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Capacity Building in Mine Action: Are We There Yet?

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Letters to the Editor

As an independent journal, we provide topics that stimulate conversations. We give the mine-action community a place to sound off. Every issue brings us rants and raves—happily, usually many more raves than rants. We’re sharing some of them here.

I am writing to you in my capacity as AusAID’s Mine Action Officer. I have just read with interest your article in the Winter 2006 edition of the JMA, “TheMine Action Express – or the ‘Wreck of the ‘99” These indeed are the issues Laling with other mine-action practitioners, are having to tackle and it was very helpful to have you spell it all out so clearly.

- James Tunson Mine Action Officer AusAID

Thanks for your recent piece on cluster munitions in Lebanon. We’re finally beginning to make progress!

- Virgil O. Wiebe Director of Clinical Education Associate Professor of Law, University of St. Thomas

I would like to express my deepest thanks to all of you ... for publishing my “Unsung Hero” profile in the Journal of Mine Action. The article was written in a very interesting and touching manner. I received emails from many people who read the article, and this made me more motivated to do an excellent job. The MAIC’s Virginia, gave me very important knowledge and skills that I still use.

- John H. Nunley, Jr., Mine Action Officer, Dept. of State

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The MAIC staff also would like to draw our readers’ attention to the profile of Cambodia, which appeared in Issue 10.2 online version of the Journal of Mine Action. Juliem Chevillard, former Mine Action Project Manager for UNDP Cambodia, let us know there were several incorrect facts in the original version, and we have not only corrected the problems, but also greatly expanded the article. We’d like to thank Mr. Chevillard and Mr. Steve Munroe for helping us correct this article.

- Sandra Kuzmic, Organizational Affairs Adviser CBM/CAMAC–Cambodian Mine Action Centre

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If something we print begs for your comment, submit your own Letter to the Editor. Please keep your response short and to the point—200 words or so. Since we have limited space, we reserve the right to edit the comments to fit the space and have done so here. Send your letters to editor@jma/jmu.edu. Visit our online journal at http://jma.jmu.edu/journal/index.

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Analouges to why operations departments undertake reconnaissance, there is more to capacity development than simply providing the tools to start activities. Indicators and benchmarks need to be established that reflect the human context (political/economic) in which things are to be enhanced. Measuring the responsibility of fielding a quality-assurance team, one that can ensure national standards are being applied, is not the same as recruiting and training the QA team and drafting national standards. In other words, a project output (QA team) does not operate in a vacuum and the institutional home (mine-action centre) and organizational setting (society) play the most significant roles in determining the real outcome and impact of the QA team. Measuring its performance, then, is tricky. Capacity might have been built and even unleashed but its potential not fully realized due to local circumstances (political, economic, staff turnover, etc.). So how do we define change, progress and even success?

Conceptual Markers

The current literature argues that capacity development is, first and foremost, a process that builds on the local context.5,6 Thus, many practitioners and analysts have abandoned the term capacity building as they saw it denoting the construction of islands of excellence removed from broader reality. It is argued that capacity development should be measured in terms of outcomes and not merely in quantifiable outputs (e.g., number of managers trained, Geographic Information Systems courses attended, QA inspectors instructed, and so on). As we have indeed learned from national mine-risk education campaigns, accounting for the number of T-shirts does not accurately reflect the degree to which human behavior has changed.

Recently, it has been argued that the lens for analysis should include observations on the intersection of the institutional, individual and organizational environments in which the projects are set.8 Better understanding relationships between these different fields of practice will provide the managers and Technical Advisors of capacity-development programmes a better perspective on what works, why it works and why it doesn’t. This insight, which if measured and evaluated properly throughout the duration of a project’s lifecycle, will also allow for innovation and broader understanding of the impact of mine action on national reconstruction (peace-building) and development (governance) objectives.

Analyzing a cross-section of non-mine-action case studies provides further food for thought.9 For example, robust institutions can be handshake by a lack of authority (political leadership or vague legal status) or highly trained individuals remain leaderless and thus their hard-earned technical skills remain idle. This raises the issue of scale, impact, sustainability and a raft of other terms that are bandied about in the development literature without much precision. Despite demonstrable progress being made on a case-by-case basis, there have been ebbs and flows to capacity development in mine action when viewed from a macro perspective. Are individual actors to blame? Economics? Politics? Donor interest? What are the cross-cutting dynamics at play?

A recent study released by the European Centre for Development Policy Management identified several useful elements to the concept of capacity which provide a good framework for dealing with the messy reality in which capacity development takes place.10 The study notes the importance of properly aligning the development of an institution or system within the national or regional context in which it is to function. But it also makes the important point that institutions grow and adapt to engage emerging, more complex realities than originally envisioned and therefore the job of learning (developing) is continual.10 In other words, capacity is elusive and ephemeral—it is not only the ability to perform a function, it is seen as a latent potential that is hard to stimulate and, given the number of outside forces that can affect its outcome. In a sense, it can be measured by looking at a combination of attributes (values, relationships, networks, systems, skills) that form a potential response to a development problem. The response to any problem will also be shaped by the degree to which an institution and its staff are empowered to act and apply their collective skills to solve new, and often more complex, problems.

Conclusion

Broadening the discourse on how we conceptualize, practice and, ultimately, report on capacity development activities is critical from an applied perspective. Moreover, it is a discussion that we as a community have yet to explore fully.11 From an applied perspective. Moreover, it is a discussion that we as a community have yet to explore fully.11

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