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MRE Certification Courses in Mali, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan

UNICEF developed a mine risk education (MRE) certification course to regulate the accreditation of MRE educators. The certification courses have had varied success in Mali, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan.

by Sebastian Kasack [Consultant]



Figure 1. MRE materials: An injured boy—this relates to one of the most serious accidents that occurred prior to the MRE emergency campaign in Mali mid-2012.

All graphics courtesy of UNICEF.

The teaching of mine risk education (MRE) is unregulated. Unlike deminers, explosive ordnance disposal workers or staff dealing with the Information Management System for Mine Action, MRE educators are not required to pass courses with final exams to obtain or maintain their qualifications. Of course, tools are available for guidance: the MRE International Mine Action Standard (IMAS 12.10), the Landmine and ERW Safety Handbook and its training package, and an excellent set of MRE Best Practice Guidebooks published by UNICEF and the Geneva International



Figure 2. Beware! As AP mines are not a threat in Mali, UXO is depicted as a shell, mortar and grenade. A skull with crossbones is internationally recognized as a warning sign.

Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) in 2005 accompanied by seven training manuals published in 2009.¹ However, standardized MRE courses are unavailable.²

In 2009, the Sri Lankan government asked UNICEF to expand MRE support to the hundreds of thousands of people returning home to a former war zone, where explosive remnants of war (ERW) and landmines still contaminate the areas. Due to a variety of implementing partners, MRE needed to become more regulated. UNICEF developed a national MRE standard with GICHD support, an MRE



Figure 3. Safe behavior! Warn others, stay away and don't touch. Report: Inform parents or local leaders. Take action. Mali has no trained deminers or military forces to report to; therefore, elders are informed.

accreditation mechanism and standard operating procedures with the National Mine Action Centre in Sri Lanka as an implementing partner. The organization also worked with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education to develop the MRE content in its curriculum for primary and secondary education.

Developing MRE Certification

A number of questions needed answering. How could it be ensured that MRE would be accurate, complete and professional? How could teaching contradictory information by various implementing partners, mostly by national non-governmental organizations (NGO) but also by the military, be avoided? How could the military be persuaded not to touch mines in front of the class or pass around mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO)?

UNICEF agreed to develop and provide an MRE certification course through the international NGO (MAG) Mines Advisory Group. The National Mine Action Centre

in Sri Lanka agreed that any implementing partner wanting to become accredited for MRE operations as well as community liaison would have to show that sufficient staff had successfully passed the certification course. Certificates would only be valid for three years in order to guarantee refresher trainings for all MRE educators.

The curriculum of a four- to five-day course for 20 participants combines aspects of training with a train-the-trainer model. The first three days focus on inputs discussion, working groups, roleplay, etc., that need tailoring to address the relevant local threats and response mechanisms. A round of introductions and a session on expectations follows the usual opening ceremony. As generic topics are addressed first, participants are asked the following:

- What is the landmine/ERW problem globally, regionally and specifically in our country?
- Why do we need MRE?
- What are the key pillars of mine action, and what is being done in our country?
- What are the main global conventions regulating mine action, including victim assistance?

These generic topics allow the National Mine Action Centre and key implementing partners to present their work or a specific area in which they are skilled. This part of the training should be kept fairly short.

The next portion of training provides an in-depth landmine/ERW safety briefing covering the following

- Risk awareness
- Information and preparedness
- Standard and emergency procedures

Breaking this PowerPoint-based session up with films, group exercises or roleplay can provide a dynamic aspect to the course. A sample scenario could involve a group on foot where one member activates a landmine or UXO depending on the context, and the exercise revolves around how the group reacts. As observers are not allowed to intervene, the class must cooperatively analyze the group's recommended behavior in an emergency.

Covering All Bases

Risk-taking behavior and groups as well as basics regarding behavior change are specifically covered under MRE. The sessions are tailored for local relevance. Instead of using generic "mines are dangerous" messages, MRE uses stories of accidents from local areas, includes landmine/ERW survivor participation in the sessions, and shows maps and sketches to supplement the lectures. Furthermore, the session covers the pros and cons of various MRE methods by building on the existing



Figure 4. The leaflet portrays more dangerous items including anti-vehicle mines in the north of Mali.



Figure 5. From left to right: Don't poke it! Don't kick it! Don't throw it in the fire! Don't try to break it open! Beware of the results of dangerous behavior!



Figure 6. Safe behavior! Warn others. Stay away, and don't touch. Report and inform parents or local leaders. Take action.

experiences of the participants. Finally, MRE links the participating community members with other elements of mine action through community mapping exercises.

One of the most important sessions discusses the mandatory content of any MRE session, which should include

1. An overview of the local landmine/ERW problem
2. Consequences: mines/ERW kill and injure
3. Dangerous behavior (including dangerous areas to avoid)
4. Safe behavior
5. Summary

The remaining two to three days involve MRE sessions focused on roleplay. Four groups of five persons are formed

and prepare a brief, 15–20 minute MRE session. Target audiences include shepherds, farmers, scrap-metal collectors, students, women's groups or local government staff. Trainees who do not perform serve as audience members. Presentations and roleplaying occur on Day 4 and, if possible, again on Day 5, providing participants a chance to receive feedback and improve their presentations. Those with less time to present during the first session receive more time during the second session.

Participants take an entry test and a final test, which must be passed with a minimum of 60 percent. Questions answered incorrectly in the beginning should be addressed during the course, giving participants the chance to learn



Figure 7. MRE material has no words, as numerous languages are spoken in Mali and many persons are illiterate.

and excel in the final test. During the course, grading depends on participation, while the MRE session presentations are valued higher than the final test. The core facilitators, usually two persons and a group of trusted senior participants grade each participant on seven criteria throughout the week: participation, motivation and interest, resourcefulness (during presentations), teamwork, presentation and communication skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, and negotiation skills.³ In the afternoon of Day 3 or in the beginning of Day 4, these criteria need to be shared for transparency.

Importance of MRE Certification

Depending on the country and the level of experience among mine risk educators, participation of acknowledged senior facilitators and trainers is essential for the social acceptance of the instructors by all trainees. In general, trainees were surprised at the importance placed on **certification**, particularly the insistence on a written test and the grading of their performance. By the end of the training, almost all participants passed

the course, but quite a few passed due to strong presentation skills.

UNICEF in Mali and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Tajikistan also provided MRE certification workshops. The context, however, was quite different to the Sri Lanka case. The knowledge and skill levels of trainees differed from country to country: Sri Lanka was already a host to specially trained, professional MRE staff that were working there for many years.

In Mali, MRE was new, but many staff from Civil Defense and those working for international and national NGOs already had experience providing HIV awareness or other behavioral change-related briefings. The curriculum was adjusted slightly to include small arms and light weapons safety for example but proved suitable for Mali's context as well. In Tajikistan, MRE was provided for many years by teachers and volunteers from the local villages. Despite years of practical MRE experience, the certification course showed that they had received only basic MRE training from the Red Crescent Society and UNDP. A more systematic approach and



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systematic roleplaying with honest feedback helped to improve their capacities.

In the end, participants from all three case studies appreciated that their skills were recognized and improved. Those who passed were proud to become certified mine risk educators.

The MRE community should agree on standard curricula for basic and advanced MRE courses. While useful in Sri Lanka, accreditation may not be necessary in other countries where well-functioning MRE programs correspond to low levels of threat experienced. In Tajikistan, the certification mechanism should standardize and improve MRE for the coming years. ©

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