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International Mine Action Standards: Some Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

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Background

International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) were requested by the mine action community and are produced and sponsored by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), with support from a variety of organisations, including the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). The initial design and development of the standards involved extensive participation from representative elements of the mine action sector during the period of 1998–2000. Since that time, the sector has continued to expand with the addition of new programmes and new people joining the sector. IMAS continue to evolve and now benefit from the experience of practical application into national mine action standards. Inevitably, the process of professionalizing a sector of activity will raise questions, and for the benefit of information sharing, this article highlights some of the more frequently asked ones.

While this article is titled "frequently" asked questions, the reverse is really the situation, with questions seldom asked of the IMAS project team or Review Board, which may either reflect complete agreement or an uncertainty of the application of IMAS and of the support and review processes that are associated with them. Comments and questions are encouraged and will be actively sought.

Questions and Answers

Q1. For whom are IMAS written?

A1. IMAS 01.10 outlines that they are written for a variety of audiences: national authorities, international organisations, donors, and organisations involved with the planning and implementation of mine action activities at the headquarters and field levels. In the case of national authorities, they provide a **guide** to the preparation of national mine action standards, based on what are considered best practice principles. IMAS reflect the standards that national authorities, international organisations and donors should reasonably expect to see applied in mine action programmes.

Q2. Why are IMAS designed the way they are, with technically complex language and duplication of some content within each chapter?

A2. The initial IMAS project team and User Focus Groups agreed that the International Standards Organisation (ISO) format followed a proven, internationally recognised "standard" process, and that using it would be beneficial for producing national standards in a format compatible with ISO documentation. The IMAS format allows each standard to effectively stand alone as a document, hence the need for some duplication of basic information. The layout is consistent, so some paragraphs, such as "Responsibilities of a National Mine Action Authority," are easy to look for and refer to in each individual standard.

Translation has been an issue, and IMAS are still not available in all UN languages. However, the Guide to the Application of IMAS (IMAS 01.10) and the Glossary of Terms (IMAS 04.10) have been translated, and work to expand this range is slowly progressing as funds become available. A balance between investing in translation of all IMAS and assisting National Mine Action Standards is sought, with the emphasis today being at the national standards level.

Q3. Do IMAS slow down demining operations?

A3. This is an interesting question that requires more detailed study. The application of IMAS is important to provide confidence to communities and national authorities that work is carried out to a known and acceptable standard. This does require transparency enabling the quality of services to be verified and proven. Within IMAS, this quality process—following the basic principles of Total Quality Management (TQM)—provides a quality assurance (QA) and quality control (QC) method through accreditation, monitoring and checking. The process requires sensible application of IMAS at the national level and best practice to be followed by all parties. It provides a method of ensuring "confidence" about a product (e.g., cleared land) to a known and specified standard. Developing internal and external QA processes does require resources, management and cooperation. QA processes should not be overwhelming or overburden demining organisations, but they are essential to provide confidence of performance. It is likely in the initial stages of a programme that a tight QA/QC process will be necessary to establish confidence; with time and experience, this may be relaxed if consistency of quality is shown. Sadly, questions on the reliability of the clearance processes, instances of missed mines and accidents at the demining work site have driven the need to ensure the application of comprehensive quality management processes. Planning and adequate resources should enable concurrent activity that allows for land to be returned to communities with confidence. So, while IMAS impose a process, if adequate resources and time management are provided, they need not slow down the completion of a full demining operation.

Q4. Why do we have an IMAS for post-clearance sampling that seems based on a statistical process for managing risk?

A4. The IMAS for post-clearance sampling was written from an industrial approach of proving quality by checking samples, using a credible mathematical model that provided a measure of confidence. The example model provided in IMAS is one method that could be adopted. Commercially, a reverse process is sometimes used in that sampling is undertaken as a form of technical sample survey to see if full clearance is necessary. Progressive offering up of lots for inspection may be one method of avoiding lengthy re-clearance checking; conversely, large lots minimise the size of the inspection sample, which may also be attractive. Suffice it to say that really good QA processes can lead to establishing a confidence level that minimises the need to perform QC (purists of TQM may disagree with this), and that, as we discuss below, IMAS are subject to a formal review process. The IMAS on post-clearance sampling is currently being reviewed, looking at an "application" process and providing other options in addition to the current example

given in IMAS. However, issues of residual liability, safety concerns for ensuring the best possible standards, and instances of missed mines will drive a comprehensive safety and auditable quality approach.

Q5. How are IMAS reviewed?

A5. IMAS are sponsored by UNMAS, with a formal management structure. Within UNMAS is a Steering Group (SG) chaired by the UNMAS director with representatives from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). The GICHD has observer status with that group. Subordinate to the SG is a specific IMAS Review Board, chaired by UNMAS (currently Noel Mulliner) with representatives from donors, national programmes, national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs, commercial operators and specialist advisers. The GICHD provides a secretariat to the review board through Phil Bean, the GICHD IMAS project manager.

The review board has several functions including a review of draft IMAS before they are forwarded to the SG for endorsement and also participating in a review of all IMAS over a rolling three-year cycle. That review involves an objective assessment on the application of the standard and decides whether an amendment needs to happen in line with the specific standard or as a result of other standards changing or being introduced.

Details of the review board and the review process are published on the site www.mineactionstandards.org; this also provides contact details for board members. Individuals or organisations with points for review are encouraged to forward their points to the board and specifically to the Chair, Noel Mulliner, at mulliner@un.org or Phil Bean at p.bean@gichd.ch.

Q6. How do we know that we have the latest version of IMAS?

A6. The most current versions of IMAS will be shown on the www.mineactionstandards.org website, which is maintained by the James Madison University Mine Action Information Center (JMU MAIC). As a result of the last IMAS Review Board meeting (19 March 2004), each IMAS will be annotated with a date of issue, and within each IMAS will be a reference to amendments that have been made since the previous issue. A proactive bulletin process informing organisations of amendments and referring them to new issues on the website will be introduced during 2004.

Q7. Can we get training and assistance with IMAS application?

A7. Yes, organisations like the GICHD can provide a variety of training support options from introduction to IMAS briefings over a few hours through to specific IMAS courses over several days. In addition, outreach support assisting in the drafting of national mine action standards over a number of weeks can be provided. A wider network of organisations can also provide assistance on the application of specific IMAS, for example on mine risk education (MRE) or mine detecting dogs (MDDs). The GICHD and UNMAS can provide details of assistance on request; please use Phil Bean and Noel Mulliner for points of contact. In the past, training has been provided for national authorities and NGO groups, and it can be tailored for individual organisation needs.

Conclusion

IMAS have generally been welcomed by the mine action community; their continued success is dependent on their application through national mine action standards. Keeping IMAS current is important, and those involved within the sector are encouraged to assist

and participate in review, application and development.

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