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Harshi Gunawardana
Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD)

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Mine Risk Education in Mindanao, Philippines

Since 1968, the Bangsamoro region of central and southwestern Mindanao in the Philippines has experienced fighting between Muslim separatists and autonomists and the Philippines government. The conflict, including recent fighting initiated by breakaway insurgent groups, continues to leave unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination around Bangsamoro. UXO threaten the safety, livelihoods and security of communities in the region. Since 1999, more than 500 landmine/UXO casualties have been identified.¹

by Harshi Gunawardana [FSD]



An FSD team member uses magic to draw the attention of children to MRE.
All photos courtesy of Harshi Gunawardana/FSD.

Following the signature of the Framework Agreement in Bangsamoro between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in October 2012, the *Fondation Suisse de Déminage* (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action, or FSD) and its national partner, the Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines, began work to reduce the threat from landmines and UXO in conflict-affected areas. The program expanded to cover mine- and unexploded ordnance (UXO)-risk education (MRE) and develop local capacities in UXO clearance, and explosives and weapons stockpile management.

In September 2013, two weeks of intense fighting between Philippine security forces and the Mindanao National

Liberation Front left parts of the Philippines' sixth largest city, Zamboanga, littered with UXO. In a three-week clearance operation, Philippine explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams removed more than 700 pieces of UXO.² Hazardous items, however, continue to remain under multiple layers of rubble and debris. As residents and repair teams return to the area, they will undoubtedly uncover UXO.

Non-technical Surveys

In FSD's Mindanao Program, an important aspect of the work is non-technical survey (NTS), which has been carried out since 2008. This activity involves collecting and analyzing new and existing information about hazardous objects and areas.



A community MRE session.

The survey teams map types and locations of UXO and report these to police or army EOD teams. In addition to NTS, FSD conducts MRE and gives community-safety briefings.

Train-the-Trainer

FSD Mindanao Programme Manager Tony Fish asserts, “In response to the Zamboanga crisis in 2013, FSD recognized the paramount need for an emergency MRE to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps. To assist the community while minimizing the level of funding required for the MRE program, FSD trained local volunteers including police officers, criminology students from Western State Mindanao University, Save the Children, and members of the local nongovernmental organizations D’ALERT and CAPIN. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provided assistance in conducting the training and in making initial contact with IDP camp managers in the Evacuation Centers.”³

Filipino, British, and Sri Lankan instructors trained MRE providers and visited evacuation centers to inform evacuees of what UXO can look like, where it might be found, the risks it poses, safe/unsafe behaviors to adopt/avoid, and who to call for assistance. MRE participant groups also received MRE kits to use in future sessions. Aid agencies, local volunteers and workers who carry out resettlement and development projects in these affected areas will also receive MRE.

The program aims to reduce the risk to local communities and strengthen the peace process by facilitating cooperation in UXO reporting and clearance between all stakeholders in the Mindanao peace process.

Community-based MRE

In 2014, FSD’s MRE program shifted from an emergency mode to a long-term, community-based approach. In Mindanao, UXO presents a significant risk to local communities.⁴ MRE involves trainers visiting schools or community centers to warn people, particularly children, of the dangers involved in tampering with UXO. Participants are advised to report dangerous objects and mine/UXO accidents in their areas to *barangay* officials and the police.⁵

MRE consists of various educational activities aimed to raise awareness and promote behavioral change through campaigns and community liaison. FSD continued providing MRE and training courses for community volunteers who will work in Zamboanga and the Sulu Archipelago—areas where FSD has little or no access.⁶ The program encourages these volunteers to educate beneficiaries to take responsibility for their safety in UXO-affected areas by discussing risks and sharing any recent changes with their communities.



A volunteer provides MRE to children.



An MRE volunteer delivers a puppet show to children.

MRE Volunteers

The current community-based MRE program consists of volunteers from

- Zamboanga
- Sulu Archipelago
- UNICEF's Child Protection Workgroup in Mindanao
- Nonviolent Peaceforce's local partner agencies in Datu Piang in Maguindanao province

MRE providers often have unique strategies for delivering messages to people of different ages. By working together as a team, providers share their preferred ways of teaching. Moreover, they sometimes field test new methods to convey standardized MRE messages.

FSD MRE teams conduct knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) surveys to assess MRE's impact on affected communities as well as returnees. The teams gather responses using a mobile data-collection platform, i.e., tablets. KAP surveys highlight target areas for future MRE programming. The survey results indicate specific target groups for MRE, e.g., schoolchildren who can be reached through child-friendly MRE materials such as games, stickers, masks, billboards and lunchboxes, or via women through house-to-house MRE sessions with female teams, flyer distribution or large billboards in each village after conducting MRE sessions.

MRE training materials include seven posters, each presenting key messages in local languages: *Tagalog*, *Tausūg* and *Yakan*. Pictures also feature true-to-scale mines and UXO. In addition to regularly programmed messages, FSD developed MRE materials specific to the mines and improvised explosive devices (IED) used by the New People's Army in Eastern Mindanao. To reach the general public and provide MRE messages in remote or inaccessible areas, FSD broadcasts MRE messages through the ABS-CBN network. The beneficiaries find it convenient to download and learn about MRE using a mobile app, and become familiar with shapes of common UXO and various safety messages. They can take a picture of the item and directly report it to the proper contact through the app. The first release of the FSD MRE app is available on the Android and Apple app websites. This is the first version available and tailored for the Philippines and will soon be accessible for other countries in different languages. To install the MRE app, visit: <http://bit.ly/1Ejivmj>.

FSD hosts regular technical working groups (TWG) to unite MRE providers, volunteers, partners and other entities including the Department of Social Welfare to extend MRE's reach using standard key messages and by reviewing material development. TWGs also provide a venue for MRE partners to discuss strategic planning and methodologies to ensure MRE



An FSD worker provides house-to-house MRE.

is delivered in a timely and effective manner to those in need. FSD's MRE teams and volunteers created Facebook pages where they post updates on activities, locations and photos of their MRE sessions.

By September 2014, the following milestones were achieved:

- 275 surveys completed
- 98 UXO locations mapped and recorded
- 113 victim reports completed (60 items of UXO, five landmines, 37 shellings or bombardments, nine IEDs, and two unidentified causes)
- 61 MRE providers trained
- More than 1,000 MRE sessions conducted by FSD MRE teams and volunteers
- More than 35,000 beneficiaries received MRE

Looking Forward

FSD will assist Zamboanga City authorities to incorporate MRE services

into the Zamboanga City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan. FSD is also integrating MRE into university and school curricula. MRE lessons will appear in textbooks, which will be printed and distributed in local languages to target schools in Mindanao. MRE training will be integrated into universities' National Service Training Programs. Based on increased demand for MRE as well as part of its commitment to strengthen local capacity, FSD will conduct further MRE provider trainings in Mindanao in 2015. FSD also plans to train Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces personnel in UXO clearance and ammunition-safety management in the near future. ©

See endnotes page 65



Harshi Gunawardana is a mine-risk education technical advisor with FSD. She has nearly 10 years of experience in the mine action sector, particularly in training, managing, coordinating and supporting mine action projects. Her interest in MRE grew while working in Myanmar and the Philippines, training people to conduct risk education in their communities. Gunawardana has a master's degree in public management from the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration. She has worked at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining in Switzerland and with Norwegian People's Aid. She is reading for her Doctor of Philosophy in management at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (Sri Lanka).

Harshi Gunawardana
Technical Advisor
Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD)
FSD Project Office, Al nor Complex
Sinsue Ave, Rosary Heights 9
Cotabato City / Philippines 9600
Tel: + 064 552 0311
Email: harshi.gunawardana@staff.fsd.ch
Website: <http://fsd.ch>