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Mine-risk Education in Ecuador: A Person-to-person Approach

by Nelson Romeo Castillo Landazuri [Organization of American States]

"Explosive Mines Kill" is the message that the Organization of American States' Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal program wants to get across to communities living in mined areas in Ecuador. By taking an interpersonal approach to mine-risk education, the AICMA campaign advocates hope to raise awareness about the risks associated with anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance.

Mine-risk-education campaigns in Ecuador take a very personal approach in reaching communities at the local level. The campaigns take place in remote cantons and parishes where the lower Andes mountains give way to the Amazon. The campaigns cover populations living near suspected mined areas or where the Ecuadorian Army conducts humanitarian-clearance operations.

The Organization of American States' *Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal* program conducts annual workshops and training sessions for natural leaders from the affected communities. These leaders then become message carriers and advocates who promote safe landmine handling behaviors within their societies.

Methods

With the objective of reaching segmented populations exposed to the dangers of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance, the OAS MRE campaigns in Ecuador employ a variety of dissemination methods. People are key transmitters in the remote region where mountains become jungle. AICMA staff in Ecuador, along with trained message advocates, spread their campaigns community by community and house by house. Women have become essential to message communication because men are usually out during house visits. In this region of Ecuador, of all the population educated on mine risks, 55.2 percent are women. Where appropriate, safety messages are communicated between children, by children to adults and by women to all affected by the landmine risk—but they are always person to person.

School supplies facilitate message communication among children. AICMA personnel distribute pencils, pens, notebooks, rulers, chalk, backpacks, chalkboards, maps and flags. Preventive education is conducted in each school in the region involving the students and their teachers. When educating adults, using T-shirts, caps, water bottles and water dispensers to convey the message is very useful. Additionally, educational sessions are supplemented by



Nelson Castiollo meets with members of the Shuar community, teaching them about the dangers of landmines and UXO.

Photo courtesy of the author

audio-visual materials, and stickers, pamphlets and posters are distributed. All this material carries the message that "Explosive Mines Kill" in both Spanish and Shuar, the native language. Educational sessions for adults take place in community settings with most adults and village elders attending.

The AICMA program also has two telephone lines dedicated to MRE, so the local population has direct communication with program staff from the nearest town. The locals are able to provide information about possible mined areas and can communicate the need to conduct preventive education. They can also report the occurrence of landmine incidents.

Campaign Phases

AICMA in Ecuador has succeeded in carrying out its annual MRE campaign in four phases:

Phase one. AICMA campaign managers train local leaders from the cantons and parishes along with local school teachers, both male and female, as principal campaign communicators and advocates. The program facilitators establish face-to-face contact at the community level by means of question-and-answer sessions. These discussions educate the community on proper procedures when confronting AP mines or unexploded ordnance.

Phase two. The AICMA program conducts educational campaigns throughout the region by way of interpersonal communication to promote necessary changes in behaviors among members of affected communities.

Phase three. AICMA monitors the effectiveness of the campaigns presented by the campaign communicators. It also assesses how successfully the educational materials spread campaign messages and awareness to children and adults. Since 2004 there have been no reported incidents.¹

Phase four. The AICMA program sustains motivation for safe behaviors by revisiting schools. The program underwrites the local construction of blackboards or additional school supplies to reinforce the campaign's themes and its "Explosive Mines Kill" message.

MRE Campaigns and General Education

To date, no formal integration exists between MRE campaigns and state education programs. Nevertheless, teachers in each school review safety issues concerning anti-personnel mines with their students. It is worth noting that MRE campaigns are organized and coordinated by the national demining authority known as the *Centro de Desminado de Ecuador*. The demining sector of the Ecuadorian Army, called the General Demining Command, and the local Red Cross, participated as well.

It is essential to include the active participation of the government and its many stakeholders. Involvement by all stakeholders encourages the population to take safety precautions when faced with AP mines. This attention to proper procedures can help avoid injury and death.

The Personal Touch

In the remote region next to the international border with Peru, where most humanitarian-demining operations and MRE campaigns currently take place, person-to-person interaction is extremely important. Several Shuar communities still live as their ancestors did without electricity, roads or modern communications. Transistor radios and the occasional two-way radio are present, but the main form of communication remains personal interaction. AICMA MRE campaigns also take into account local customs, authority models, mainstream education levels and other cultural issues such as language and environment.

Successful communication with the indigenous population depends on effective methods of relaying information. The AICMA's successful MRE campaigns in Ecuador are based on their ability to deliver the programs locally, in a personal way. ↕

Biography

Nelson Romeo Castillo Landazuri, born in Tulcán, Ecuador, holds a Bachelor of Arts in social sciences with a concentration in teaching from Ecuador's Army Polytechnic Institute. He currently designs and oversees all mine-risk education campaigns and manages the victim-assistance program under the OAS-AICMA in Ecuador.



Endnotes

1. Program personnel control for mine reports (alerts) of new suspected hazardous areas and reports of new landmine incidents. Since 2006 the local population has made five reports alerting about the presence of mines in their area. These five reports indicate the locals acted properly, and so are indicators of MRE effectiveness. The number of new incidents remains at zero in the areas covered by the campaigns.

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