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The Challenges of Mine Awareness Education for Children in Afghanistan

Save the Children (USA) began its Landmine Education Project in Kabul, Afghanistan, in April 1996, with support from several donors, including Rädä Barnen. In 1995, the United Nations Mine Clearance Program completed its survey of Kabul, concluding that the capital city was in the midst of a landmine crisis. In response to this declaration and the apparent lack of child-focused methodologies employed in existing mine awareness programs, Save the Children developed a participatory curriculum based on principles of non-formal education.

Initially, the project was implemented through the city's public schools. Save the Children facilitators ran two sessions each day for students in grades one through 12. The program consisted of two segments: first, a multimedia slideshow containing all of the key messages about living in a mined area, and second, a 90-minute session during which students participated in a variety of educational games and activities. To ensure that children absorbed the messages and adapted their behavior, Save the Children trained selected volunteer teachers from each school to carry out a series of 12 follow-up education sessions for all participants. In late 1996, Save the Children stopped its work in schools due to gender discrimination enforced by the new ruling power in Kabul, the Taliban militia, and developed several new approaches to teaching landmine education in com-

munities and health care institutions. In spite of the many challenges faced by the Landmine Education Project throughout its existence, it has achieved considerable success on many levels. Most importantly, the incidence of mine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) related injuries and deaths in Kabul City has decreased significantly since 1996, presumably be-

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cause of a variety of factors that include the achievements of mine clearance and mine education programs.

Mine-Free Playgrounds

In addition to educating children, the Landmine Education Project has constructed 20 playgrounds in high-risk areas of the city, providing children with an alternative to playing in potentially mined areas. Also, Save the Children's research team has tracked mine and UXO incidents in Kabul City since May 1996, and in some districts of Kabul Province since

way to quickly reach large numbers of children was to run sessions in the city's public schools. Shortly after implementation began, staff members began to recognize that there were many children who did not attend school that were potentially vulnerable to the dangers of landmines and UXO, particularly since many of them were working as shepherds or collecting scrap metal and firewood. Save the Children educated some children in the city's major orphanage and in centers for working children. It soon became evident that the Landmine Education Project would have to develop ways to work on a much larger scale outside the school system, particularly as the public schools close each winter for four months because they are not equipped for the harsh weather.

Three Approaches

Save the Children developed three new approaches to landmine/UXO education outside the formal school setting. The first was the Emergency Response Team (ERT), which was established in reaction to emerging information about the alarmingly high number of incidents that were taking place in certain areas of the city. The purpose of the team was to identify high-risk areas and quickly reach large numbers of children with landmine/UXO education.

Hospitals and health care clinics soon became the second new venue for teaching landmine/UXO

education. After much negotiation, the Ministry of Public Health granted Save the Children's female staff permission to work in health care institutions—the only place where the Taliban would allow women to be employed.

The third new branch created within the Landmine Education Project was the "Children's Network," which has carried out most of its activities in a densely populated housing project.

Success and Frustration

Each of these new approaches has had considerable strengths and weaknesses. The ERT, for instance, has been very successful at gathering large numbers of children in high-risk areas.

The ERT has been somewhat limited by its

quick-response nature, in that it has not been able to provide the kind of methodical follow-up training and reinforcement of messages that Save the Children believes is important. Instead, facilitators moved swiftly from one community to the next. After they believed they had covered an entire district, facilitators began returning to areas they had already visited to provide additional sessions.

If the emergency response concept is to succeed, there must be a well-designed plan in place for reviewing the existing mine/UXO threat, revising team assignments and moving operations to new priority locations, including those that are less convenient logistically. Furthermore, if a program aims to change the attitudes and behavior of children, plans for follow-up education should be incorporated into the strategy, even if the program has been deemed emergency response. Save the Children's plans, for instance, now include provisions for training community volunteers to conduct follow-up sessions.

Unlike the ERT, facilitators in hospitals and clinics generally work with the same children for several days at a time. They usually conduct sessions in clinics during the morning and in hospitals in the afternoon (when the clinics are closed). Facilitators rarely change their assigned work locations, so they have a great deal of time to spend with the children at each site. In the hospitals, most of the participants are patients or relatives of patients and often cannot spend lengthy periods taking part in a session. In clinics, most of the participants are children from the surrounding community, who typically come back for more education almost daily, particularly due to the fact that there are few other educational opportunities that exist.

While plans are underway to expand the network to new geographic locations, Save the Children does not want to lose its relationships with the community and local volunteer branch leaders, or the access to children, that it has in the original location. A great strength of both the Children's Network and the Hospital/Clinic Program is that Save the Children can reach thousands of eager children on an ongoing basis. This provides an ideal opportunity to introduce new programs, including expanded landmine/UXO education, health education, peace education, and training on the campaign against landmines, children's rights, community mobilization and other issues.

Child-Focused Methodology: Non-Formal Education

Save the Children decided to become involved in mine education in Afghanistan because it recognized that, although children were among those most affected by the landmine crisis and therefore especially in need of education, existing mine awareness programs did not seem well-suited to children's developmental needs and learning capacities. In an effort to make the subject more tangible and interesting for children, the Landmine Education Project adapted the principles and methodologies of non-formal education that were used in women's literacy classes run by Save the Children in northern Afghanistan. The curriculum consists of a series of games and activities that enable children to learn through play and interaction with their peers. Rather than employing lecturers, Save the Children trained facilitators to guide children through the learning process. The program is designed to encourage children's participation and to stimulate them to solve problems and relate lessons to their own experiences. The majority of each session is devoted to small group work.

Although it can be challenging to train Afghans to fully adopt non-formal education techniques, once it is understood, the methodology is usually very popular. Children flock to the sessions, seeking men-

55% of Landmine Victims in Kabul Are Children

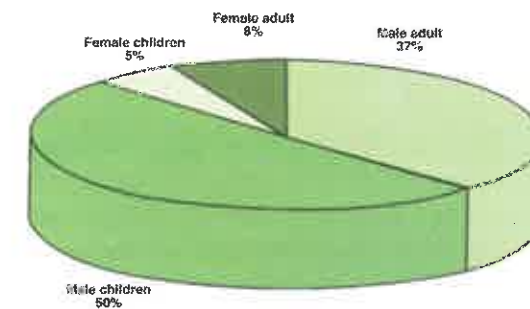


Photo Save the Children

tal stimulation and an opportunity to play. Parents and community members appreciate the unique educational opportunity that the program affords their children. Ironically, public school teachers and representatives of the Ministry of Education have been some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the methodology, many of them requesting additional training and inquiring how the philosophy could be applied to other subjects. In a country where war has virtually destroyed the educational system, the infu-



Teaching adolescents has been a challenge in mine awareness education.

Photo c/o Save the Children

May 1997. The data was reported to the U.N. Mine Action Program, which has used the information for planning purposes. Advocacy work comprises another important component of the Landmine Education Project and communicating to the international community the devastating effects that landmines have on Afghan children. Finally, as a spin-off to its landmine education activities, in 1998, Save the Children also began the Social Reintegration Project, a pilot program that assists war-wounded children through the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities.

Mine/UXO Education Outside of Schools

When Save the Children first began the Landmine Education Project in Kabul, the most practical

sion of new ideas has been a significant secondary benefit of the Landmine Education Project.

Using a Child-to-Child Approach

One of the most difficult concepts for the facilitators, teachers and volunteers has been the idea that children can play an active role in teaching and that they can learn through their interactions with each other. In all sessions, children are asked to discuss pictures and analyze situations together in small groups. Also, children who have already attended several sessions sometimes help facilitate small group activities for other children. At the end of every session, children are asked to transfer the messages they have learned to people in their homes and communities. Involving children in these ways can be a great



Games have been a very successful teaching tool for mine awareness education.

Photo c/o Save the Children

way to maintain their interest and to foster a sense of confidence and pride.

Teenagers in Afghanistan are in need of focused attention, many of them having spent their entire lives in a war-torn society, suffering a variety of hardships as a result. Most of them are receiving little or no education and few can find jobs. Teenage girls, especially in Taliban-held areas, have no access to education or job opportunities and are restricted in their movements and social interactions. Therefore, participating in the Landmine Education Project provides these youth with a unique learning experience that enables them to make a positive contribution to their communities while simultaneously gaining some valuable skills. Teenage volunteers also act as positive role models for younger children.

The Landmine Education Project teaches three steps:

(1) Slowly turn and walk in your exact footsteps until you return to an area you know to be safe (such

as a road or well-worn pathway).

(2) Make a marker (using stones, sticks, an arrow in the dirt, etc.) that points to the location of the dangerous area.

(3) Go and inform a nearby demining team, local authorities or other responsible adult.

During each session a few children are selected to act out the three steps for getting out of a mine field, with a pack of cards, a stone or some other object used to represent a mine. In doing this, most children are able to recite the three steps with no difficulty, but their execution of the routine is generally hasty and not very realistic. As a result, Save the Children will pilot-test a simple new educational material to encourage children to be more deliberate about their actions. Rather than fully imagining the whole scenario, children will walk on a pathway made of cardboard. The path contains five painted footsteps. When the children walk back to the start of the path, they will have to be careful to place their feet in the painted footsteps. When they get to the end, there will be stones lying nearby that they use to create a marker. The children will then have to bring the facilitator to the marker and explain the situation exactly as they would if they were talking to a deminer or other adult. Also, rather than two or three children demonstrating the exercise, all children participating in the session will be asked to practice it.

While reviewing and revising the project curriculum, Save the Children is focusing heavily on increasing the opportunities for children to "learn by doing" and on making lessons as realistic and tangible as possible. The Landmine Education Project has made limited use of photographs of mines and UXO because of the high cost of reproducing and laminating photographs. Due to concerns that children will receive mixed messages about the danger of explosive objects if facilitators are seen handling or standing near them and because of the difficulty of transporting heavy objects to communities, the project has mostly shied away from the use of sanitized mines or mine models.

Eventually, facilitators began to use black and white drawings of mines and UXO to introduce the topic because they felt the other curriculum materials were not sufficient for providing a general introduction to the topic. In the future, the program will likely adopt the use of wooden models to help children visualize the actual shapes and sizes of explosive devices. However, the objects will not be handled and will be in an area marked with the accepted symbols

of the mine action program. Wherever possible, facilitators will also construct an "obstacle course" that allows children to demonstrate their knowledge and practice safe behavior in a simulated mine field.

UXO Education

The revised curriculum will also include a much larger segment on UXO. According to Save the Children's data from Kabul City, approximately 55 percent of all landmine victims were children, but roughly 85 percent of all UXO victims were children (most of them boys). In the first quarter of 1998, these figures dropped to 30 percent and 40 percent, respectively, but are still high enough to warrant serious concern and intensified focus on UXO education. Although UXO is included in the original curriculum of the Landmine Education Project, the emphasis of the sessions has been on mines. Furthermore, project staff have not had sufficient training on UXO to enable them to feel confident enough to produce appropriate materials or to lead in-depth sessions on the subject. Therefore, key project staff will be trained in UXO awareness by the U.N. Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA), and new materials for children will be designed based on the MACA's training aids.

The approach to educating children about UXO should differ somewhat from that used to address the issue of landmines. Most people who step on a landmine do not see the device before the incident occurs. Although it remains important to teach landmine recognition, the larger task is to ensure that people understand and respect marking signs and other indications that an area may contain mines. The opposite is true of UXO: most of the people injured by it are either handling or tampering with a device or are near someone who is taking this risk. In Kabul, children sometimes dare each other to hit, kick, or throw stones at UXO. Some children play with UXO out of curiosity, while others collect it to sell as scrap metal. In teaching children about UXO, the emphasis must be on ensuring that children recognize its most common shapes found in their area and that children fully respect the danger that UXO pose to their safety.

Instilling Pride: The Landmine Education Passport

In the process of educating children about landmines and UXO, changing attitudes and transforming behavior presents a far more daunting task than simply increasing children's knowledge. To promote responsible attitudes among children, Save the Children tries to instill in them a sense of pride in the knowledge they have gained and encourages children to share information and model safe behavior for others. After completing the core curriculum, every child



Rādda Barnen conducts peer education and landmine awareness: Yemen.

Photo c/o Save the Children

receives a small blue passport. Inside each passport are spaces for the child's name, age and address. There are also several blank spaces, where children receive a "visa" stamp for every session they attend. At the back of the passport are some of the key messages about mines and UXO. Children carry the passports in their pockets and proudly display their stamps upon request. The prospect of receiving more stamps motivates many children to attend multiple follow-up sessions.

Providing Alternatives to Dangerous Activities

In addition to equipping children with knowledge and encouraging positive attitudes and behaviors, it is also important to consider what alternatives can be provided to steer children away from risky ac-

tivities. At the height of the landmine crisis in Kabul, most children were injured while playing. In order to provide children an alternative to playing in dangerous areas, Save the Children began building safe playgrounds, targeting the communities that were experiencing the highest number of mine and UXO related incidents. Thousands of children throughout Kabul visit Save the Children's 20 playgrounds year-round. Also, volunteers from the community surrounding every playground have been recruited to organize activities for children in their areas. Unfortunately, constructing safe play areas probably has little effect on the problem of children being injured while at work, usually collecting metal or firewood or tending animals.

Adapting Western Ideas

In developing games and activities, Save the Children took several Western ideas and adapted them to the Afghan context. For instance, the game "Snakes and Ladders" evolved into "Travel Through Afghanistan," a board game containing a map of Afghanistan, filled with scenes from around the country. Children try to move their game pieces from Kabul, in central Afghanistan, around the country

to Mazar-i-Sharif, at the end of the road in the north. Along the way, their pieces may land on red question marks, which require the children to answer questions pertaining to landmines and UXO, and blue question marks, which pose questions on topics including geography, mathematics, history, and health education. Although "Travel Through Afghanistan" is an adaptation of

western idea and is not drawn from traditional games for Afghan children, it quickly became a favorite among participants in the Landmine Education Project. Likewise, children eagerly awaited the opportunity to play a revised version of the game, "Memory," in which children match pairs of pictures and learn to recognize the basic shapes of mines and UXO, as well as how to recognize the symbols of a demining team.

While the introduction of Western games and activities has been extremely successful, significant thought and care were required to make appropriate adaptations. Furthermore, some ideas had to be

changed after the start of the program, as they proved to be unworkable in the Afghan context. For instance, the original version of the board game was accompanied by a small bag containing dice and game pieces. A few months into the program, the dice were replaced by small cards, each containing a number from one to six.

When developing the game, the expatriates working on the project had discussed the possibility that the use of dice might raise eyebrows, because they might be associated with gambling. However, in the end it was decided that, since the game in no way involved gambling, there should be no objections to the inclusion of dice. This turned out to be a false assumption. Because many Afghans do automatically associate dice with gambling, the intent behind their use was irrelevant. Sometimes children would exclaim, "Oh, we're going to learn to gamble today!" There were also rumblings coming from other agencies and indications that the issue might be raised with the Ministry of Education, so an alternative was quickly created. The number cards that replaced the dice have the same purpose but have removed all suspicion of impropriety surrounding the game.

Cultural vs. Political Appropriateness

Since the arrival of the Taliban militia in Kabul, the content of education materials has been an even greater cause of concern than before. The Taliban has issued edicts declaring that any representation of a living creature is forbidden (including pictures, drawings or toys that depict a human being or an animal). Other images are sometimes deemed un-Islamic by the Taliban, particularly those that symbolize other religious traditions. The materials used in the Landmine Education Project rely heavily on the use of visual images, particularly of people and animals. Because pictures are believed to be fundamental to the curriculum, Save the Children has continued to use its existing materials.

One exception to this is the multimedia slide program, which was used in school-based activities. Using the slides which were accompanied by a taped narration and music, also forbidden by the Taliban, was considered to be too risky, and furthermore, was no longer logistically feasible in the teams' new work environments. Also, two new landmine/UXO activity books for children were produced without any human images in order to minimize potential objections by the authorities. In any case, the decisions made in this regard have all been in the context of political and security concerns, rather than of cultural

appropriateness, since the edicts reflect the principles of the ruling authorities, not necessarily of the communities with which Save the Children works.

Ensuring Female Participation

Save the Children concluded that it would be possible to reach both males and females in a variety of other settings outside the formal schools. Furthermore, since female teachers were no longer allowed to work, the state of education in the public schools had deteriorated beyond its already abysmal state, and many boys had stopped attending school, or attended only for an hour or two. Most boys, therefore, could be reached outside the schools. By choosing to continue its activities outside the formal school setting, Save the Children made an important statement in opposition to the gender-based discrimination institutionalized by the Taliban authorities. Furthermore, it recognized the importance of continuing to educate females, even though they represented a smaller percentage of victims than males. Females deserve to be educated about the dangers of mines and UXO as do males, both so that they can protect themselves against this threat, and because they often play an important role in educating and caring for the people, especially the children, around them.

Reaching Adolescents

Unfortunately, one of the more vulnerable groups, youth (especially boys) aged 13 to 17, has been particularly difficult for Save the Children to reach since its move away from the public schools. In the schools, the Landmine Education Project worked with students in classes one to 12, thereby spanning all age groups. Since moving to communities, though, the Emergency Response Team reports that most of the participants in their sessions are younger children. In the hospitals, clinics, and Children's Network, older boys are not allowed to enter the rooms where the female facilitators are working. Older girls rarely participate in sessions, because it has become very difficult for them to leave their homes due to restrictions imposed by the authorities. Save the Children will closely examine this issue to better understand which age groups are participating in the program and how the materials, venues and recruiting system could be changed to encourage more children from other age groups to at-

tend. The solutions for the different branches of the project will likely be different.

Flexibility and Quality Control

Given the unpredictable political environment and extreme restrictions placed on humanitarian agencies and the local population, it has been critical that the project remain flexible and open to different ways of solving problems in each of the three branches. It is evident that the male and female staff could not continue to run a joint program or even an identical program under the current circumstances. Indeed, in order to continue to employ the female staff, Save the Children had to create ways to work in health care institutions. Also, to enable female staff to operate in communities, a very low-profile program that depended largely on local volunteers had to be established.

Moving From Emergency to Development

During this transition period when the original project is shifting focus and location and as new programs are following in its wake, the utility of landmine/UXO education as a bridge between emergency and development activities is becoming especially clear. While the Landmine Education Project was developed in response to the landmine crisis in Kabul, its philosophy was based largely on common development principles. Because the program aimed to educate people and encourage changes in attitude and behavior, special attention was paid to reinforcing messages and incorporating follow-up activities. Also, whenever possible, the Landmine Education Project has attempted to provide children with a somewhat broader educational experience than could be gained through simple mine awareness activities. Furthermore, the project has taken a comprehensive and longer-term approach by building safe playgrounds in high-risk communities, establishing community sub-offices and training local volunteers.

Community Volunteers

While much of the capacity building carried out by the Landmine Education Project has been for Save the Children's own staff, the sustainability of the project lies mainly within the trained volunteers. In the four prioritized districts where the Emergency Response Team works, nearly 200 male community



Children enjoy a mine-free playground in Afghanistan.

Photo © Save the Children

volunteers have been trained to conduct follow-up landmine education sessions. They are also expected to continue working in the future to conduct sessions for children in their neighborhoods that have not yet received it, particularly returning refugees and internally displaced people. Due to restrictions imposed by the authorities, training of female volunteers in the same communities has only recently begun on a very small scale. All of these volunteers receive an initial two-day training, after which each is given a package of education materials. Their work is monitored by Save the Children facilitators. The observations of these facilitators have made it clear that the volunteers need to receive further explanation of and practice with the materials. Therefore, Save the Children is committed to providing refresher trainings for all volunteers as needed.

The branch leaders that work for the Children's Network comprise another significant volunteer corps within the Landmine Education Project. These women have received considerable training and are monitored on a weekly basis by two female facilitators. The branch leaders have developed a relatively comprehensive understanding of the principles of non-formal education, as well as issues pertaining to landmines and UXO. The branch leaders are expected to be particularly helpful to Save the Children in its future program initiatives. Furthermore, the skills and training these women have received will be very useful to most of them if they have an opportunity to return to the job market in the near future. If they are not able to resume their studies and regular jobs, the skills the women are building through their involvement in the Children's Network will at least be helpful to them in their informal work within their communities.

A third important category of volunteers working for the Landmine Education Project is comprised of the hundreds of people who participate in "Community Support Groups." These groups were established in each of the communities surrounding the safe play areas built by Save the Children. The groups help to maintain the playgrounds and are also charged with organizing activities for children in their communities. Save the Children is currently developing ideas for further training and utilization of the Community Support Groups. The groups will receive assistance in setting up athletic, educational or other activities for children in their areas. They will also be trained on issues that are relevant to children, such as landmine/UXO education, health education and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Thus far,

the Community Support Groups have been underutilized, but with limited support and training, could prove to be an extremely valuable resource, not only to Save the Children, but also to their communities.

Government Institutions

In addition to building the capacity of volunteers, Save the Children has also worked to train and turn over activities to government employees. Initially, the Landmine Education Project worked closely with the Ministry of Education, both on the implementation of the program in the public schools and in planning for future mine education activities in the city and beyond. Since the Taliban authorities imposed restrictions on female education and employment, though, Save the Children has suspended its cooperation with the Ministry of Education. However, the program's relationship with the Department of Mine Clearance (DMC) continues.

Save the Children trained the DMC to collect landmine and UXO incidence data from the districts of Kabul province (outside the city). The department sends three staff members to the districts each month to collect information from the district leaders, who receive the information from community leaders. Save the Children pays transportation costs, monitors the DMC's work, receives and checks the data and compiles the reports for the MAP. Within the coming year, Save the Children plans to hand over all data collection responsibilities for the province to the DMC. The Ministry of Public Health may also be trained to collect data in Kabul City and other areas.

Incentives

Save the Children has faced similar problems in working with both volunteers and government employees. Most of the volunteers are unemployed or earning very little money and constantly demand payment and benefits. Likewise, government employees receive very small salaries, if they are paid at all. They and their employers continuously request "incentives." Save the Children has tried to avoid paying salaries or incentives to its partners in communities and ministries. Small concessions have been necessary, though, in order to maintain the commitment of the people working on the project's behalf and to encourage their future involvement in the program. For instance, the branch leaders, who work approximately four hours each week, receive a very small stipend (roughly \$7 U.S.) at the end of each month. The community volunteers receive a small package

of materials at the first refresher training after they have demonstrated a commitment to the program by conducting regular sessions for children. The data collectors from the DMC receive a stipend for transportation and overnight stays. Save the Children will continue to avoid paying larger incentives, because it would like to respect the notion of volunteerism, as well as the idea that the government should support its own activities.

Quality Control

Another common problem faced in cooperation with volunteers and government workers is the challenge of enforcing quality control. In general, these people have had significantly less training and experience than Save the Children's own staff. Furthermore, they have less investment in the program, since they are not full-fledged employees. While it is important to train communities and governmental organizations to take over the work of international agencies in the future, it is also important to ensure that the quality of programs remains high, both at present and after hand overs take place. Save the Children has found that close monitoring, good communication and regular training are critical to the success of capacity-building efforts. Even then, it may be optimistic to think that these groups will be prepared to fully implement landmine/UXO education activities independently, on a large scale and at a high level of quality in the near future.

Data Collection in Support of Programming

In particular, Save the Children's data collection activities have informed the work, not only of Save the Children's mine education teams, but also of the U.N. sponsored mine clearance program. Data compiled by Save the Children is used by the MAP for Afghanistan to assist with setting priorities for clearance and awareness activities and for assessing the overall situation with regard to mines and UXO in Kabul. Save the Children's teams also submit reports to the regional mine action coordinator regarding any UXO they find throughout the course of their work in communities and through follow-up visits to areas where recent incidents occurred.

While this information sharing and cooperation has been extremely beneficial, it should continue to be improved. A reexamination of existing informa-

tion systems has shown that current data collection and reporting procedures could be strengthened. Furthermore, significant amounts of data have been collected but never analyzed extensively. In order to obtain the maximum benefit from data and interviews, Save the Children, as well as the managers of the MAP, recognize that further analysis of existing data will be necessary. However, in order to improve data collection and reporting procedures, strengthen data analysis and apply the results to program planning, extensive training and supervision is required.

Conclusions

In designing a landmine and UXO education program for children, creativity and innovation are vital if the program is to capture and maintain the attention of participants. Materials and methods should invoke children's experiences, encourage their participation, and demand that they demonstrate good decision-making skills and behavior through repeated practical exercises.

Over the long-term, the program must remain focused on its vision of helping children adapt to life in a mined environment, and remain flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and lessons learned. Priorities and approaches should be reassessed periodically, with particular attention to identifying shifts in the mine/UXO situation, changes in vulnerable populations, and new information regarding the nature of the existing threat. Intensive supervision and on-going training are critical to ensuring a high standard of performance by the program. Finally, while evaluating the overall effectiveness of mine awareness programs is complicated by numerous factors, at minimum, the general quality of the program should be monitored and the effectiveness of delivery mechanisms evaluated. ■

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