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Mine-action Capacity Development at a Crossroads

Capacity development is a central part of sustainable mine action. As a concept, capacity development has evolved over time but even now there is not an agreed-upon definition. While the mine action sector has made progress in encouraging the development of national capacity in many countries, there is still much that can be done to promote strong, capable institutions—both within the mine-action field and beyond.

What is Capacity Development?

It is difficult enough to define specific things (e.g., metal detection) and processes (mine-risk education) within the multi-environmental function that makes up the realm of mine action and ERW, but dealing with a topic as politically and conceptually contentious as capacity development is positively daunting. What is capacity development? Is it an endogenous or externally derived model? What are its parameters? We have noticed that in mine action/ERW development and funding circles, the term capacity development (and its precursor, capacity building) is so popular as to be a kind of buzzword. While it is a widely used but not widely understood term. It is treated as both a process and outcome, and it deals with both material applications (e.g., specific skills, knowledge, tasks) and human resources (e.g., ability, process, addressing the system within its environmental context).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines capacity development as "the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole, unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time." While descriptive, this concept is operationally too general to guide programs, standards and contracts. We believe that the United Nations Development Programme is helpful in this regard when it offers that capacity is "the ability of individuals, organizations and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve goals," and that "capacity development entails the sustainable creation, utilization and retention of that capacity, in order to reduce poverty, enhance self-reliance, and improve people’s lives." Barakat and Chard, in Third World Quarterly, conclude that a review of the use of the term capacity gives the impression of "constantly shifting, unclear and contested definitions" and has "added to the confusion by masking contradictory aims under the banner of a common rhetoric." Capacity Development in the Mine-action Arena

Once we know someone who held a very passionate position on a certain issue," says Dennis Barlow, Mine Action Information Center Director. "He moved laterally within his organization, his opinions changed radically. I asked a mutual friend what had happened to occasion such a change. He looked at me with one of those 'Are you for real?' looks, and said, 'What you see depends on where you sit.'"

Capacity development is one of those topics that changes shape and form depending on one’s perspective. And yet it is imperative that those of us involved in mine action and remediation of explosive remnants of war not only have a clear understanding of capacity development but also, by comprehending other points of view on the topic, derive a common approach to dealing with it.