

Making It Relevant: Risk Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo

For many years MAG (Mines Advisory Group) has delivered risk education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through its humanitarian mine action programs. In 2012 MAG evaluated its educational methodologies and their effectiveness on different target groups in DRC.

by Vicki Peuple [MAG (Mines Advisory Group)]

For years, risk education has been a central component of humanitarian demining activities. Key to communicating the dangers posed by the presence of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), risk education can significantly reduce the risk of accidents before clearance takes place.

MAG (Mines Advisory Group) has delivered risk education to affected communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since 2006. Working through dedicated community liaison teams, MAG has gained significant experience and seen firsthand the positive impact that risk education can have on communities still suffering from the effects of conflict.

Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is rarely effective in any educational activity, MAG developed an array of tools and techniques to allow a tailored approach for delivering risk education to various groups in communities. These range from formal presentations for nongovernmental organizations and national authorities to focus group discussions with rural women. MAG continually develops new methodologies in response to changing needs and realities in mine-affected communities.

Evaluating Approaches

With funding from the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), a recent project implemented from February to June 2012 sought to examine how diverse approaches to risk education delivery can produce different levels of learning among various target groups. Findings from this project allowed MAG to evaluate its approach to risk education.

To measure the program's effectiveness, MAG community liaison teams normally use a tailored survey that tests comprehension of key messages among target beneficiaries. The survey is typically completed immediately before and after risk education sessions. With DFID funding, MAG monitored for



A MAG community liaison officer delivers risk education messages to children in Dimbelenge territory, DRC. All photos courtesy of Vicki Peuple/MAG.

the first time the change in content-retention levels over time and completed a comprehensive analysis of the results across different target groups and methodologies.

Target Groups

For the project, MAG identified three principal target groups for risk education activities and employed three different methodologies.

First target group. MAG used general presentations for the first target group consisting of up to 50 adults (women and men). These sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes and covered the principal themes of risk education: ERW identification/recognition, ERW effects and impacts, suggested behaviors, and recognition of local and international ERW markings.



A beneficiary and MAG community liaison officer explore the dangers of UXO during a women's risk education session in Dimbelenge territory, DRC.

Trained community liaison officers delivered the sessions in the local language using standardized banners with words and images. The participants' ability to read or write did not affect the training. The officers encouraged audience members to participate at various points during the session, particularly during sections on behaviors (e.g., demonstrating ERW marking, informing populations, etc.). Each session included time for questions and answers.

Second target group. MAG selected groups of eight to 10 women, to participate in the second target group, which consisted of focus-group discussions to convey the content. This methodology encouraged participants to lead discussions around the principal themes of risk education. Selected images stimulated debate about key subjects. A facilitator guided the discussion, usually with a second, supporting facilitator acting as an observer. The objective was for participants to identify the problem and develop solutions. This process of analysis helps to develop key messages in beneficiaries' minds and assists with identifying and exploring risk-reduction strategies. It also relies on strong audience participation.

Third target group. Primary age schoolchildren comprised the third target group, usually reaching around 30 participants for each session. MAG taught key messages through song and play. In this approach, images (standardized and approved by the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre) and games stimulated discussion about ERW effects. By using words and image banners, MAG taught children UXO- and

mine-recognition basics. Role-play illustrated safe behaviors that children should adopt in the presence of ERW. The sessions were highly participatory and were kept to a maximum of 30 minutes to maintain the children's interest.

During the course of the project, 2,506 individuals from 32 villages in Dimbelenge, a territory within DRC's Kasai Occidental province, benefited from the risk education activities. Of these villages, half were included in the first target group and participated in the general presentation, while the other half were part of the second and third target groups. In total, 456 beneficiaries completed surveys before and immediately after risk education sessions and again one week later. The results revealed interesting patterns of understanding among the beneficiaries.

Outcomes

Immediately after the session, all groups demonstrated a notable increase in understanding. On average, before the program, beneficiaries answered only 42 percent of questions correctly. Immediately after the sessions, 82 percent of the questions were answered correctly. This suggests that all beneficiaries were interested in the messages relayed and supports the success of the various methodologies. After one week, the average number of correct answers was only reduced by 1 percent, with 81 percent correct. Further follow-up is needed to determine how long high levels of understanding are maintained.

Beneficiaries in the first target group on average demonstrated the highest levels of understanding of risk education both before and immediately after the sessions. This is most likely because these groups consisted of a higher ratio of men, who generally have more access to education in DRC than women. This methodology may also be the most well-known to MAG community educators, and hence they deliver it most effectively.

Beneficiaries in children's groups demonstrated the lowest levels of comprehension before and immediately after the sessions, which is most likely due to factors including participant age and education level. However, these results may also suggest that MAG educators do not yet implement the children's sessions as effectively as other methodologies and that adaptations in content delivery may be needed. Alternatively, the retention survey may need modification specifically designed for children.

Although the second target group, the women's group, demonstrated lower levels of understanding than the first target group (consisting of men and women) before and after the sessions, the women who participated in focus group

discussions (second target group) demonstrated the greatest increase in understanding. This group answered 44 percent more questions correctly after the risk education session than before, when the average increase across all groups was 41 percent. Finally, women benefitting from focal groups also displayed the highest rate of information retention on the quizzes given one week after the risk education sessions.

These results suggest the methodology relative to the target groups was the most effective for the second target group. This suggests that the focus-group approach can effectively be used in risk education activities for women in DRC. Recognizing strategies that reach women and girls is important when working in a country like DRC, where women are far less likely to partake in community education activities carried out in a public and mixed-adult setting (as done with the general presentation methodology used in the first target group). In addition, women are frequently those most at risk from ERW's negative effects. Women are usually most likely to enter potentially dangerous areas such as fields, wooded areas and water sources because this is where their daily activities lead them (e.g., cultivating land, collecting water and firewood, etc.). Often, women are the least educated about the potential risks of mines and UXO and are the least informed about what to do if they find an item.

The survey also analyzed the educational content that beneficiaries most and least understood. Very similar patterns emerged across all groups. Before MAG delivered the risk education, beneficiaries on average had a notably high level of understanding of mine and UXO dangers and how to recognize a potentially dangerous area in their community. However, participants did not know



A MAG community liaison officer carries out a risk education message retention survey with a beneficiary in Dimbelenge territory, DRC.

how to identify mines and UXO or the behaviors to adopt around them. Familiarity with mines, UXO recognition and improved behaviors around UXO increased significantly after risk education sessions. In some cases, beneficiaries still seemed unclear on how to recognize the difference between mines and UXO and the related appropriate behaviors.

While the results were not unexpected, the study provides evidence that a tailored approach to risk education is likely to yield more positive results relating to beneficiary learning and understanding. Organizations should continually monitor and assess the effectiveness of their interventions to ensure that their risk education program is effective. When done correctly, risk education positively impacts the community. 🌱



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