

MINE ACTION LESSONS AND CHALLENGES: IS MINE ACTION MAKING A DIFFERENCE . . . OR AVOIDING THE QUESTION?

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Certainly, the international mine action community has learned a great deal over the past 15 years. However, has mine action really made a significant, long-term difference to the lives of the people it is trying to help? For few things in mine action cause more frustration and misunderstanding among donors, recipient governments and programme managers than the question: what results has the programme achieved? Study after study has decried the fact that, while there are abundant data detailing the number of landmines destroyed, the area of land cleared and the number of people receiving mine awareness training, there are few data allowing an assessment of whether these achievements have enhanced the well-being of people in mine-afflicted communities.ⁱ

This means we can assess the efficiency and safety of mine action activities – “has the job been done right?” – but we fall short when trying to assess the more difficult but ultimately more important questions that determine, “has the right job been done?” These questions are:

- Relevance – are the objectives set for the programme consistent with government and donor policies, and the requirements of the beneficiaries?
- Effectiveness – have we achieved the planned objectives and enhanced the well-being of people in mine-afflicted communities?
- Sustainability – will the benefits to these people and communities last?
- Impact – what are all the consequences, intended and unintended, for better or for worse, of our mine actions?ⁱⁱ

There are numerous attempts under way to rectify this shortcoming, but for the most part these represent only partial measures – pieces of a larger puzzle. In fairness, the mine action puzzle is unusually complex. The community faces the challenges that always arise when trying to focus more tightly on results – what might be termed “garden variety” management problems. But it also faces “exotic” challenges because

many mine-afflicted countries represent such difficult and rapidly changing environments.

The first decade: 1988-97

Large mine action programmes were first established in countries in the midst of, or just emerging from, anarchic “complex emergencies”.ⁱⁱⁱ In these emergencies, military engineers were thrown into the fray to deal with the landmine contamination. When mine action addressed humanitarian concerns, the people involved understood the problem principally in terms of numbers of landmines and contaminated areas. With some notable exceptions, they were “mine-centred” (according priority to the most heavily mined areas) rather than “people-centred” (investigating which hazards posed the greatest danger to people and their livelihoods).^{iv} Because not all hazards could be cleared in the short-term, basic mine awareness training was provided to at-risk civilians and aid workers.

With a people-centred perspective, the clearance of hazards and the destruction of landmines are seen simply as means to an end: not as ends in themselves.

Making progress? Mine action since 1998

In 1998 the UN adopted a people-centred perspective in its landmine policy, stating...“*It is not so much about mines as it is about people and their interactions with a mine-infested environment.*” (UNMAS, 1998, para. 5) At about the same time, a group of international NGOs active in mine action endorsed *The Bad Honnef Guidelines*.^v

The picture that emerged by mid-2001 was broadly positive. Landmine clearance seemed to be delivering results in terms of socio-economic benefits, and the scale of these benefits appeared to outweigh the high costs assuming clearance was carefully targeted. However, a number of issues remained unresolved.

First, it is far from clear how much of the gap between social scientists and mine action practitioners has been bridged. For example, the human toll exacted by landmines and UXO has been well documented and was the principal impetus behind the international campaign to ban landmines. But what do we know about the actual contributions made by clearance, marking and mine awareness to a reduction in the number of deaths and disabilities? Unfortunately we know very little, at least in quantitative terms.

Take the numbers of deaths and injuries from landmines, which often rise after the end of a conflict as refugees return along routes and to communities that may be contaminated. The numbers of accidents then decline as people become aware of the hazardous areas. This knowledge may come from MRE or because minefields have been marked by survey teams, but more generally from seeing landmines, hearing from other community members, or because some unfortunate person or animal has detonated a mine. Mine clearance also makes a contribution to risk reduction, but in heavily

contaminated countries this is modest because only a tiny portion of hazardous areas are cleared in any one year.

With all these factors influencing the level and trend of accidents, it is extremely difficult to isolate which factor has led to what portion of the decline in numbers. This could conceivably be accomplished with abundant data of excellent quality. Unfortunately, in most countries data on landmine accidents is incomplete and often of poor quality. As a result of these complications, there is not a single study that has demonstrated any statistically meaningful link between the numbers of landmine accidents and any component of mine action or mine action in general.

Working smarter, not harder, what's so hard about that?

The concept that good management is all about achieving results is far from new. Results-based management (RBM) has been used for years in the public sector to improve performance because,

- *What gets measured gets done;*
- *If you don't measure results, you can't tell success from failure;*
- *If you can't see success, you're probably rewarding failure;*
- *If you can't see success, you can't learn from it;*
- *If you can't recognise failure, you can't correct it;*
- *If you can demonstrate success, you can win public support.^{vi}*

The trouble is that, when there is no clear bottom line, there is no simple measure that provides an unambiguous gauge of performance. Rather, a set of measures is required covering each stage in the "results chain" whereby inputs allow mine action activities to produce outputs which reach beneficiaries who use them to achieve intermediate and (ultimately) final outcomes.

Programme managers have a fair degree of control in producing the outputs, but they exert progressively less control as we move to outcomes in the short- and medium-term, and eventually to final outcomes. First, they need to ensure the outputs reach the intended beneficiaries and are used by those people in some worthwhile fashion or the planned outcomes will not be achieved.

Second, as more time passes, future outcomes are influenced by a range of factors outside the control of the programme or even its direct beneficiaries. Therefore, planning for the achievement of intermediate and final outcomes needs to be based on assumptions concerning these outside factors. Thus, success in terms of making a difference depends as much on understanding the likely influence of outside factors – so that reasonable assumptions can be made – as it does on the efficiency and safety with which outputs are produced.

For example, a programme clears agricultural land on the assumption that this land will be used for crops. If much of the land is not so used, the assumption is faulty and some research is warranted to determine why. Indeed, in Angola it was found that *“Demining land for cultivation in a village surviving on subsistence farming provides little improvement if the farmers, after decades of war, have no seeds and tools left. They will go hungry despite the clearance of many hectares of productive land to a cost of maybe tens of thousands of dollars.”*^{vii}

Pitfalls to overcome

While a focus on measurable results offers distinct advantages, it also introduces dangers. One is an over-concentration on a few indicators that are easily measured may introduce “perverse incentives” leading to unintended and undesirable outcomes.

A well-known example of perverse incentives comes from the field of education. The desire to enhance education quality has led many governments to measure school performance based on the pass rates on standardised tests achieved by each school’s students. As a consequence, most schools “teach to the test”, coaching their students to pass the standardised tests rather than teaching them more fundamental skills such as critical thinking.

This phenomenon is common in mine action, particularly because performance still is judged on too narrow a range of indicators for which data happens to be cheap and easy to collect. Measures such as landmines destroyed, areas cleared and the numbers of mine awareness courses and trainees allow assessments concerning operational efficiency. But there is growing evidence that this narrow focus on efficiency has created perverse incentives which are leading to less effective performance

Prime examples in which the desire for efficiency has diverted attention from effectiveness are the reports from many countries that minefields have been selected for clearance because they were easy to clear, allowing programmes and individual demining organisations to report that their costs were falling.

Also, proposals in a number of countries to introduce mobile teams to clear small hazards that are blocking vital community resources have faced resistance from “traditional” clearance organisations, who argue that these mobile teams are inefficient.^{viii} Undoubtedly, such teams are inefficient if measured against the area cleared, but there is growing evidence they can be extremely effective in enhancing the well-being of target beneficiaries.^{ix}

There is another problem common to most programmes, including mine action. Progress toward many of the most important objectives cannot be assessed for some time. For example, technical advisers (TAs) are often fielded with a dual mandate to get something up-and-running (say, EOD teams) and to develop local capacities to keep it working in the long term. Whether EOD teams are trained and deployed on schedule is quite apparent, but it takes time to determine whether local capacities have been developed to

manage those teams effectively, particularly when the technical adviser is still on hand to prevent egregious errors. So the adviser's success in establishing the EOD teams can be monitored when still on the job, but the success in developing indigenous EOD supervision and management skills will only be apparent some time after the adviser has departed.

Failure to take reasonable steps to address this type of problem implies that performance can only be measured against indicators which show measurable changes in the short-term. In our TA example, this creates incentives for an adviser to focus mainly on establishing the EOD teams even at the expense of developing indigenous capacities (which ultimately is of more importance).

Standing still is not an option

It should be clear that it is not a trivial task to demonstrate that a programme is performing well in terms of making a difference to the lives of people in mine-afflicted communities. But such an effort pays dividends in terms of bolstering support for the programme and learning to improve performance over time. And these dividends multiply over time.

One further spur to action needs mention: if mine action programmes do not come to grips with how to set performance targets and to document the results they are achieving in terms of enhancing the well-being of their target beneficiaries, they will have no credible defence when and if negative consequences of mine action come to light. In Cambodia, for example, allegations arose in April 1999 concerning falsified payroll records in the Mine Action Centre (CMAC). This led to a string of further scandals culminating in claims that the agency was clearing land for military commanders, logging firms and a former leader in the Khmer Rouge. As it had not set clear performance targets in terms of, say, the numbers of poor households that would benefit, CMAC was not collecting and reporting data about who the ultimate beneficiaries were and had little evidence to demonstrate whether most of the cleared land went to poor peasants. The perception quickly spread that abuse was the norm.^x Mine action organisations operating in Cambodia have since begun to document and report on the end-use of land they have cleared^{xi} but tremendous damage was done to CMAC's reputation and to the level of donor support to Cambodia's mine action programme.

There are twin morals to this and similar tales. If programmes do not clarify *what results* they are aiming for in terms of *what benefits* will reach *which beneficiaries* for *what purposes* – and then monitor, document, and report on their achievements of these beneficial results – then: (1) only the bad results can be reported, and (2) bad results are more likely because opportunists will take advantage of lax monitoring.

Conclusions

Mine action programmes in heavily contaminated countries will not be able to declare victory in the short- to medium-term. Therefore, they need to equip themselves adequately for the long haul. This implies something more fundamental than new tools for their kits: it implies learning how to learn. This ability is required if programmes are to assess their performance in terms of results that make a difference to people in mine-afflicted communities, which is necessary to maintain the support of donors and, increasingly, of host governments. Even more critically, the ability to assess performance in terms of meaningful results is necessary to improve such performance over time.

Accordingly:

1. Mine action programmes in heavily contaminated countries should:
 - Provide for a comprehensive needs assessment (such as a Landmine Impact Survey) to provide a coarse-grain picture of how contamination is impacting communities throughout their country;
 - Provide for more targeted surveys of heavily impacted regions and communities to provide a progressively more detailed picture.
2. Plans for all programmes and projects in heavily contaminated countries should:
 - Specify objectives at the intermediate and final outcome levels, and set performance targets for each;
 - Specify relevant performance indicators for each result or, where it is unclear what indicators should be used or where data on an indicator are lacking;
 - Incorporate a clear plan for monitoring the results achieved during implementation, and for reporting these results;
 - Provide for periodic evaluations.
3. All mine action programmes should initiate a system of post-clearance surveys to determine whether the land and facilities cleared are (i) being used (ii) in the expected manner (iii) by the intended beneficiaries and (iv) without undue delays.
4. The international mine action community should establish an action research network to promote learning about the social and economic dimensions of landmine contamination and of mine action, with a particular focus on narrowing the gap between social scientists and mine action practitioners, by:
 - Identifying common problems and emerging issues affecting major mine action programmes;
 - Recommending issues that warrant study because of their practical potential for improving the results being achieved by mine action programmes;
 - Promoting the rapid dissemination of key findings from studies, evaluations, pilot projects and other action research activities designed to generate new information about the interaction between people and landmines;

- Recommending new pilot projects to accelerate the practical application of key findings generated by research and evaluations.

Endnotes

- ⁱ See for example, Andersson *et al.*, 2001. Another observer has aptly termed debates over the number of mines as “*a persistent distraction.*” (Horwood, 2000, p. 3)
- ⁱⁱ The standard criteria for evaluating development programmes are efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, impact, and relevance. DAC/OECD, 1991, *Principles for Evaluation...*
- ⁱⁱⁱ This term also was coined in the late 1980s to describe the situation in Mozambique. Such emergencies feature intra-state conflict, a blurring of lines between combatants and civilians, violence directed largely against civilians, fluidity in terms of conflict zones and populations on the run, and a breakdown of the state and loss of legitimate authority over increasing swaths of the country. (DAC, 1999, *Guidance for Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies*, OECD, Paris)
- ^{iv} For an example from Mozambique, “*ADP was originally criticised for concentrating on mine-dense fields at the exclusion of examining socio-economic impact...early tasks were in logistically favourable areas...*” GICHD/UNDP, 2001, *Socio-Economic Approaches...* p. 152. Reports from Bosnia claimed that “*...much of the effort is focused on farmland and pastures, not built-up areas, which take longer to rid of mines...*” Aida Cerkez-Robinson, *Undermining Demining: Mine removal snarled in conflicting interests, mismanagement*, Associated Press, 28 May 2000.
- ^v Formally, *Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes from A Development-Oriented Point of View: The Bad Honnef Guidelines*, reproduced as Annex F of UNMAS, 1998.op. cit.
- ^{vi} From Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, *Reinventing Government*, Chapter 5, “Results-Oriented Government”, cited in Quinn Patton, 1999, p. 27.
- ^{vii} Quoted in Maslen (forthcoming), *Mine action after Diana: An audit of international efforts against landmines and unexploded ordnance*, Pluto Press: London.
- ^{viii} Such resistance has been reported in a number of countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Mozambique. Over-reliance on efficiency measures puts more flexible and responsive approaches at a disadvantage even though they may deliver higher – but hard to quantify – benefits.
- ^{ix} In many cases the critics have also claimed the mobile teams are ineffective, but on close examination such claims represent confusion concerning the meaning of “effectiveness”. For example, a recent critique of mine action in Bosnia (Banks, 2003, and Banks and Banks, 2003), which otherwise contains a good deal of valuable information, is marred by this confusion between efficiency and effectiveness.
- ^x Information obtained from www.ngoforum.org.kh/ – the NGO Forum on Cambodia website – accessed on 2 October 2003.
- ^{xi} See for example, HALO Trust (www.halotrust.org/asia.html).

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