

The management of risk
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Mine action is, essentially, about the management of risk. It involves the gathering of information to determine the form, degree, extent and perception of the risk; it involves an assessment of possible methods to reduce the risk to a level acceptable to key stakeholders including the affected communities, national authorities and donors; it involves implementing programmes, projects and tasks which aim to reduce the risk; it involves measuring the effectiveness of mine action to determine the degree to which the risk – and the perception of risk – has been reduced; and it involves making adjustments to the programmes, projects and tasks to reflect lessons learned.

So, if the above statement is true, why do we shy away from accepting the concept of risk management in mine action? Have we been programmed to accept the unrealistic goal of a “mine free world” advocated by the Mine Ban Treaty fundamentalists? Or is it because we now expect decision makers to protect us from all forms of risk, be they natural hazards, terrorist attacks, carcinogenic chemicals or explosive remnants of war? We aspire to live in a safer and more benign world, we have increased expectations of safety, and a growing belief that we can control our fate through technology and regulations. For some, the very idea of mine action which accepts any degree of residual risk to individuals and communities is reprehensible. The requirement for total clearance leading to a mine-free world has been the mantra of mine action planners and practice for the past decade. Indeed, the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of International Mine Action Standards has encouraged such thinking.

But the tide of opinion is turning. There is a growing acceptance that a mine-free world will never be possible and there are increasing demands from donors to find smarter ways of targeting resources at the threat from mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), and of reducing the humanitarian impact.

The vision of a “mine-free world” represented the views of those who drafted and promoted the Mine Ban Treaty in 1996/97. However, some at that time were more cautious and suggested such a vision was unachievable, and at best was disingenuous. Indeed, in its *Mine Action and Effective Coordination* policy of 1998 the United Nations defined mine action as “... activities which aim to reduce the social, economic and environmental impact of landmines and UXO.’ The use of the verb “to reduce” - rather than “to remove” – was deliberate and significant. Indeed this concept of reducing risk has been carried forward into the recently published *United Nations Inter-Agency Mine Action Strategy: 2006 – 2010*.

The risk from landmines and UXO is both objective and perceived. Objective risk - in terms of the probability and degree of harm - can, in theory, be calculated through general assessments and technical surveys; but the perception of risk is much more difficult to define and measure. Yet it is the perception of risk which determines the way in which dangers are seen and assessed, and thus the impact on people, communities and the state. The key to risk management in mine action is to understand and to influence people’s perceptions of the risk from landmines and UXO.

The challenge we face in mine action is to understand how best to use the concept of “risk” in a meaningful way to assist mine action managers prioritise projects, determine levels of “acceptable” risk, and design approaches and Standard Operating Procedures

which will release land where the residual risk is deemed acceptable and tolerable to local communities. However, the terms “acceptable” and “tolerable” are difficult to define. They imply human judgement of a situation – and judgement may be tentative, transient and fallible. Who, for example, will decide what is “acceptable” risk in a mine-affected country: the national mine action authorities, the affected communities, technical advisors or the donors? Will the perception of “acceptable” risk change over time for a country as it advances from an immediate post-conflict setting to peace and stability?

The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining addressed the issue of risk in 2004/05 in its study of *Manual Mine Clearance (Chapter 4: Risk Assessment and Risk Management of Mined Areas)*, and is considering risk in greater detail in its current work on area reduction. New methods of applying risk are being used in Cambodia, and a risk mitigation model is being developed by the GICHD for Lao PDR. Cranfield University has been working with Shell International in northern Libya to develop tools to assess more thoroughly the risks to the Company’s people, equipment and sub-contractors involved in seismic operations in the Gulf of Sirte area. And more recently the university has been contracted by the Argentine and British Governments to assess the feasibility of demining the Falkland Islands: this work has involved evaluating the risk to the local environment as well as to people and equipment in the Islands.

Understanding the risk of major and long lasting damage to the environment from the inappropriate use of mechanical systems in demining is a relatively new science. As the demand increases to make greater use of mechanical equipment to prepare and clear contaminated land, for area reduction, and to conduct effective and rapid post-clearance quality control then we need a much better understanding of risk management in mine action. Armed with a better understanding of risk we will be able dramatically to improve the efficiency of the sector by more rapidly making land available for productive use.