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Joe Lokey
CISR

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It's Mine and You Can't Have It!

by Joe Lokey
Deputy Director, Mine Action Information Center

Feeding the Information Appetite or Starving the Data Hungry?

It seems to be a given in the mine action community that you are acknowledged as an "expert" simply because you have stood up and declared it so. As with many humanitarian pursuits, there is no process to credential, certify, or license individuals, processes, or procedures in mine action. There is no guild or professional body to oversee and validate the veracity of performance claims. This is frustrating to donors and funding organizations that have little upon which to base outcome expectations. The answer is an open information system and process, transparent reporting, and contributions from the scientific community that are based on solid testing and unbiased findings that tie performance to expected outcomes.

In this issue of the Journal of Mine Action we have solicited a variety of articles on manual deminers and their personal protective gear. As you will see with many of the articles, this segment of the community seems to use basic information about what it can and cannot do more than the other segments of the landmine community. Numbers are important. Decisions are made from them. It seems, however, that information, though wanted by everyone, is shared by few. Curiosity? Not when you consider the nature of the mine action.

For example, where is this empirical support to the preposterous claims accompanying mechanical equipment releases and developments? Why don't the mine detecting dog people publish the results of their dog teams efforts in detail? Even those organizations working with victims are reluctant to publicize numbers and data that support their level of effort. Colin King once observed that "not one of the great obstacles to progress in mine action was peoples in-built reluctance to cooperate" and posited the concept of "information non-cooperation." There are a variety of reasons behind this such as:

Sensitivity
In spite of the well-intentioned proclamations of most groups and governments, many are sensitive to reporting of casualty rates, number of deminer accidents, causes of accidents, and number of people receiving effective mine awareness education. Sometimes simple rationalism takes over and raw data is frequently manipulated or held in order to either minimize the appearance of incompetence or over-stated to influence a more positive message. This reluctance to open organizational or governmental performance data is regrettable and leads to suspicions that can be even more harmful and less productive. Trust needs to be established between those owning the data and those using and basing decisions on that data.

Competition
NGOs competing for programs and for the funding that goes with them, as well as commercial companies competing for contracts, frequently view the donor pool as a zero-sum entity in which giving to one somehow takes away from another. The fear of "donor fatigue" is as old as, unfounded as funded programs seem to be bigger and bigger and donors are still actively seeking solid, outcome-based proposals. Although the Canadian Mine Action Investment Database provided for UNMAS is a start, more donor information needs to be made public after ten years because this relationship between dollars spent and outcomes is generally overstated because few are the wiser. Few resumes and CV's receive the attention and scrutiny that they should because this inflation of fact permeates the industry in general. On the brighter side, this is a small community and the less capable and charlatans are known to most and don't last long on the more significant projects.

Expectations of success are generally overstated because of the inability to articulate clear and measurable goals and outcomes. The data required to determine if goals have been met is rarely released and thus comparisons of productivity of operations to the reality of demining or mine action outcomes is difficult at best. Corporations also have an expectation that off-the-shelf technologies usable for other purposes can sometimes be adapted to current demining needs which explains their inability to produce widely useful tools and equipment.

Cost-Benefit Malady
A relatively new disease striking donors of large sums is the paralyzing ability of under-funded and poorly funded organizations to ask for a clear relationship between dollars spent and outcomes produced. Governments are apparently stricken more
than others with the symptoms of the disease being non-specific and inapparent to relate
easily simple questions. The utility of the answers, even if true and forthcoming, are questionable but
does, indeed, seem to be a chronic reluctance on the part of governments to accurately account for
funds spent on mine action initiatives.

Uniformed Ubiquity

One rarely encounters a landmine problem without
encountering the military in some shape or form. In
some countries, the military are the exclusive own­
ers of all clearance capacity and information. In oth­
er, military trainers and advisors pass along skills and
knowledge while lending considerable logistic and
communications support to clearance efforts. In spite
of everything militaries have to offer, there is a strong
propensity among all militaries to distrust civilian
institutions, especially aid agencies, and, as a conse­
quency, withhold valuable and useful information.

This is changing albeit slowly as more integrated ef­
torts occur and trust is built. Similar to the Siles
Bullet Syndrome above, military research and deve­
lopment results and outcomes are also classified and
withheld for years before emerging into the public
realm based on fears that new technologies in
countermine R&D would be challenged by an
adversary. This may be particularly true in the sensor
area more than others.

Signatory Sickness

In one of the more perverse consequences of in­
ternational cooperation, there seems to be a re­
liance among signatories of the Ottawa Convention
to not share information with non-signatories of the
convention. In a self-defeating act of self-righteous
indignation, this refusal to both provide and share
useful information to organizations attempting to
assist in mine action efforts is having the unintended
consequence of actually slowing progress and mak­
ing the entire effort more costly thus killing or injur­
ing more people that could have been saved. This
form of moralistic political partitioning is not only
harmful it’s just plain silly.

In short, we are a common thread of “information = power” running through nearly all of these
which seems to typify the frustration and outlook of
many. Unless and until there are more teaming ar­
rangements, multilateral contract awards, partners­
hips and other trust-building measures taken that
emphasize comparative advantages, this inability to
access simple common data for the greater good may
actually get worse before it gets better. The United
Nations and other large donors, particularly through
the Mine Action Support Group (MASG) and other
like efforts, can play a great role in opening these
doors by encouraging through contracts and bilateral
relationships an open systems architecture for all mine
action data and information. Host country mine ac­tion
centers (MACs), who have historically and un­
derstandably not programmed manpower for this,
can add functions to their staffs that enhance their
ability to collate and disseminate information of wide
use to a variety of people and organizations.

It’s just data. It’s not evil and it won’t bite. As
this issue of the Journal demonstrates, the PPE
community is doing a decent job of getting good data out
to you, the consumer, on what you need to know to
make more informed choices. The job ahead of all of
us is to important continue with practices that are
both petty and irrelevant to efforts to rid land of
mines and UXO. There are enormous challenges and
obstacles facing all of us without some simple communi­
cation being the first casualty of any operation. Talk
to us and tell it like it is. The objective, after all, is to
make the process better. Right?

These Things I Keep Inside

You never really think of religion.
It just doesn’t go with this kind of work.
You just believe that most people are good.
But when we entered that village something changed my mind.

It was an idyllic setting, surrounded by hills and mountains of great
beauty. But those sights were seen, I realized then that this human race has a great
capacity for evil.

Where the desire to cause such pain comes from,
I don’t know.

First we saw the mosque with its minaret fallen at a grotesque angle.

Who could do this?, I thought.

For what purpose to damage a place of worship.

If this was bad, how could I cope with what was to follow?

The orders were to clear the mosque, so cautiously
we went inside.

It was not—a bodies, no bodies in there.

Just a hand grenade on the floor.
Blow it up where it is, the sheiks say.

But you can’t do that in a church, so carefully take it outside.

I remember thinking that to do this in a place of
worship, whether a church or mosque or synagogue, is somehow wrong.

If only I had known what was to come.

But nothing could prepare me for that.

In the briefing the night before we were told:

“Doors are to clear the fridge for the press...”

Make sure that it’s safe for them to film.

They must show the rest of this world the destruc­
tion.”

But still I wasn’t prepared for what I would see.

As we moved into the village all was quiet.

All the young men were away fighting the war.

They thought that their homes and families were safe—the front line was miles
from their village.

And, anyway, the elders were there to protect the wives and children.

The village now safe for the press to come in.

The old men and the women and children—we see no more pain.

Now our pain starts.

Nothing can prepare you for this sort of job.

You do this work because we are dedicated, not because it is fun.

When we left the village, I prayed.

“I can’t remember praying before that day or since.

I cried real tears and sad tears.

I fought in wars and seen many of my friends die and never cried before.

But that day I cried.

I will never forget that day.

I still cry inside for three people.

I see them every day.

I have never prayed for them since that day.

But I have cried for them many times.

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