

“ECONOMIC NECESSITY” IN THE MINE ACTION SECTOR”

A Very Short Discussion Paper

Richard Moyes, December 2004

Responsibility for failing to tell somebody how to undertake an action more safely is not felt by implementing agencies because the victims have usually transgressed the core message - “do not touch” - thus making the accident their fault. Responsibility is not felt or apportioned *even though* almost all mine action bodies would profess to understand how dire economic circumstances (for example) can impose on people *the necessity* of undertaking high risk behaviours. All this is rationalised in terms of “not wanting to encourage people” by giving them false confidence. The real problem in all this lies in the issue of who is responsible.¹

The term “economic necessity” is commonly used within the mine action sector as an explanation for why people in mine and ordnance affected communities persist with forms of behaviour that the mine action sector has counselled them against (e.g. handling ordnance or entering areas suspected of being mined.)² This paper is concerned primarily with the discourse of mine action – with the processes of representation and communication that shape practices. It suggests that the term “economic necessity” is part of the disempowerment of communities living with mines and ordnance. This paper is a development of the thinking in the paragraph quoted above and is the extension of a discussion in perhaps 1998 with Christine Murphy (then working for MAG) in which she challenged the common representation that people “had no alternative” but to take risks. She was suggesting that people in Angola were choosing to collect wood from a mined area nearby rather than walk an additional 3 km every day (for example.)³

The mine action sector continually seeks to invalidate such “choices” to enter mined areas (or to handle ordnance) by suggesting that if only we could communicate the *true* danger more clearly then people would stop. Eventually, when we get to the point where we have transmitted our messages at them for a long time, and in accordance with the latest mechanisms in the pedagogic toolbox, we assert that “economic necessity” must be blocking the adoption of safe behaviour. It is always “necessity” rather than a deliberate rejection of the external messages (which themselves are almost always the same despite any amount of smoke and mirrors “participation.”) We accept that the choice to reject our messages is reasonable only given circumstances of such (imagined) economic distress and hardship that it amounts to a necessity, and thus is not really a choice at all. This is essentially a mechanism for reinforcing the construct of absolute risk⁴ commonly used by the mine action sector. “Necessity” shields this construction from the challenge of local rationality.

My real distaste for “economic necessity” as a term arises from our subsequent refusal to promote forms of programmatic engagement that work from an acceptance of risk taking behaviour. Even though we construct such behaviour as *a necessity* we have consistently avoided such forms of engagement for fear of encouraging risk behaviour or of being held responsible – as if the behaviour of rural populations is our responsibility.⁵ This is another smoke-screen designed to hide the fact that we don’t know what best to tell people in such circumstances and that telling people what to do is the only model of assistance that we have got.

Both of these interlinked deceptions are processes by which we blame the locals rather than admit to the shortcomings of our models for external assistance. The concept of “economic necessity” amounts to a betrayal – it is that point in the rhetoric of mine action where we publicly forgive the local “pre-victims”⁶ for their sins against our discourse (breaching our directives, entering mined areas, “tampering” with ordnance), wash our hands of them (generally proscribing a good dose of development instead) and at the same time ask donors for more money.

All of this is related to the critical question of “who is responsible for the behaviour of mine affected communities?” The paternalistic, welfare-state model of the formal mine action sector takes this responsibility upon itself on condition that its rules are followed. Its message to those who find themselves suffering from a landmine infestation (be they individuals or communities) is to “stand still and call for assistance.” The much derided Superman MRE comics are an accurate representation of the formal mine action sector’s construction of its relationship to the mine affected society – with the solution to problems being a fly-in from an authoritative external body rather than a process by which people help themselves. Of course for many people living in mine-affected communities Superman and the mine action sector are equally accessible.

“Economic necessity” keeps us focussed on local problems rather than local solutions. By masking choice and the acceptance of responsibility for risk-behaviour by local people, it keeps the focus on external problem-focussed interventions rather than local coping mechanisms and capacities. It presents people as double victims - of both their economic circumstances and their hostile environment. Trapped between the absolute risk of the minefield and the ultimate hunger of economic necessity it is a wonder any of these people are still alive. That some *are* still alive should offer us grounds for hope.

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NOTES:

¹ Moyes (2004: 128 – footnote 132)

² The GICHD (2003: 15) follows the original UNICEF (1999) guidelines for MRE in presenting the following framework for understanding “the main causes of UXO and mine accidents:”

- “People are not aware of UXO and mines;”
- “People do not know the safe behaviours to practice around UXO and mines. They may be aware but do not have the appropriate knowledge to avoid accidents;”
- “People are aware of UXO and mines and they know how to minimise the risks mines pose, but they are still practising high-risk behaviours (due to economic necessity or other compelling reasons.)”

³ This example echoes Chayanov’s conception of peasant economies as involving a balance between consumption requirements and “drudgery,” and also the concept of “self-exploitation.” Chayanov argued that when the gains from any further increase in work input become outweighed by the drudgery of that work then the increase in work input stops. In other words, once a household had done enough work to ensure an acceptable standard of consumption for the family as a whole, it would not work any harder. This formulation had a politically loaded context as an effort to counter models of the peasantry as proto-capitalists and hence “unreliable” revolutionaries (the model broadly adopted by Lenin.) The definition of “self-exploitation” is open but it provides a useful concept for our model where people are exploiting their physical vulnerability in order to reduce the drudgery of longer work for the same output. Thus risk can be seen as an alternative to drudgery – and external exhortations to avoid risk become demands for people to work harder.

⁴ Reference Ruth Bottomley

⁵ These issues of responsibility are increasingly related to the concept of sins of commission vs. sins of omission.

⁶ An important role of people driven into minefields by “economic necessity” is fundraising for the formal mine action sector. As such they can be seen as accidents-waiting-to-happen or “pre-victims” who it may actually be possible to save if only we can get to them in time – and of course time means money.