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Introducing Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment

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Introducing Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment

This article describes the Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment and how it seeks to contextualize ERW-related risks at community, mine-action-operator, national-authority and donor levels in order to prioritize community aid so funds are used effectively and communities receive the assistance they need.

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The global mine-action community has traditionally focused on clearing and releasing areas that are believed to pose a threat to populations. While processes for prioritization, survey and tasking have improved significantly over recent years, a most notable discrepancy that is seldom discussed is where the broader humanitarian needs of the affected communities sit in relation to the local mine and unexploded ordnance threat.

It is therefore important to look at the big picture. The *Landmine Monitor* tells us that in 2008, there were 5,197 recorded victims—including at least 1,266 fatalities—due to explosive remnants of war and victim-activated improvised explosive devices.[1] A quick look at global statistics tells us that in the same year, road accidents alone accounted for 2,500 deaths in the United Kingdom, 5,000 deaths in Turkey and a staggering 115,000 deaths in India.[2] There are 200,000–270,000 non-conflict-related firearm deaths each year[3]; snake bites are estimated to kill more than 20,000 each year[4]; and around 150 people are killed each year by falling coconuts.[5]

The obvious question that arises from this crude comparison of victim numbers is: Why does mine action not actively seek to contextualize itself alongside other prevalent risks?

In countries affected by landmines and UXO, competing needs are inevitable. Often, post-conflict communities not only face continual mine threats, but also are overwhelmed by challenges that may include poverty, disease, lack of education, inadequate access to food and water, and issues relating to human security. What, therefore, are their real priorities, and how can we as a mine-action community ensure that beneficiaries are consistently getting the most needed support from the international community?

Some humanitarian mine-action nongovernmental organizations, such as Norwegian People's Aid, MAG (Mines Advisory Group) and Danish Demining Group, have made efforts to move into this area by developing impact-monitoring tools. These tools have broadly sought to look at how HMA assists communities where activities are implemented beyond just square meters cleared and numbers and types of landmines and/or UXO destroyed to develop a broader understanding of what HMA activities really achieve. In this sense, efforts **are** being made to look at the relevance of HMA to the local context, but as far as the authors are aware, no attempt has been made to directly assess the impact of landmine- and UXO-related risks alongside other common community challenges.

In a study undertaken at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining in 2007,[6] a researcher spent a month living in and studying two Cambodian communities and asked residents to describe the degree to which mines affected their communities. Both communities assessed UXO as among the top three threats to their community (although this may have been influenced to some degree by the fact that the researcher was housed with local demining teams), but after rescaling the factors based on interviews and analysis of the prevailing situation, the prioritized list was found to be: lack of food, lack of water, diseases, indebtedness, mine accidents, lack of land/ghosts/thieves.[7]

While this outcome is to a certain degree subjective, it raises the question of why a community is seeking mine clearance in that particular location. The same question can be posted at a more strategic level.

A mine-clearance team waits until the locals have harvested rice before they begin clearance operations. Is the wait worth the risk to the population?
PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM LARDNER

Both donors and analysts are beginning to ask whether, for instance, the investment of US$4.8 million[8] in mine-action-related activities in Mozambique in 2008 was justified against the nine casualties recorded and 1,200 mines and UXO destroyed. This in a country where more than a thousand people were killed due to road traffic accidents[9]; there were 6.4 million malaria cases and 3,400 malaria related fatalities,[10] and an estimated 81,000 deaths due to AIDS[11] in the same year.

Why Are We in This Situation?

National mine-action programs' plans are often at least in part based upon survey work, which mainly provides ERW information to the mine-action community and is more often than not also used to support funding requests and to build credibility with host governments. In this sense, the intended audience and scope is frequently very limited.

Mine-action survey work often focuses on technical and clearance-related criteria and, even when based on data collection targeting specific social and economic indicators, is still viewed through the prism of mine action. As such, the gathering and interpretation of ERW-related data tends to be implemented in a partial vacuum and are not designed to appropriately place ERW-related problems within the context of the broader humanitarian needs of the community.

A Way to Contextualize Risks

Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment is a new methodology specifically designed to appropriately contextualize ERW-related risks at community, mine-action-operator, national-authority and donor levels. CCNA also allows data gathering and analysis to be undertaken with the benefit of the broader perspectives of the humanitarian aid, development and reconstruction communities.

CCNA is a flexible, community-based data-gathering, collation and interpretation concept that is closely linked to established analytical processes such as Knowledge, Attitude and Practice studies.[12]

What Does CCNA Aim to Do and How?

CCNA cross-references existing data (using Landmine Impact Survey, IMSMA and other relevant sources that describe a broad range of humanitarian, development and reconstruction needs[13]) against updated information gathered on a task-specific basis in order to accurately determine humanitarian priorities on a community-by-community basis. Its primary aim is to rank the assistance needed as defined by the communities themselves and to accurately reflect their tolerance to a wide range of risks. This assessment promotes the more effective provision of direct assistance including mine action through:

- Allocating relevant services to the most needy communities early on
- Using donor funds more effectively and efficiently
- Collaborating, planning and implementing projects among sectors
- Enhancing host-government capacity to guide and manage direct assistance
- Developing a more holistic understanding of the factors that underpin humanitarian security threats and human-security issues
- Developing a truly representative common operating picture

How Could CCNA Help?

CCNA provides spatial and statistically significant supporting data to allow all levels of the mine-action, humanitarian relief and donor communities to prioritize tasks and allocate resources not only on the basis of mine-action-related indicators, but also through an appropriate consideration of a wide range of assistance needs and priorities identified during the CCNA. From an ERW perspective, CCNA can also assist with the identification of truly needy communities and thus can promote early prioritization of mine-action services in the community.

CCNA would also provide data collection for humanitarian-driven operations, including baseline and comparative spatial/statistical data on demographics, social, economic and ethno-religious indicators that may be used to produce long-term forecasts, as well as other related analyses to organizations working in complex environments. This kind of integrated approach to data collection and analysis is not only becoming increasingly relevant in terms of facilitating successful operations, but it is emerging as the norm for organizations, donors and companies working within the constraints of clearly defined targets and objectives.

The same data that is prioritized for collection within mine action can also support cross-sectoral operations on the ground by identifying critical weaknesses in the social and economic structures of surrounding communities. Once this information has been identified by CCNA, humanitarian organizations and commercial companies will be able to benefit from pre-identified targets that can define the links between sustainable development and corporate social responsibility.

Whom Can CCNA Help?

CCNA currently remains at the concept stage, and the following list is intended to provide an indication of the types of benefits that could result from its use, across various levels within the HMA sector:

- **Local communities** will be empowered through the ability to effectively influence the allocation of resources based on their own priorities and tolerance of risk.
- **Mine-action operators** will have access to a tool that enables them to significantly refine task prioritization by widening the scope of relevant assistance criteria.
- **Mine-action authorities and the United Nations** will be able to more accurately define the national ERW problem and allocate resources accordingly.
- **Commercial actors** will be able to capture and identify the critical indicators needed to mitigate potential threats and engage with surrounding communities to develop and fulfill corporate social-responsibility activities.
- **Donors** will be able to assess national mine-action needs on an equitable basis alongside other humanitarian priorities, and will thus be able to formulate policy and allocate funds more efficiently.

Is CCNA Just Another Survey?

CCNA is designed to be entirely complementary to, and a further development of, processes such as a LIS or an equivalent General Survey. As such, it draws heavily upon existing data collected by relevant stakeholders and therefore does not replicate, but actively builds upon, previous efforts by considering the information gathered in a holistic—rather than sector-segregated—fashion. CCNA therefore only requires limited additional resources in order to achieve results that can ultimately lead to enhanced effectiveness and a significant savings in time and cost.

Will CCNA Assist with Processes Such as Land Release?

Once developed into a fully field-ready tool, CCNA has the potential to provide enhanced community-level information that can be used to support key decision-making in processes such as Land Release and Area Reduction/Avoidance. This capability concerns landmine- and UXO-affected areas recorded in IMSMA or a national database. If the CCNA process determines that ERW is a low-ranking local priority against other needs, national authorities can purge databases of SHAs that have lost relevance to communities as conditions have changed since the original survey.

In short, CCNA can potentially enable communities to determine their own acceptable level of risk in relation to the local ERW problem (as opposed to the level of risk traditionally "imposed by mine-action norms) and provide an objective means by which national MACs can cancel SHAs that have lost relevance.

In this sense, CCNA has the potential to be a very powerful Land Release tool that provides important objective data to support the "impact freeing" of entire communities beyond just parts of individual SHAs as standard mine-action Area Reduction implies. The appropriate adoption of CCNA within a national mine-action program could contribute to significantly shortening the time required by ERW-affected nations to reach Ottawa compliance status, while at the same time effectively incorporating and appropriately reflecting local ERW-risk tolerance levels and needs.

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Tim Lardner co-established Cranfield Mine Action, an initiative designed to deliver high-quality management training to United Nations national mine-action staff. Afterward, he spent five years at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, first looking at manual mine clearance and later initiating and developing the work in risk management and land release. Lardner now runs Lardner Associates, which provides guidance and support to all sectors of the mine-action community.

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