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Capacity Building: Lessons Learned

Norwegian People's Aid believes that to deliver results in mine action programs, it must empower and support national governments to take ownership of the contamination problem. Successful capacity-building efforts require support and buy-in from national authorities and mutual respect between parties involved.

by Vanessa Finson [Norwegian People's Aid]

Since 1992, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) has implemented mine action programs in more than 40 states and territories globally. Over the last decade, NPA has increasingly been involved in capacity-building efforts of national authorities and implements 15 formalized capacity-building projects in addition to large-scale operational (survey and clearance) efforts worldwide.

Despite significant progress in the wider mine action sector, including a substantial reduction in landmine victims and millions of square meters of land released for safe use, full implementation of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBBC) obligations, in particular Article 5, remains a challenge for most States Parties.¹

NPA believes the ultimate responsibility for mine action lies with national governments, and that only by empowering and supporting national governments to take ownership of their contamination can the problem be effectively and efficiently resolved. National ownership, in turn, requires the national authority's buy-in and financial support, a strong focus on efficient land release in operations, and sufficient and relevant information management and reporting structures. Equally and just as important, it requires useful and relevant capacity building of national authorities' management and staff.

The Importance of Agreement

The mine action industry's tradition of establishing, funding and supporting national mine action centers (NMAC) has proven to be of questionable value and in many cases counterproductive to the end result. In NPA's experience, the most important question to ask when looking at supporting national mine action structures is the anticipated size of the problem, most relevantly measured as square meters of suspected



Female NPA deminer in South Sudan.
Photo courtesy of Werner Anderson.



NPA has implemented mine action programs in over 40 countries, such as South Sudan.
Photo courtesy of CISR.

or confirmed contamination. When contamination is limited, an NMAC is unnecessary and long-term capacity-building programs have proven neither needed nor desirable, which has been NPA's experience from several countries. For example, in Guinea-Bissau and Zambia, two countries with only limited contamination, focused efforts and limited capacity-building support on selected subjects such as information management was key to success and eventual declaration of compliance with convention obligations.

In Malawi, NPA provided very limited implementation and database management support to national authorities through capacity-building efforts. Database management is critical to the good management and understanding of mine action, and it proved crucial to the ultimately successful completion of Malawi's Article 5 obligations. Moreover, in the case of Malawi, NPA introduced and operationalized the concept of combined non-technical and technical survey (though limited), which quickly populated the database and was vital to the national authorities' understanding of Malawi's contamination.

Different Needs for Different Countries

NPA believes that scaling capacity-building activities according to size of the problem is the only effective and efficient way to support a country in dealing with its mine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination. Assessment and analysis of the country's mine action needs should occur before capacity building begins. When a need is defined, the capacity-building plan is specially tailored to the needs of the country. No "blueprint" for national capacity building exists; each plan should be designed to fit a country's specific needs.

NPA's approach to capacity building has varied from country to country and changed over time. NPA has had

many successes but has also identified opportunities for improvement. Some efforts have been less successful, mainly because the program setup was not tailored to the country's actual needs. For instance, several actors, including NPA and the U.N., have attempted to build capacity for years in South Sudan. Even though the national mine action authorities undoubtedly have improved capacities, there is still a long way to go before authorities have an overview of contamination, and can plan and prioritize mine action effectively. Many reasons account for this, but the baseline capacity surely plays a role. Also important is the fact that South Sudan, as the world's newest country, needs skilled and trained individuals at all government levels, and trained people are hard to keep when new job opportunities arise. Perhaps most importantly—and this is something the mine action community faces in several countries and needs to take seriously—is the fact that among the many priorities that South Sudan has, mine action may not be at the top of the list. Moreover, the importance put on mine action by national authorities themselves affects the ability to deliver capacity building.

In Vietnam, NPA was asked to assist in setting up and training staff in the use of a database. As one of the most contaminated countries in the world, the Vietnam government clears huge amounts of land every year without international



NPA worked with partners to build capacity in South Sudan.
Photo courtesy of CISR.



NPA deminers in Zimbabwe.
Photo courtesy of Werner Anderson.

assistance. In this case Vietnam wanted the database but ultimately did not want to use it as the international actors expected. As a result, the capacity-building project was seen as a failure. More recently, Vietnam is again asking the international community for assistance with its database, and the project from 2011 could constructively be seen as a warm-up exercise rather than a failure.

Although NPA bases its approach on respectful partnership and close collaboration with national authorities, human and financial resources must be spent on efforts of highest priority or those that bring added value. In Senegal for example, NPA chose to cease its operational and capacity-building efforts due to the perceived lack of political will, or real national interest in dealing with the country's landmine/ERW contamination. This focus on a respectful partnership approach—undoubtedly influenced by NPA's philosophy and background as a larger developmental organization—requires a given country to ultimately set the parameters for NPA's work there.

Specific Experience Aids Training

Depending on the country context, national authorities are responsible for all or some of the mine action pillars.² NPA's strengths as a capacity-building actor come from its experience as an operator, and this experience has naturally been brought into its capacity-building efforts. These efforts generally focus on operations, planning, quality management and information management rather than the full myriad of areas that may require support.

Increasingly, this focus on national responsibility is growing with actors and stakeholders, including donors. In the recent U.K. Department for International Development tender, the inclusion of the Cluster Munition Remnants Survey (normally an activity that would be considered in an operational tender) in the capacity-building tender validates that a greater understanding of the problem, coupled with the ability to analyze the information collected, is invaluable as a stand-alone

capacity-building effort and a prerequisite to any capacity-building efforts that potentially follow.

Large capacity-building projects developed as blueprints instead of reflecting evidence-based needs (with expensive and overarching coordination) have often proved unsuccessful in design and implementation. Project planning should include a proper needs assessment. Unfortunately, in many cases, seemingly unnecessary efforts are undertaken, or focus is placed on capacities that require additional prerequisite skills. A proper appraisal of existing skills within a national authority, along with the corresponding required abilities, is indispensable for any solid planning and effective capacity building to occur.

Collaboration and Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

NPA's experience has shown that capacity-building efforts are ideally done in collaboration with other stakeholders, ensuring that all areas that require support receive the attention and specialized training needed. Several examples indicate where one actor was chosen to provide all the training and follow-up needed for establishing and maintaining an NMAC; for example in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the U.N. worked alone in trying to set up and build capacity of the national authorities. This, in NPA's experience, has often failed, as conflict of interests may arise and the skill level required to fulfill all needs of an NMAC are often lacking in any one actor. Moreover, when more actors are involved, additional value can be found in the checks-and-balances system this interaction provides. If an actor is the only operator in a country, the actor does not have the voice needed to question the country's Article 5 completion declaration.



NPA offices in South Sudan.
Photo courtesy of CISR.

South Sudan and DRC are only two examples; many more can be found in Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon and Libya.

Willingness to review and assess the objectives, plans and activities, i.e., the basics of a monitoring and evaluation system, is also critical to any project's success. A capacity-building plan must be included as part of the implementation of the national mine action strategy, and this plan should be dynamic and changeable to adapt to the successes, or lack thereof, during implementation. The only means of measuring and evaluating the effect of the capacity-building efforts is at the individual and organizational performance level. Evaluation of efforts has, in NPA's experience, often been absent in the planning and development of capacity-building efforts.

Lastly but critically, NPA has found that national authorities' involvement has often been lacking, i.e., efforts were designed, activities planned and resources secured for activities that were not discussed with and agreed upon by national authorities. The foundation for long-lasting capacity building can only come from inclusion and leadership from those requesting support, along with the determined political will of national authorities to deliver on assessed problems. ©

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News Brief

Tracense Develops New Explosive Detector

Scientists at Tracense, a technology company in Tel Aviv, Israel, created a new nanotechnology explosive detector. Tracense CEO Richard Osiroff says the apparatus can detect even the smallest explosive material.¹ According to the *Counter IED Report*, the new device has an electronic chip that detects airborne traces of explosives at concentrations as low as several molecules per quadrillion.²

A team of researchers, directed by Professor Fernando Patolsky of the chemistry department at Tel Aviv University and its Center for Nanoscience and Nanotechnology, helped develop the nanosensing technology.³ Capable of detecting specific smells, the detector is built with a system of receptors that detect explosive chemicals by observing how molecules bind to each receptor.¹

With its high level of accuracy and sensitivity, this laptop-size portable detector can instantly pick up chemical traces of explosives in devices that stronger chemicals would otherwise hide.³ Patolsky says his team is working on making the technology the size of a mobile phone.⁴ Current methods of detection can be bulky, tedious to prepare and may only detect a few types of explosives.⁵

Since its creation, the detector found TNT, cyclonite and octogen, as well as peroxide-based explosives such as acetone peroxide and hexamethylene triperoxide diamine, illustrating its ability to detect military and commercial explosives as well as homemade devices.²

Tracense is working to develop more sensors to meet growing needs of public safety, security and threat detection. ©

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~ Julie Hirschhorn, CISR staff