April 2002

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Recommended Citation
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Mine Awareness: A New Approach

The proper integration of mine awareness, Level 1 and 2 surveys, and EOD can produce a synergistic effect that would benefit everyone involved in a mine action program. This concept has been used before but needs to be more widely utilized.

by Michael Labon, Independent Consultant

Introduction

Normally, all aspects of Mine Awareness (MA) are conducted in parallel with, but often separate from, Survey and Clearance. In addition, Level 1 Survey typically precedes Level 2 Survey. And finally, Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) is often done during Level 2 Survey, but may also be conducted by a stand-alone force. There are good and historical reasons for these being independent and/or linear functions; however, it does lead to gaps in the overall solution to the mine and UXO threat.

The concept involves marrying, often independent and linear components into one operation, to create a cycle of feedback and incentive, producing an operation with synergy that gives greater benefits to beneficiaries with equal donor resources. The end up is a unified operation. When properly done, this produces a synergy that will lead to direct benefits for the recipients, donors and practitioners. When the components are combined into an information and activity cycle, they will produce better information and better plans and therefore more safety for the beneficiaries and more precisely directed resources.

Reasons for Changes - Field Experience

How MA got into Survey

Most of this experience comes from conducting mine action operations in central Mozambique, for the German Development and Cooperation Agency (GTZ) from 1994 onwards but especially from 1996 to 1999, for CARE in Kosovo in 1999, and especially Somalia in 2000, where the closest version to this concept was put on the ground and was very successful.

Initially, during emergency refugee repatriation operation (GTZ/MineTech) into Mozambique in 1994, it was found that information gathering was enhanced with simple MA lectures. Put most simply, if someone has an idea of a mine threat in the area, the local people could make comments. When given a single mine and UXO recognition lecture, people suddenly recognized the shapes, sizes, colors, etc. and could give Level 1 information. This was continued through the years into village clearance projects (Survey, followed by Clearance), and it was then found that the Level 2 Survey team (which included EOD support) were often given more and better information that had not been given to the Level 1 Survey team.

Incentive

Two factors were involved in the success of the Level 2 Survey team:

- The Level 2 Survey took much more time, during which the team lived near the community, interacted with them and gained their confidence; and
- The incentive provided by removing and destroying things (e.g., UXO), but often just harmless but suspicious items, made the people more interactive. They had not felt motivated to hand in information previously, just for the sake of handing in information. Now, everyone could see a benefit in giving information.

Information

Poor information had two severe consequences. First, the lack of knowledge in communities led to casualties caused by people doing things they should not have done, and going places (or sending their livestock to places) where they should not have gone. The vast majority of casualties I have encountered in every mine/UXO risk area I have knowledge of except Afghanistan, have come from people touching/tampering with UXO. This is closely followed by people touching or going into eroded areas about which they know nothing. Invariably, casualties are caused by ignorance (ignorance being simply a lack of knowledge).

Secondly, "mine fields" that do not exist but are firmly believed to exist retard progress in the same ways known mine fields do. This applies equally to suspicious devices that are actually car parts (Mozambique), old stoves (Kosovo) or the grave of a tortoise (SomaliLah), all of which halted progress in some manner.

In addition, both of these "information failures" hamper the external relief effort. Hereafter, the term "external" will be used to refer to all actors outside of the benefiting community, be they professional, commercial or NGO clearance, MA organizations, aid, development and relief agencies, etc., suspect areas and mine fields that are not known cannot be dealt with. This is the smaller problem, as inevitably, someone in or around the community has information on every suspect area, and eventually this will come out. Reasons why this is not shared with the rest of the community are numerous.

The larger problem for the external is that these areas are the "mine fields" that do not exist. In most cases, it takes as long to clear an area with no mines as it does to clear a heavily-mined area. The major factor slowing clearance is vegetation coverage. Therefore, good information gathering during the survey stage can lead to early discrediting of suspect areas, which in turn frees resources for other tasks. Good information leads to a greater impact for the beneficiaries.

Another problem encountered in the field was survey/clearance/EOD activities that were not understood by the community.

The most common example of this is an external EOD capacity that visits an area that contains both mines and UXO after a report. The team destroys the UXO (often with a loud bang), and the local population then believes the entire threat is eliminated. However, while some devices have been destroyed, a mine field remains. The people have not been told, nor do they understand, the difference between clearance and EOD tasks, and we end up with further casualties, a crisis of confidence in all survey and clearance activities, and previously cleared areas becoming suspect areas again.

How the Concept Works

As is seen in the diagram, all components are interconnected, and ideally, "under one roof", with a common manager who is responsible for the entire concept, rather than any one component of it. The concept may be applied to a specific area, and each component strengthened or weakened depending on the needs for that component. However, every aspect is vital and equally important.

MA, Training, Mine Risk Edu-
FEATURE

The Future of Mine Action

by V. Thomas Graham, Jr.

A New Approach to Mine Awareness

In this article, the author discusses the need for a new approach to mine awareness, highlighting the importance of understanding the psychological and social factors that contribute to UXO contamination. The author argues for a shift from a reactive to a proactive approach, emphasizing the need for community involvement and education. The article suggests that by addressing the root causes of UXO contamination, we can prevent new casualties and reduce the burden on affected communities. The author also calls for international cooperation and the sharing of best practices to promote a global solution to the mine action crisis.