Mine-risk Education in Mine Action: How is it Effective?

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Mine-risk Education: In Mine Action: How is it Effective?

Mine-risk education has been an integral part of mine action since mine action began. It is one of the five pillars of mine action; an obligation of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention; Protocol V of the Convention on Conventional Weapons; and now the Convention on Cluster Munitions. As with all aspects of mine action, MRE has evolved and adapted over the past 20 years to reflect best practices and lessons learned. Today, a variety of MRE activities takes place every day in many different mine-explosive remnants-of-war-affected environments reaching large numbers of beneficiaries. With mine action entering its 20th year and the second Ottawa Convention review conference set to take place in Indonesia on 30 November 2009, MRE is on the cusp of further change. As MRE faces questions about its contribution, impact and demonstrable successes, this article provides a brief discussion to address specific mis-understandings and misperceptions about the discipline. It starts by highlighting the importance of MRE, clarifies the role MRE plays within mine action, and finally looks at the impact of MRE and the measures of its effectiveness.

The Principles Behind MRE

A key principle underpinning MRE is the individual’s right to receive accurate and credible pre-information about landmine risks and other hazards in the environment. In the public-health sector, when there is a proven public-health hazard, with casualties already recorded, the state or other authorities have an obligation to inform people of such hazards. Whether such information and awareness results in the desired behaviour change cannot be assured; however, every effort should be made to exercise duty and care to protect an individual’s right to safety. This same principle is even more relevant when it is applied to the situation of mines/ERW and MRE activities in particular, as the hazard in this case is caused by human intervention and also because most victim-activated explosives are, by definition, preventable.

Measuring the Effectiveness of MRE

One of the gaps noted in a recent MIRAI report is that it has yet to demonstrate its effectiveness in a tangible, reproducible way. Again, this criticism belies the full range of goals that MRE strives to achieve. When measuring the effectiveness of MRE, one has to take into account all the points made above and not simply focus on reduction of victims as an indicator. Evaluating behavior change can be very difficult and hard to measure, but this is not the sole objective of MRE. With all the outputs and outcomes that MRE strives to achieve, it is easier to count the numbers of posters distributed or the number of square meters cleared, but the actual benefits that these activities provide to at-risk populations is something that the international mine action community has been slow to articulate.

It should be highlighted that demonstrably well-planned and executed MRE activities have been undertaken in many countries including Cambodia, Croatia, Kosovo, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Sudan, among others. These programs normally rely on the same specific community needs, have a participatory and analytical approach, and apply methodologies that best suit the needs of the particular context. Often they also have an integral data-gathering element that assists in the planning and prioritization of the mine-action response. In Kosovo, the communities themselves decide on their local MRE volunteers, whose task it is to pass on invaluable information to the community and update the regional MRE teams with relevant information on incidents or discoveries of mines or cluster bomblets.

Despite the progress made in mine action as a whole, it also should be recognized that there are still projects that continue to be poorly designed and implemented, making their efforts ineffective. It is as much incumbent on MRE operators as on those in any other mine-action discipline to monitor and ensure the relevance and quality of projects and programs. This responsibility also falls to the national authorities who ultimately should demonstrate the most rigorous oversight.

New Developments

Change is continually taking place in MRE programming, as it does in all of mine action, the constant self-reflection and efforts to improve are hallmark of the industry. Many MRE programs no longer demonstrate “traditional” mine awareness, but rather combine this with a process of victim transfer involving a dialogue with the community on not only the landmine/ERW threat, but also wider developmental concerns, and seeking possible solutions.
T he people of Afghanistan have seen more than their share of war and the remnants of war and their consequenc-es have been a part of Afghans’ lives since the 1980s. Mine-risk education has therefore been important in communicating the dangers of IEDs. Children have always been among the most vulnerable to these dangers, and MRE campaigns are therefore usually aimed at them.

In the current conflict between the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and insurgents, civilians are again living with the consequences of war. With the rise of insurgent activity, IEDs have become increasingly common. IED casualties have risen tremendously and now surpass the IED casualties. This development fostered discussions about whether the mine-action community should create risk-education materials about IEDs, culminating in the development of an IED-awareness booklet in 2008.

Mine-risk Education in Afghanistan

MRE has gone through tremendous changes since its humble begin-nings in the late 1980s. The first mine-awareness programs were dev-oped by Operation Salvation, the United Nations’ emergency relief operation set up in Pakistan in 1988. At the time, the Soviet war in Afghanistan was at its peak, lasting until 1989, when the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the country became the scene of a vicious civil war. 1, 2

During the first years of Operation Salvation, it provided MRE mainly in refugee camps around Afghanistan. The booklet was the specific intention of preparing returns for the dangers of IEDs. At the end of the war, mine-awareness operations began to move into Afghanistan itself. 3, 4

The fundamental methodology established under Operation Salvation still provides the basic framework for MRE. MRE is commonly taught using mobile teams, with two teachers and a driver. The teacher team nor-mally consists of a man and a woman, giving them the ability to conduct gender-segregated classes. 5, 6

In general, MRE programs consist of lectures with the use of posters, silk screens, activity cards, brochures, booklets and pamphlets as educa-tion materials commonly termed “training aids.” The teacher introduces the IED-awareness booklet. 7, 8 The IED-awareness booklet is in- tended to supplement existing program materials.

To ensure that the guidelines and teaching systems set by the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan are followed, UNMACA’s quality-assurance teams perform routine checks of the MRE sessions. This system is established in order to provide feedback to the MRE teachers and nongovernmental organizations running MRE programs in particular regions. 9

The basic structure of MRE has changed very little over the years. The teaching system developed around regular MRE constitutes a teaching ideology that transcends Afghan MRE as a

The Challenges of IED Education and MRE in Afghanistan

Improved explosive devices have become a significant threat to the people of Afghanistan and have surpassed the threat posed by other types of explosive remnants of war. In order to combat these dangers, the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan has worked closely with other groups to develop an IED-awareness booklet that supports current mine-risk education efforts.

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