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Perspectives on Capacity Development

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Massive U.N. bureaucracies that (previously) ran mine-action programs ... have disappeared and they have not been replaced by an expatriate presence on the same scale. And that alone is indicative of the development of national capacity.

Daniele Ressler: Perspectives on Capacity Development

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Sara Sekkenes, United Nations Development Programme by Daniele Ressler | Mine Action Information Center

On 30 March 2007, Daniele Ressler interviewed Sara Sekkenes, Senior Programme Advisor and Team Leader for Mine Action and Small Arms in the United Nations Development Programme’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. The interview was conducted to learn more about Sekkenes’ and the UNDP’s views on the role of capacity development in mine action. Lessons learned from past UNDP capacity-building activities are highlighted, as well as plans for future activities and the process of mainstreaming mine action.

Daniele Ressler: How do you, representing the UNDP, define or understand capacity development in the context of mine action and what are the underlying things that make this concept important to the UNDP?

Sara Sekkenes: In terms of definitions, a development need is the difference between current and required or desired performance. Capacity development would be an ongoing approach and process concerned with identifying or boosting and sustaining national capacity to enhance overall development. That’s the core mandate of what we do.

The whole idea of UNDP supporting mine action obviously stems from the fact that landmines are senseless remnants of war that create obstacles for development and access to social and physical infrastructures. Obviously, something that lies very close to our mandate of promoting the Millennium Development Goals. What UNDP does is assist national mine-action programs. We may assist to actually establish them and then we work, in particular, with capacity development to support mine-affected countries’ ability to manage mine-action institutions and to oversee and coordinate mine-action activities in their respective countries.

Sekkenes: Although the demand centers, there are many different aspects of capacity development that UNDP works with. Perhaps some of the more obvious aspects are technical and operational issues; for example, we can deploy a Technical Advisor who has mapping expertise if that is identified as a need in a mine-action center.

Additionally, when we talk about mine action, we talk about so many mine features that need capacity development: the investigatory framework for mine action; the national institution and their staff and personnel; management and financial management; public relations; and operational factors such as mechanical, do you have manual clearance; coordination and awareness-raising requirements for survivor and victim assistance and resource mobilization to determine the plan and strategy for future sustainability of programs, to name a few.

We talk about how mine action fits into the overall development planning of a country in order to facilitate the social and physical infrastructural access, rehabilitation and expansion. We talk about the ability to perform or to draft national mine-action plans, and to sound into broader development planning and policy plans and budgets. Ultimately, mine action is a very resource-demanding, complex activity and until now remains quite donor-dependent, which we’re trying to build down by lessons on foreign support to mine action.

Another aspect to consider in mine action is “mainstreaming.” The threat posed by mines should be mainstreamed in the sense that, wherever you have a road a road you also have to take into consideration other challenges or threats that might hinder or support you to build that road there, as well as planning for any activities and costs these considerations may imply. And the landmine issue is just one of these threats. So in that sense, I believe “mainstreaming” in and of itself needs some capacity development because the mine action community has no clear definition of what mainstreaming means or what we mean by mainstreaming mine action into development.

And, of course, with all these various facets of mine action, we need to define explicit goals. Where are we? Where do we want to go? This should obviously be done together with those who are trying to assist; it’s not something that UNDP can or should do on its own. Rather, this is a constant and progressive dialogue with those affected governments that we assist. We should work to draft and develop plans of how we’re going to achieve these goals, including supporting affected governments to abide by the international commitments they have undertaken, and mainstream mine action. We need to establish meaningful relationships between advisers and counterparts. We need to develop and sustain collaborative working alliances. We need to work on counterpart abilities and readiness to change. Capacity development is not only to support change, but it’s also to help all stakeholders to understand what needs to be in place in order for change to take place.

DR: In your opinion, what are some of the examples of successful capacity-development initiatives in mine action and what are the key components leading to this success?
time period, we have seen a narrowing in the gap between the professionals carrying out mine action and the professionals working in mine action. We’ve also watched a growing understanding of the need for measuring the impact of mine-action activities. Ten years ago, you had a clear focus on measuring the results of mine action in terms of the number of mines and square meters cleared. However, we have found that you can have remote mountain areas and borders that are littered with mines and high-density minefields, and you can clear as many square meters and mines there as you wish, but there may be little or no impact in terms of facilitating for, or directly improving, the living conditions for civilians and mine-affected communities. Exceptions occur, of course, where border areas contain high levels of cross-border activities such as the heavily mined K5 belt on the border between Cambodia and Thailand.

So over these 10 years, that whole notion has completely changed. I think you will find very few today that would argue that you don’t need to prioritize where you carry out your mine-clearance activities. We’ve improved every aspect of mine action. We have improved manual demining, mechanical demining, dog demining, the strategic planning, the survey work, the databases. In fact, we’ve significantly improved mine-action clearance operations—but during these 10 years, we’ve also become much better at questioning where we do mine action and why we do it.

SR: Where do you see the greatest areas of hope or promise for future success in capacity development in mine action? What about some of the greatest challenges for the future?

SS: Future success builds upon the acknowledgement of lessons learned and I think we’re getting there. Another facet of future success is that we are starting to move towards mainstreaming mine action. We’re starting to mainstream mine action because I think that’s the only way you can actually make it sustainable. There are a number of examples where undesirable effects of political appointments are seen, and not political appointees who are less capable and perhaps without the clearance and EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] capacity that we’ve obviously been a little bit lost. But we’ve also lost is if we don’t acknowledge the contributions from other sectors such as the affected communities themselves, development, administration and management sectors with specific expertise on community needs, management, administrative, financial, logistical and outreach skills, to name a few. I think that mine action would perform better if we just acknowledge that we do need a diverse pool of personnel to staff institutions that are going to address the mine-action problem.

We also have to make up our mind on how far we want to go with our long-term commitment to projects and programs, as you can easily create expectations and dependencies if you’re not able to tell your donors that you’re going to stop. National governments in mine-affected countries also have to decide how they ultimately are going to address the mine-action program because many of them are under binding international obligations that clearly specify the end goal.

I think another lesson learned is that we still believe that mine action requires one specific expertise and educational training that most deminers commonly acquire in the military. I think military training is fully valid in terms of some of the tasks that are carried out in mine action. But I think we have also learned that we need so much more than that as well. And I want to emphasize “as well” because without the clearance and EOD [exploratory ordnance disposal] capacity and the EOD personnel, we’re obviously a little bit lost. But I also think if we don’t acknowledge the contributions from other sectors such as the affected communities themselves, development, administration and management sectors and the expertise on community needs, management, administrative, financial, logistical and outreach skills, to name a few. I think that mine action would perform better if we just acknowledge that we do need a diverse pool of personnel to staff institutions that are going to address the mine-action problem.

Someone that will create a uniform methodology and approach to capacity development to achieve desired outcomes in the various countries. Although the expectations may differ between countries, depending on how a country wants to address its mine problem.

As of today, I can’t really say that we have anything that proves we’ve achieved what we said we endeavored to try to achieve, even though, as mentioned, huge improvements have been made.

SR: We need to acknowledge the contributions from other sectors such as the affected communities themselves, development, administration and management sectors with specific expertise on community needs, management, administrative, financial, logistical and outreach skills, to name a few.

SR: What, if any, innovative lessons learned has UNDP identified after working on capacity-development initiatives in mine action?

SS: One lesson learned by UNDP is that you have to document what you are doing, make plans and identify goals to be achieved. We’ve said we endeavored to try to achieve, even though, as mentioned, huge improvements have been made.

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Building Prosthetics & Orthotics Capacity in the Balkans

The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been working with the Northwestern University Prosthetics/Orthotics Center in developing the Center for International Rehabilitation’s distance learning program to give formal training to experienced prosthetic technicians since 2003. In January 2006, the program’s first students graduated with an International Society of Prosthetics and Orthotics Category II certificate. The efforts of the CIR have led to the formation of the BiH Association of Orthopedic Technology, which is in the process of creating an ISPO regional center.

by Nikola Privolj, Justyna Przyjocka and Dr. William K. Smith (Center for International Rehabilitation)

T he 1992–1995 war in BiH left the country heavily contami- nated with landmines and unexploded ordnance. During the conflict, landmines and UXO were used to protect the front lines. After the war, these devices were set next to roads and around houses to prevent people from returning to their homes. As a result, BiH is among the most mine-affected countries in the world, with the largest and most complex landmine-contamination prob- lem in Europe.

Unreliable information on minefield locations and a lack of minefield records make this situation extremely dangerous. Since the beginning of the war, there have been 4,921 mine/UXO ca- sualties.2 Members of the international community and various nongovernmental organizations have responded to this urgent hu- manitarian problem by initiating a variety of programs, working with the local government to clear landmines, promoting landmine education/enforcement, and offering landmine assistance programs that provide education, employment and rehabilitation services to landmine survivors.

There are currently 2,280 men, women and children living in BiH who have suffered the amputation of one or more limbs due to mine/UXO incidents.3 As a result, there is a tremendous need for specialists who are able to provide high-quality prosthetic services quickly and efficiently. To address the demand for more trained prosthetic practitioners, the Center for International Rehabilitation introduced a Distance-Learning Program in prosthetics in BiH in early 2003. The CIR is establishing a regional hub in Bosnia to pro- vide training upgrades to technicians working in rehabilitation cen- ters throughout the Balkan region.

Implementation of the CIR’s Distance Learning Program

In June 2002, the CIR conducted a program assessment as the first step toward establishing a distance learning program in the Balkans. Based on this assessment, the CIR selected a group of cen- ters to participate in network activities. A few of the activities were distance-learning data collection and reporting, technology develop- ment and clinical consultation.

The CIR Distance Learning Program was launched in January 2003 and is headquartered in the Prosthetics Department at the University Hospital ‘Sestre Milosrdnice’ in Tuzla, BiH. A Category I International Society of Prosthetics and Orthotics certified prosthetic educator was hired to develop the capacity of the prosthetic services and staff at the UHC. Four local individuals were employed in sup- porting roles as a prosthetics assistant, IT specialist, translator and regional administrator.

The CIR’s program was designed for prosthetic technicians who had three to five years of experience providing prosthetic services but had not received any formal training. This innovative education program stresses collaborative, interactive learning and is designed to be adapted to different cultures, learning styles and technologi- cal resources. The online portion of the program is supplemented with hands-on instruction, periodic evaluations, weekly quizzes, and theoretical and practical examinations. The content incorporates text, graphics, photographs, case presentations, videos and hybrid CD-ROMs. To facilitate online communication and interaction, the CIR initiated a cooperative agreement with WebCT, an enterprise...