

Using IMSMA: The Challenges and How To Overcome Them

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GICHD continues to make efforts to assist mine action programmes with the integration of the IMSMA system into their operational activities. This increases the usefulness of the IMSMA system as a tool to strengthen the planning and management of mine action activities. However, the use of the IMSMA system is not without its challenges. A number of issues that are pertinent here will be discussed below.

One of the first issues that must be tackled concerns the institutional setting as a whole, together with institutional understanding of the usefulness of the IMSMA system. In other words, mine action programmes must regard the IMSMA system as a valuable tool from the perspective of their operations, and henceforth be willing to ensure that operations have a strong link to the database department.

In relation to the institutional organizational chart, tackling the above can be addressed in numerous ways. How the issue is approached will ultimately depend on a variety of issues, including the size and existing structure of the organization. However, what is important is the existence of a link between the operations department and the database department that allows the database department to verify information held in the database in an efficient and effective way and makes possible an appropriate response to the need for outputs to better the operationalization of mine action activities.

In line with the above, it is also important to recognize that the operations department must be familiar with the type of information held in the system, and with the options available with respect to the types of outputs that can be produced by IMSMA. If this is not the case, operations will be unable to make sensible requests to the database department – making the existence of a database department somewhat superfluous.

While operational staff must be familiar with the content of the database, it is also important that database staff are familiar with the meanings and concepts associated with the data stored in the system. The knowledge base of database staff tends to be more computer-related than linked to technical mine action issues. However, it is important that computer staff have a basic understanding of mine action activities and mine action information requirements. This will enable them to understand the needs of operations, and both increases the ability of database staff to check quality and reduces the potential for data-entry errors.

Another issue of concern is transparency of data. The availability of data and the potential to make such data available to end users are essential factors in using IMSMA as an operational tool. However, the reality in many cases is that information is regarded as a source of power, and the holders of this power are not always willing to make information they hold available. Ironically, unavailable information (particularly in this case) is useless. In other words, the value of IMSMA lies in its ability to assist in the planning, monitoring and recording of mine action activities. The first two tasks are impossible if data is not made available to the database section, and thereafter to the operational staff that will benefit from the availability of the data.

A further challenge that must be faced is the issue of technical knowledge – or the lack thereof. While IMSMA strives to be a user-friendly system, it does require database staff that have a degree of computer literacy. In some countries, computer skills are hard to find.

In relation to the above issues, there is a need for training. Here, this is mentioned as a challenge, but in reality it is one of the key areas where GICHD regional staff can provide maximum support to the user programme.

Funding is also a question of concern. The IMSMA system is provided free of charge to mine-affected countries. However, the running of the database and necessary hardware must be covered by the programme that is in charge of holding the database. This is a consideration that all programmes need to take into account before venturing to request the system.

The existence of appropriate facilities is also a key factor. Clearly, information can be managed in a variety of ways. If a choice is made to use the IMSMA system, it is important to bear in mind that there must be facilities to house the database department, including an environment that is safe for computers (i.e. environmental questions), the existence of power supplies that will permit the use of the system, and so on.

Above are some of the challenges faced by programmes using or exploring the possibility of using the IMSMA system. Recognizing the importance of these issues is key. Ultimately, success in using the system depends on having facilities, funding, technical knowledge and organizational structures that allow the database department both to operate and to do so in a manner that is of direct service to the needs of the operations department.