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The GICHD Regional Support Centre: An Approach to Regional Information Management

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Defining Regional Information Management

Ask most people in mine action what is meant by regional information management and they will talk to you about the consolidation of country-specific mine action information at centralized regional locations. They may talk about the need for data aggregation, the reluctance of programmes to provide data and the generally slow pace of the work. In almost all cases, they will mention data analysis and comparisons between the work completed in different programmes as key elements in regional systems. Most of the examples given will focus on efforts that fell short of expectations and failed to deliver on the promise of increased efficiency and improved resource allocation so often touted as reasons for regional or global data management. In short, for many people, regional information management is a concept that has seldom managed to maintain the constant flow of unconsolidated and standardized data required to achieve its real potential over the long term.

While this definition does describe one vision of regional information management over the last two years, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) has been working to turn this concept upside-down and give field programmes the tools and assistance they need to manage information locally. Focused on consolidating and sharing knowledge and experience about information management rather than consolidating and analyzing the information collected, the GICHD is starting to give a whole new meaning to regional information management through its Regional Support Centres (RSCS).

Data Sharing

The idea of data sharing and consolidation on a regional or even global basis has been around since the early days of mine action. Advocates of data sharing point to increased efficiency, improved resource allocation and donor demand for reporting as powerful reasons for adopting various data consolidation plans. Unfortunately, sharing mine action information is not always an easy task. Whether data is to be shared at the global, regional, national or even local level is a question that often arouses spirited debate and discussion.

Along with strategic and security considerations, development and other national interests are often part of the debate. In addition, the competitive nature of fundraising makes states carefully consider the information they are willing to release. The fear that the public release of too little, too much or the "wrong" data could adversely affect funding

can be a powerful factor when making decisions about data sharing. These reasons and many others can help to explain why many of the actors involved in mine action, including government agencies as well as national and international organizations, tend to restrict or closely control the release of information concerning their activities. In those cases in which information is released, donor-specific reporting and aggregated information for the general public make up the majority of the available data.

In the specific case of the mine action programmes in Latin America, the exchange of information on the national and local level works rather well, compared with some other areas. Nevertheless, information is always carefully communicated in accordance with the national policies established for mine action information dissemination. These policies often reflect the idea that no actor is interested in seeing its data compared on an international level without being able to provide explanations or to promote its own interests. This means that in most cases, national mine action programmes tend to communicate aggregated information.

There are many factors that contribute to the relatively open and cooperative atmosphere that surrounds data-sharing questions in the region. These include the limited number of actors involved in mine action, which reduces the level of debate; widespread acceptance of the regulation and monitoring mandated by the national authorities; and a clear legal framework for these measures. In addition, the desire to be in compliance with the reporting obligations spelled out in the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention with regard to known mined areas, marking, clearance and stockpiles is seen as a matter of national pride within the region and contributes to a free flow of information.

While it might be argued that data-sharing in the Americas is far from perfect, the system of data-sharing works well enough for most purposes. Donors receive periodic progress reporting, the public is informed of hazards, and the turnover of cleared land and resource allocation is accomplished. Unfortunately, this approach does not mean that country-to-country data comparisons or regional aggregation of data is actually being accomplished. This is because mine action information is collected by each national authority according to its local needs and standards. Even the definition of the various data elements collected can vary considerably between actors in a single programme and between the various country programmes. This makes cross-country comparison of information difficult at the best of times and dangerous at the worst.

Taken together, these factors make regional data consolidation and information management difficult—if not impossible—tasks. In the spring of 2001, the GICHD decided to abandon the idea that the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) would contain a so-called "Global Module" designed to consolidate data and began to identify new approaches to regional information management. It soon became clear that despite the many differences among mine action programmes, the local differences in the definition of the data collected and the processes monitoring the general characteristics of information management remained constant worldwide. This led to the idea that regional information management might best benefit from local assistance and solutions rather than the consolidation of data.

New Approaches

Local competence and confidence in the quality of the information available could lead to a more open approach to data-sharing and a more meaningful and trusted product to share. In December of 2001, the effort to provide assistance locally and encourage local competence took root in the form of a field test of the first GICHD Regional Support Centre (RSC). Physically located within the Organization of American States-Assistance

Program for Demining in Central America (OAS-PADCA) compound in Managua, Nicaragua, the Latin American RSC was conceived as a way to provide technical assistance with the implementation of the IMSMA, give guidance and support to the information management process, and coordinate the activities of the GICHD throughout Latin America locally. Instead of moving the specialists of the different mine action programmes to and from the RSC for training and support, the regional centre's resident regional coordinator travels on a regular basis to the programmes within the region. Being constantly in contact with the mine action community within his or her area of responsibility, the regional coordinator soon becomes well informed about the situation in the different programmes and can begin to tailor the services and assistance provided to the local needs of information managers.

Rather than try to consolidate and compare data, the RSC gives regional information management an entirely new meaning. The RSC consolidates the experience and information management products created by the different mine action programmes. Instead of concentrating on the differences among programmes, the RSC capitalizes on the similarities among programmes. Faced with similar problems, each local programme was spending valuable time and resources rediscovering old solutions. The RSC concept provides a common resource on a regional basis to help ensure that new information management products developed to meet local needs are applied on a regional basis whenever possible. By disseminating new ideas, best practices, products and services, all of the mine action programmes within a region learn and profit from the achievements made by the other programmes without regard to the original source of the knowledge.

The assistance provided during the frequent visits of the GICHD regional coordinator assigned to each RSC is less focused upon achieving immediate results, but does target an understanding of local problems and the processes used to overcome them. This learning process can be time-consuming, but eventually it leads to a much better understanding of local problems and local solutions by the regional coordinator. Being part of the local team and yet remaining outside the local staff, the regional coordinator can objectively analyze the problem, approaching how a particular situation might be improved or applied to other programmes regionally or globally.

The Regional Coordinator

At the same time, national authorities can call on the regional coordinator to provide advice and technical expertise designed to help improve the programme's information management systems. Regional coordinators do not attempt to guide or control the specific details of information management in the local programmes, but offer assistance and help where and when it is needed and requested. It is important to keep in mind that each national programme has not only the right and authority but also the responsibility to manage its own policies, activities and resources.

By providing advice, technical expertise and periodic independent external reviews of the entire information management system within a programme, the regional coordinator assists the national authorities and gains the knowledge required to make traditional regional information consolidation and analysis possible. This knowledge also makes it possible to define local information management products and needs as well as focus training and workshops on meeting these needs. This approach to training helps the local staff apply training lessons almost immediately to real world problems. Unlike centralized training and workshops, focused field training carries lessons that remain with the programme long after the regional coordinator has moved on.

In addition to local training, regional coordinators organize and conduct regional

workshops. These activities can be an efficient way to disseminate knowledge among the different mine action programmes in a region once the initial field training has been accomplished. Therefore, the RSCs also respond to the need for optimizing the expenditure of funds invested in information management assistance. At the same time, the GICHD and the field benefit from the local presence of the coordinator in areas such as the dissemination of studies, field guides, and announcements and coordination of other services offered by the Centre.

The RSC Latin America

The experience gained from the RSC in Latin America demonstrated that during the early phases of such a programme, establishing and building up the information management knowledge in a programme can require frequent on-site assistance. The Latin American experience also demonstrated that the GICHD's concept of local mine action data as the property of local authorities represents an almost universally accepted norm. In keeping with this policy, the GICHD RSC does not collect, consolidate or copy the local data without the express written permission of the local authorities. Instead, regional information management as practiced by the RSC consolidates the experience gained, knowledge acquired and products created by the different programmes in the region so that all of the information managers in programmes throughout the region can benefit equally.

Since the establishment of the RSC Latin America, the GICHD has opened RSCs in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to provide support to the sub-Saharan and western African region; in Beirut, Lebanon, to provide support to the Middle East and northern and eastern African region; and in Geneva to support the southeastern Europe and central Asian region. Representing the GICHD within each region, the RSCs are not only active in information management, but also serve as a field communication and coordination platform for the GICHD. The activities of the RSCs are under permanent internal review in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the assistance being provided to the field and their future needs.

Upcoming Projects

The regional information management concept represented by the RSC programme stands for an effort to move beyond data and work with systems of information management. The Latin American RSC has already demonstrated the impact that new approaches and new ideas can have in the field. The GICHD's effort to bring new ideas to the table has not ended with the introduction of this new approach to regional information management. With the help of the RSCs, the GICHD has been actively involved in the development of two new projects bearing the potential to change information management in mine action yet again.

Both projects are based on the use of Mine Action eXtensible Mark-Up Language (maXML), an emerging international standard for data-exchange developed by the GICHD. MaXML is an effort to further integrate information management into mine action operations by overcoming the differences between the local definitions given to mine action objects. In effect, maXML is a commonly agreed dictionary of definitions to be used when exchanging information between computer-based information management systems.

The first of these projects is a field trial combining the use of IMSMA with the Swedish Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Demining Center (SWEDEC) handheld data-collection system, EOD IS-SURVEY. The test configuration provides operations with the first fully automated data-collection tool for field use. The RSC Latin America played a key

role in the introduction of the system in Chile in March of 2004. Building on this success, the knowledge gained was transferred to the RSC for southeastern Europe to support installation of the system in Albania.

MaXML will also play an important role in the development of a completely re-engineered version of IMSMA. The new system will shift its focus away from the process orientation used in the current version of the system. Instead, the new IMSMA will be based on hazards and locations. This change will expand and improve the modularity of the system and make it easier to perform data entry on a thematic as well as geographic basis. Again, this all-new version of IMSMA is being developed and deployed with the close cooperation and input of the RSCs, assuring permanent contact with system users at the local level and instant feedback from the field.

By matching services and products provided to local needs, the RSC approach to regional information management has proven to be a successful and useful tool in Latin America and other regions. In the future, the RSCs may even be able to help realize the promise of regional information management through data consolidation and analysis. The assistance being provided by the RSCs to help develop local competence and local control in information management is already bringing the possibility of regional data solutions closer to reality than ever before.

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