

Information Sources: The Troubling Question

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It is often heard that IMSMA is a “black box” that needs to be fed with information, but that no useful data ever comes out of IMSMA. Even worse: if we do get data out, it is generally bad – or even wrong.

In many cases, the responsibility for this lies within the IT department of a mine action centre. It is their responsibility to make sure that the data that goes into the database is correct – and it is they who are to blame if this is not the case. The operations department provides only “raw data”, and everything else is left to the IT department.

But, is the IT department really the sole party that is responsible for the quality of the data within IMSMA?

As information management is not the exclusive responsibility of one single actor, the same must be the case for the information itself: it cannot be the responsibility of one actor alone (the IT department) to make sure that all information is correct. Indeed, the joint responsibility of all actors involved is required to make sure that data is correct, since errors can happen at any point along the information cycle: during data collection, during data entry, during data analysis and during data dissemination. Only when IT and operations work constantly together can such errors be detected and corrected.

Data used in mine action can come from a variety of sources, and in many cases the reliability of this data can only be assumed. Non-technical data is often collected by actors that are not directly connected to mine action (for example, impact survey data might be collected by social scientists). Gathering data that relies on informants requires extensive skill and experience, and lack of these attributes among surveying staff can drastically increase the risk of potential errors already at the information source. In most cases, the potential users of the data are operations: it should be in their own interests to ensure that collected data is properly cross-checked and validated before being entered into IMSMA for future use. Hence, operations should not only be concerned with what was gathered, but also with how the data-gathering process itself was conducted. Being able to evaluate these two factors will allow for an evaluation of the reliability of the information – and henceforth its value and usefulness.

Along with data from impact survey teams, data that is collected directly by operators and operations (i.e. technical data) needs constant quality control: names, dates, numbers and especially coordinates are very easily misspelled during manual manipulation. Data gathering, data transmission and data entry are all steps where mistakes can happen. Efforts are ongoing to eliminate sources of human error by minimizing manual data manipulation (for example, through use of the handheld data-gathering tool). Nevertheless, these will not eliminate the need to quality check and validate any data collected prior to using such data for planning – once again, a task that should be realized jointly by operations and IT!

Data analysis is a task that needs operational knowledge, since the data primarily concerns operations. For data dissemination, the IT department needs to know the exact needs of operations. Without knowing what operations are looking for, they cannot provide accurate information. Finally, operators in the field will not be able to help in keeping data up to date if they do not know in the first place what data is available in the database.

What has been outlined here in a rough sketch that can be boiled down to a simple principle: the need to work together at all times. Only when the IT and operations take joint responsibility for the data at hand can they assure the quality of that data. Only in this way can we ensure that we ultimately get to a situation of “Good Data In – Good Data Out”!