Chapter 4

Setting priorities

This chapter outlines some of the main factors that underlie the establishment of priorities and which should be reflected in the decision-making criteria used by the mine action community.

The basic approach

Setting priorities is a rational process that entails some reckoning of the costs and expected benefits of alternative actions to target available resources for maximum benefit. When costs and benefits can be quantified, those tasks offering the best ratio of benefits to costs are given priority;[1] in other cases, tasks that meet a set of criteria are undertaken.

Calculating costs is reasonably clear-cut, but estimating expected benefits is often fraught with complications. As a result, priority setting is not necessarily a rigorous, quantitative exercise, although it should be systematic in judging each alternative against the same criteria. Formal cost-benefit analysis can identify the solutions in reasonably straightforward cases (see Chapter 3 above), and can provide at least partial answers in most other situations. But human judgement is required to weigh the relative values of different benefits, estimate the likelihood that these benefits will be achieved and sustained, and decide among alternative actions. Because of this irreplaceable human factor, the decision-making process itself influences the quality of the choices made and the degree these are acceptable to those with a stake in the decision (see Box 7).

[1] In theory, the benefit-cost ratio could serve as a single criterion for ranking priorities. In practice, other criteria are used to ensure both technical and institutional feasibility and to screen out actions that would cause serious damage to the environment, or an ethnic group, etc.

Box 7: The Decision-Making Process

The decision-making process itself influences the choices made. Factors include:

Who makes the decision? The decision to undertake specific mine action activities can be made by different development actors -- each with distinct motivations -- including:

- Mine action managers,
- Managers of internationally-supported programmes/projects (reconstruction, peace-building, resettlement, development) by commissioning or hiring mine action personnel;
- Governmental, including local, authorities; or,
- Private individuals or firms.

Who has input into the decision? Decisions will be more informed if "stakeholders" (i.e., those with an interest in the decision, including funders, national authorities, and affected communities) are allowed to participate. But participation entails costs, and there is a point at which the extra costs exceed the benefits.

To whom is the decision-maker accountable? All decision-makers should give a periodic accounting of what has been achieved with the resources entrusted to him or her. Is an accounting given only to the funding agency, or also to the national mine centre? Provincial and local authorities? The ultimate beneficiaries in mine-affected communities? More accountability is better, but reporting costs time and money and mechanisms are needed to resolve conflicts

What alternatives are available for consideration? The alternatives available to any decision-maker are "bounded" by constraints imposed by authority (resources, geographic responsibility, functional responsibility), data, and, roughly, the capacity to analyse the data to compare among alternatives. The analytic capacity is in turn determined by knowledge (training and experience), time available and tools available Systematic data collection reduces data constraints, training can compensate for lack of experience, and the provision of specialised staff and computer support can allow more analysis within the same period of time.

What decision-making rules are used? Decision-makers can try to optimise (i.e., rank every alternative then work from top to bottom as resources permit) or to seek simply satisfactory results (i.e., accept an alternative if it meets certain criteria or rules of thumb). Optimisation requires far more data and processing, and increases the risk that the decision model will be mis-specified (i.e., does not reflect reality well), leading to systematically incorrect decisions

Are alternatives considered simultaneously, or sequentially? Ideally, alternatives should be assessed and ranked by priority using the same data at the same time. This may be impossible due to limitations in data (e.g., before a national survey has been completed) or computational capacity. Therefore, alternatives are considered sequentially, either individually or in manageable groups In such cases, some sort of "satisfying" decision rules must be applied.

Are decisions made in stages? A two-stage decision-making process would assign preliminary rankings to alternative activities, and confirm specific commitments after a further review, either after more information was collected (e.g., a technical survey) or by another person or committee (which would also bring additional information to bear).

For example, the Landmine Impact Survey (see Chapter 2 *Impact of Mine Contamination*) is a decision-making process that seeks **optimal** rankings by **simultaneously** calculating mine impact scores for all communities In a typical case, decisions are made by mine action programme managers, generally in conjunction with government authorities. Others, including the affected communities, generally provide data but do not otherwise have input into the decision Decision-makers typically are accountable to national authorities and to an international accreditation centre, but not to local authorities or the intended beneficiaries. The limited ability of surveyors to collect standardised data from all communities on items such as the quality or quantity of land contaminated **restricts alternatives** to a "weak metric" with significant weighting on recent accidents. While not perfect, the limitations inherent in Landmine Impact Surveys are not fatal because a survey forms part of a **two-stage decision-making** process (i.e., high mine impact scores lead to rapid deployment of technical survey teams before a final decision on what mine action is required).

Contextual factors

The major contextual factors – the social and economic features of the country and its communities; the undertakings of other development actors; progress or regress along the conflict-peace continuum – can be thought of as important facets of the "real world" Changes in these factors clearly will influence mine action priorities because, as the real world changes in important ways, so do the opportunities and constraints facing those in mine-affected communities and the costs of addressing constraints and capitalising on opportunities. Therefore, benefit-cost ratios will change, sometimes dramatically. Most obviously, in areas still affected by conflict, survival dominates the concerns of civilians. As conflict abates, refugees return, and "normal" life resumes, people's priorities shift increasingly from survival to creating independent livelihoods and achieving prosperity. Things that are unimportant while conflict prevails – such as safe pasturage after all livestock has been stolen by warring factions – loom increasingly large.

Taking risk reduction as a further example, the dangers posed by mine contamination in a community will depend in part on the social and economic features of that community. These dangers will:

- Increase with the extent of economic specialisation, which stimulates trade and the movement of people;
- Be lower if people have access to alternative resources (e.g., uncontaminated land);
- Increase with the extent of absolute poverty, as the poor often are forced to engage in risky behaviour;
- Be different for men and women because of the different gender roles in society.

Because of differences in these and other social and economic factors, two communities confronted with the same physical pattern of mine and UXO contamination will, in fact, face different risk patterns. Mine action priorities may well be different in the two communities. Further, the risks posed to a community can be magnified by renewed conflict, which will:

- Increase movement as people seek refuge;
- Reduce access to alternative resources;
- Increase poverty; and,
- Destroy the social fabric (e.g , by causing men to flee to avoid conscription), changing the gender pattern of risks.

Similarly, the activities of other development actors in and around a community can dramatically enlarge the size of potential benefits from certain kinds of mine action and increase the likelihood that this potential will be realised. This too should alter priorities.

Accumulating information

As the social and economic features of the real world change, so do the patterns of costs and potential benefits and, hence, priorities. But there is another important source of change over the course of a mine action programme that affects how we set priorities: we acquire more information. In fact, the real world is so complicated we can never understand it fully. Our knowledge of a country and its people is limited by the amount of data we have and our ability to make sense of this data. Even if conditions in the real world are relatively stable, our understanding of it will change as we acquire

more and different types of data, and learn how to convert this into useful information.[2] As our understanding changes, so will our priorities.

To illustrate, a new mine action programme typically concentrates on risk reduction, ostensibly for three reasons. First, donors and mine action personnel are motivated by the desire to reduce human suffering. The removal or marking of landmines posing clear and present dangers, the delivery of mine awareness training, and efforts to assist victims are concrete steps to promote this worthy goal on which all can agree. Second, there are reasons to assume that, on average, the landmines posing the greatest risks to people also impose significant constraints to socio-economic development. Given the same level of contamination, more accidents will occur on land used more intensively, and land used more intensively is generally more valuable. Therefore, the location of accidents provides a reasonably good indicator of socio-economic potential, and removing landmines in these locations will deliver significant social and economic benefits in addition to risk reduction.[3] Third, new mine action programmes typically do not have enough information to assess a wide range of socio-economic factors. Therefore, in the early days of a mine action programme, "compassion rules" when setting priorities.

This straightforward approach to setting priorities evolves over time even in countries where the broad contextual factors – socio-economic features, conflict, development activities – are relatively stable. As more and better information is obtained, increased emphasis can be given to economic potential and other factors that might improve people's livelihoods.[4]

Supply versus demand considerations

In mine action as in other humanitarian and development programmes, donors naturally like to raise their nation's flag by contributing goods made in their country, often via "national champion" NGOs and firms. Similarly, most organisations and people like to do what they are good at doing. This often leads to "supply-led development" in which priorities are set principally on the basis of the type of resources on offer and the skills and aptitudes of those in charge of the programmes. At its worst, this can result in the delivery of unsuitable equipment via tied-aid schemes, and the mobilisation of "experts" with preconceived notions of what needs be done. Even when such problems are avoided, there remains the danger that tasks will be undertaken to make efficient use of a programme's assets rather than to address the priorities of mine-affected communities.

In mine action and other development programmes, objectives are more likely to be achieved and sustained if the intended beneficiaries feel the objectives reflect their own priorities. Demand-led approaches emphasise local "ownership" and focus on effectiveness – doing the right job – before efficiency. Efficiency remains, of course, a worthy goal, but the efficient completion of a worthless task is a waste of resources.

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[2] Information is useful and usable data – the right data delivered in the proper format to the right person at the right time.

[3] This is the logic underlying the use of the concept of "essential livelihood space" in Kosovo.

[4] This *does not* imply that priorities become less compassionate. For example, in most mine-contaminated countries, many more people die from malnutrition and preventable diseases than from landmines. Mine action to promote food security and the delivery of primary health services will often score higher in a "compassion calculus" than targeting sites of recent accidents.

Analysis versus responsiveness

Mine action planners and managers should strive for efficiency but must first and foremost be concerned with effectiveness – the impact of their programme in the real world. But impact is a complex, multi-dimensional concept – the "effect (of a programme) on its surroundings in terms of technical, economic, socio-cultural, institutional and environmental factors" [5] How can planners and managers get a better understanding of the likely impacts of their decisions? Two broad strategies can be employed. The first is ***analytic***; roughly, using more data and more processing. The second is ***responsive***; adopting the priorities identified by government officials, community representatives, and other development actors. Both approaches have merit and should be seen as complements rather than alternatives.

The advantage of responsive approaches is that they tap into the information and expertise of others, who often are far more knowledgeable than mine action personnel on problems and opportunities at the community, district, sectoral, and national levels Responding to the priorities identified by local people also increases their sense of ownership, while responding to those of other humanitarian and development organisations increases goodwill and the likelihood that their co-operation will be forthcoming in the future.

The danger with responsive approaches is that government, community, or aid agency officials may, through ignorance or wilfulness, represent their private or institutional interests over those of the people in mine affected-communities. Mine action organisations cannot afford to abandon analytic approaches entirely because they must be in a position to determine whether the priorities identified by others are reasonable and are likely to represent public rather than private interests.[6]

Responding to community needs: Direct participation or representation?

Information concerning priorities can and should be obtained from mine-affected communities. Mine action organisations can garner this information in a number of ways. They can:

- Conduct participatory consultations directly with affected communities;
- Work with international NGOs doing community development work using participatory approaches;
- Work with local NGOs doing community development work using participatory approaches;
- Ask local, district, and provincial officials who themselves obtain "bottom-up" information from the communities they represent.

The first three are participatory approaches, while the last takes advantage of official representatives. The cost of obtaining this information falls sharply as one goes down the list of options. More importantly, the sustainability of the "information system" increases sharply as one goes down the list. Finally, the likelihood that "bottom-up" information can be combined with "top-down" and "horizontal" information about

[5] From the terminology agreed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Expert Group on Aid Evaluation, quoted in Hallam (1998:18).
[6] This is one of the functions fulfilled by monitoring, which is covered in the next chapter

other relevant plans and developments (e.g., new roads, government health, education, and extension services, sectoral and macro-economic policies, etc.) increases as one works down the list.

There are indeed countries with serious political shortcomings in which official or traditional authorities are unlikely to represent the interests of a community.[7] In such cases, a mine action organisation should experiment with participatory approaches, either directly or – usually better – in conjunction with a development NGO. However, where State authorities are, broadly, concerned with the developmental needs of the communities they represent, it normally is preferable to work with those authorities. If the political system also has mechanisms that effectively channel "bottom-up" community priorities to district and provincial headquarters, mine action operators could simply look to district and provincial officials to establish their priorities. In many poor countries however, provincial and district governments may be well motivated but have no budgetary and human resources to remain in touch with some communities and so lack the detailed knowledge necessary for setting the correct priorities. In such cases, a mine action organisation might support government to undertake its own participatory appraisals of community needs, and so develop skills to continue such work after the demining organisation ceases to operate in that area.[8] This will support the role of the State, be less costly, and carry the added benefit that these same skills can also be applied outside the mine action field.[9]

Responding to national government priorities

The nation State is far and away the most potent force for development of a country. Rapid and widespread development can only occur when the State – through policies, the maintenance of public security and the rule of law, and its mobilisation of resources for investment and public services – is reasonably effective. Where there is an effective developmental State, donor countries, international agencies and NGOs can help accelerate development by providing complementary assistance, but they cannot achieve widespread development in the absence of such a State. The policy and investment choices of a developmental State will be the most important factor in determining which sectors and regions of a country will grow in a dynamic fashion. Normally, these sectors and regions will offer greater pay-offs, in terms of socio-economic development, from mine action. Where there is a developmental State, it is important for the mine action community to understand and respond to its national development priorities.

Clearly the mine action community cannot remain passive and await direction from senior government officials, even in heavily contaminated countries. Landmines were not even mentioned in government-written submissions and verbal presentations to the latest Consultative Group[10] meeting for Mozambique. Similarly, the problems of

[7] In complex emergencies stemming from "failed states" (e.g., Sierra Leone, Somalia) there is no effective government apparatus. In other cases such as Afghanistan, the *de facto* authorities are not recognised by the international community.

[8] Similar reasoning applies where cultural norms exclude certain groups (e.g. women, pastoralists etc.) from access to officials.

[9] The Government of Mozambique has signalled its willingness to work with NGOs in this manner. "Their close links give NGOs and religious confessions a comparative advantage in the conception and implementation of specific programmes to fight poverty. They can act as intermediaries between the Government and communities." (Government of Mozambique, 1999:52)

[10] These are the principal aid and policy co-ordination meetings between the government and the donor community.

UXO contamination have received barely a mention in the main Lao PDR economic and development documents. Heads of national mine action centres often have difficulty getting sustained attention from senior government decision-makers. Mine action personnel should assume the onus is on them to seek information on government policies and programmes that is relevant for setting mine action priorities.

Responding to priorities set by other development actors

The same rule applies for obtaining relevant information from other key development actors, such as international organisations (World Bank, the regional development banks, United Nations agencies), bilateral donors, and development NGOs. One can hope these organisations will keep the mine action community apprised of plans and programmes that could influence mine action priorities, but it is unsafe to assume this will happen. Experience in Kosovo and most mine-contaminated countries suggests that few development agencies formulate their plans with sufficient spatial information to assist mine action personnel in setting priorities. Even if these agencies have the data in the necessary format, time pressures and inter-agency rivalries mean this is not often provided to mine action managers.

The solution to this problem is not to ignore it and set mine action priorities without considering other rehabilitation and development projects at the community, regional, or sectoral levels. Neither is the answer for mine action organisations to build sufficient expertise in the various social science and development disciplines so they can come to their own conclusions about what sectoral and area development priorities should be. Instead, the mine action community in a country needs to reach out to key government departments and other development actors. Mine action programmes need to have sufficient expertise to know what organisations have the information needed for establishing priorities, and invest sufficient time to meet representatives from those organisations to obtain that information. Mine action organisations also need to adapt their own planning calendars and procedures to those used by other key development actors, so it is easy for other organisations to provide the necessary input. Finally, mine action personnel must be willing to invest time in helping other organisations plan their work programmes and show how mine action can help these organisations achieve their objectives. These are "outreach"', "networking", and "information brokering" functions To discharge these effectively, a core socio-economic research capacity is required, but large research units are probably unwarranted. The IMADS initiative being piloted in Mozambique (see Box 8) is an example of what might be both useful and affordable.

Concluding remarks

There is no single set of criteria that all mine action programmes should use in deciding priorities...
Instead, the appropriate criteria will differ for labour surplus countries relative to land-abundant ones, or for largely subsistence economies relative to those where most people specialise in producing a small range of goods and obtain their other requirements from the market Some mine-contaminated countries remain embroiled in conflict while others have secured lasting peace. Governments in some countries are effective in promoting development, while others prey on their own citizens. These

Box 8: Integrated Mine Action Development Strategy (IMADS)[a]

IMADS is a capacity-building tool designed to enhance the ability of post-conflict societies to link mine action into long-term national development planning. IMADS aims to have national authorities gain greater — and more rapid — ownership over mine action programmes by building sustainable research and analysis capacity through the Mine Action Centre (MAC)

Building on outputs generated by the Global Landmine Impact Survey and Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database and drawing information from sectors such as health, agriculture, and education, will ensure that mine action has a greater and more lasting inter-sectoral impact. Cross-cutting development reports based on combined development and mine action research and analysis will inform national, provincial, and district level planning.

A multi-sectoral and multi-level approach to mine action means bringing in new stakeholders to planning, decision-making and problem-solving processes. This will mean new networks that bring together members of different stakeholder groups to work on mine-related problems. For example, the potential roster would include the MAC, the government, communities, mine action operators, the academic community, funding agencies, and the private sector Flexible, *ad hoc* focus groups will centre on the mine action requirements for a broad range of development needs, from community goals to larger-scale infrastructure rehabilitation and investment initiatives.

The basis of IMADS is the establishment of a multi-disciplinary research and policy unit at a National Mine Action Centre (MAC), or other appropriate body. This unit will be responsible for generating mine action data and analysis on how best to establish criteria, indicators, priorities, and benchmarks for success in a given national development context. In an effort to promote local responses to local problems, the IMADS Unit will comprise nationally-trained professional staff.

A key IMADS strategy will be to link staff from the MAC and/or Landmine Impact Survey/IMSMA teams and local social scientists with backgrounds in development who are skilled in working with existing primary and secondary data and building sound social and developmental analyses and policy frameworks. It will also attempt to raise the political profile of the MAC by helping to create an inter-ministerial steering committee process, elevating the importance of the MAC and providing a forum for the interchange of ideas and information across different government sectors

The scarcity of data in many mine-affected countries is exacerbated by the scarcity of people/institutions capable of working with complex data. IMADS will bring in a wider network of thinkers and trainers to make sure the data generated by the Landmine Impact Survey/IMSMA projects is fed into sustainable and useful policy and programming structures.

IMADS is designed to support the pre-existing Global Landmine Impact Survey/IMSMA data collection efforts. IMADS does not seek to replicate these initiatives, rather it casts its objectives further afield and will draw on this information as only **one** component of its support to the MAC in its effort to support knowledge creation and capacity-building.

[a] Information provided by the IDRC office in Johannesburg.

and many other differences across countries are profound, and there is no "magic list" of criteria suitable for all.

... but there is a core set of issues that should be reflected in the criteria used by all programmes.

These are accidents (pattern over time, age and gender breakdown, mine versus UXO, etc.), demographic (numbers at risk, plus their distribution), vulnerability (location, extent, and nature of the contamination, the coping capacity of those at risk, entitlements to assistance should accidents occur), development potential (potential for economic growth and for the alleviation of poverty and inequality), and costs (productivity; cost structure). In countries still in or recently emerged from conflict, the criteria should also reflect political issues central to peace-making and peace-building.

The relative weighting given to different criteria will change over the life of a programme...

Needs evolve as countries move from open conflict to secure peace, and will continue to change as the country progresses on the path of development. Opportunities also change as development projects and other investments are completed, or when national development strategies are rethought. Even when the set of criteria remains constant, the relative weights accorded to each should vary as the society and economy evolves.

... but there are consistent patterns to how the relative importance of criteria will evolve.

Heavy weighting should be given to criteria reflecting risk-reduction objectives while large numbers of people face highly uncertain risks from landmines and UXO (i.e., while conflict continues and in the aftermath, when many displaced people return to their communities). This weighting should decline over time as the affected population learns more about the hazards faced. Conversely, criteria reflecting development potential should receive less weight until peace is well established, as new mine laying or renewed conflict could quickly destroy the potential economic benefit accruing from mine clearance.[11] Risk-reduction criteria should also receive more weight during the initial period of a mine action programme, as it takes longer to acquire and interpret data on complex social and economic features than data on accidents and the location of mines/UXO.

The information required to properly set priorities expands over the life of a programme ...

During its initial period, a mine action programme can use the Landmine Impact Survey or a similar system based heavily on recent accidents to establish clear priority rankings. As noted in Chapter 2: *Impact of Mine Contamination*, experience suggests the mine impact scores will be heavily left-skewed, with a few communities scoring highly and the majority falling around or below the median. Priorities stand out clearly, and a "weak metric" suffices.[12] More and finer information, reflecting a broader range of social and economic features, is required to differentiate between communities that score similarly according to a small number of criteria.

... but in many cases other development actors can supply most of the additional information required.

Other development agencies can advise about national, sectoral, and district development strategies, issues, and priorities. International and local NGOs can often provide detailed information about community development priorities. In countries blessed with reasonably effective governments, national, provincial, and local government representatives can also give much of the information required to set mine action priorities. Obtaining this information may require diplomacy and an outreach effort, but success will allow mine action organisations to concentrate their efforts where they have their greatest comparative advantage — dealing with mine contamination.

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[11] In modern internal conflicts, some part of a country may be secure for extended periods while other parts are visited repeatedly by conflict.

[12] As repeated accidents are likely to occur only on valuable, heavily-used land, clearing land on which repeated accidents have occurred is likely to yield other significant social and economic benefits. In other words, communities that are very heavily impacted according to one criterion are likely to be significantly impacted according to several others.