MRE and Community Leader Involvement in Risk-prone Colombia

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The Organization of American States’ Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal (AICMA) program began mine-risk education activities in Colombia. Activities and campaigns are coordinated with Colombia’s Pro-grama Presidencial de Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal (PPAICMA, Presidential Program for Mine Action). The first OAS-AICMA campaigns were designed to complement emergency clearance operations covering the popula-tion in the municipality of San Francisco in Antioquia and displaced families around the la-cality of Bajo Grande, Bolivar department.

An important step in beginning MRE activities was selecting community leaders in each of the target zones who could carry out prevention activities and promote the AICMA campaign messages. Respected leaders from these communities, who are familiar with their community’s needs and environment, can better educate at-risk families. After completing the required OAS-AICMA training, these leaders become mine-risk-education advocates. These AICMA advocates visit the countryside around mined areas under emergency clearance to educate the population on prevention measures while learning from the people’s experiences. The inhabitants tell of their pain, hopelessness and anxiety caused by armed conflict in their region, which has forced them to abandon their plots, homes, and in certain cases, their entire communities.

The beginning of clearance operations gives hope to displaced families of safety returning to their homes and recovering their way of life. MRE advocates tell families what to do when finding explosive artifacts on countryside footpaths, near their houses or around their plots or schools.

In each municipality with ongoing MRE programs, the student population is sensitively included. AICMA advocates bring their campaign messages to schools using playful activities that increase interest and creativity among children and adolescents, resulting in improvements that are incorporated into future programs throughout the different communities. The campaign also uses games,
Mine-risk Education in Ecuador: A Person-to-person Approach

“Explosive Mines Kill” is the message that the Organization of American States’ Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal program wants to get across to communities living in mined areas in Ecuador. By taking an interpersonal approach to mine-risk education, the AICMA campaign advocates hope to raise awareness about the risks associated with anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance.

by Nelson Romeo Castillo Landazuri | Organization of American States |

In Ecuador, mine-risk education campaigns take a very personal approach to reaching communities at the local level. The campaigns take place in remote cantons and parishes where the lower Andes mountains give way to the Amazon. The campaigns cover populations living near suspected mined areas or where the Ecuadorian Army conducts humanitarian-cleanup operations.

The Organization of American States’ Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal program conducts annual workshops and training sessions for natural leaders from the affected communities. These leaders then become message carriers and advocates who promote safe landmine handling behaviors within their societies.

Methods

With the objective of reaching segmented populations exposed to the dangers of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance, the OAS MRE campaign in Ecuador employs a variety of dissemination methods. People are key transmitters in the remote region where mountains become jungle. AICMA staff in Ecuador, along with trained message advocates, spread their campaigns community by community and house to house. Women have become essential to message communication between children, by children to adults and by women to all affected by the landmine risk—but they are always person to person.

School supplies facilitate message communication among children. AICMA personal distrubutes pencils, pens, notebooks, rulers, backpacks, chalkboards, maps and flags. Preventive education is conducted in each school in the region involving the students and their teachers. When educating adults, using T-shirts, caps, water bottles and water dispensers to convey the message is very helpful. Additionally, educational sessions are supplemented by audio-visual materials, and stickers, pamphlets and posters are distributed. All this material carries the message that “Explosive Mines Kill” in both Spanish and Shuar, the native language. Educational sessions for adults take place in community settings with most adults and village elders attending.

The AICMA program also has two telephone lines dedicated to MRE, so the local population has direct communication with program staff from the nearest town. The locals are able to provide information about possible mined areas and can communicate the need to conduct preventive education. They can also report the occurrence of landmine incidents.

The AICMA program in Ecuador has succeeded in carrying out its annual MRE campaign in four phases:

Phase one. AICMA campaign managers train local leaders from the cantons and parishes along with local schoolteachers, both male and female, as principal campaign communicators and advocates. The program facilitates establish face-to-face contact at the community level by means of question-and-answer sessions. These discussions educate the community on proper procedures when confronting AP mines or unexploded ordnance.

Phase two. The AICMA program conducts educational campaigns throughout the region by way of interpersonal communication to promote necessary changes in behaviors among members of affected communities.

Community MRE is held in the municipality of San Jacinto, department of Nariño.