer observation of our tactics, we realized that our website was a bit difficult to navigate because of incongruent and easily misconstrued site links. Assessing these problems, we began to make minor changes in design (i.e., statement of purpose, home page, colors, etc.). These changes brought a fresh look to the website and gave us something to use as a lever to catapult the Lessons-Learned Project further into the international mine action community.

Mid-way

After changing our website design, we also changed our marketing technique. The e-mails that we sent out appealed to a greater audience and carefully explained what the Lessons-Learned Project entails. Sending these out to over 1700 contacts, we were very anxious for replies and new postings. Additionally, we contacted the directors of the UNMAS and the Organizations of American States (OAS). Initiating dialogue with these individuals was

an attempt to have them produce an authoritative request for lessons—hoping that it they would encourage their personnel to post lessons.

Where are the Lessons?

We spent a lot of time considering the many aspects of our project and trying to discover the reasons why there hadn't been an overwhelming response from members within the mine action community. Additionally, sending out more than 1,000 emails, we expected a substantial number of replies. Instead, we received a reply rate of less than one percent. So we began to analyze the aspects of human behavior connected with information sharing among organizations. We spent a great deal of time considering this in our daily discussions. Two reoccurring themes in our discussions were the multiple reasons as to why someone might be reluctant to submit a lesson and also if many people within the community felt it was necessary to have a supervisor "okay" their personal submission.

Are Lessons Considered Secret?

We considered the idea that not circulating different field lessons gives those who contain certain knowledge a bit of superiority, for lack of a better word. Sometimes we as humans like to keep certain information to ourselves, because if everyone knew everything that everyone else knew, then there would be no need for experts.

From the Top Down

When we began our project, we solicited individuals on all levels in the mine action community—field workers, managers, NGO directors, etc. We realized, though, that the processes we used for our project were in need of a change. What we should have done in the beginning was get permission and full support from directors, and they in turn would give the same to the field workers, stating it was "okay" to participate in lessons-learned discussions. We realized people often feel more secure and ready to divulge information when the proper authority allows for such. When leaders and colleagues show interest in a project, most often, it trickles down into the organizational network—spawning mutual interest and triggering independent initiative.

Inch by Inch

As Dennis Barlow, Director of the MAIC, once said to us, "Here [on the Lessons-Learned Project], we measure our success in inches and millimeters," and by that definition, our work this summer was successful. Persistence has paid off and will continue to pay off in the future. Over 1700 people know about the database. A record number of people have viewed the database this summer; approximately 30 new lessons have been added. Eventually, this database will not only affect the usability and practicality of the IMAS, but it will also kindle conversations among individuals that would have otherwise been left unexplored.

Hope Remains

Even though we were a little discouraged at the beginning of the project, our hopes were rekindled by our realizations and the interest that has been shown towards the Lessons-Learned Database. Those who want to offer advice or a lesson are more than welcome to participate. In suggesting improvements, problems and additions to the database, individuals acknowledge the importance of analyzing and learning from field experience. This knowledge transcends any boundary existing between organizations, a commonality that lends optimism to the future of Lessons-Learned.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who has and will continue to participate in this project. Thank you for your patience. Without your help, this database would not be a reality. You can access the Lessons-Learned Database at <http://www.maic.jmu.edu/lldb>.

References

1. <http://www.mineactionstandards.org/imas.htm>.
2. <http://www.mineaction.org>.

3. <http://www.maic.jmu.edu/lldb/>.

Contact Information

Robert Burritt

E-mail: burritrg@jmu.edu

Carrie Smart

E-mail: carrielsmart@yahoo.com