

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

While mine-risk education has faced questions about its effectiveness, it has been an important part of mine action for the past 20 years. As mine action continues to evolve, so does MRE and the ways in which it operates and works with at-risk communities. Continued success in many different countries has shown the effectiveness of MRE and the necessity of the discipline.

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Mine-risk education has been an integral part of mine action since mine action began. It is one of the five pillars of mine action¹ and an obligation of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention,² Protocol V of the Convention on Conventional Weapons³ and now the Convention on Cluster Munitions.⁴ 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 Colombia 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 misunderstandings 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 timely 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 behavior change cannot be assured; however, every effort should be made to exercise duty of care and 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 explosions are, by definition, preventable.



MRE campaign activity in celebration of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action. Juba, Sudan.
PHOTO COURTESY OF BOJAN VUKOVIC

The Functions of MRE in Mine Action

When it comes to the function of MRE within mine action, a key challenge has been the lack of understanding of the full scope of MRE by many across the program sector. There are those who believe that MRE is simply about raising awareness and sharing safety information with at-risk populations. While this narrow definition of MRE may reflect the reality in some programs, MRE has evolved to encompass far more than simple awareness-raising and information-sharing. Some of the key additional functions and contributions of MRE within mine action are explained below.

Emergencies. In emergencies, MRE may be the quickest and most effective measure to reduce risks from explosives in the short term, and before or during clearance. The return of large numbers of displaced people to areas littered with explosive submunitions in Kosovo after the cessation of conflict in 1999 is a good example. A more recent example is the conflict in South Lebanon in 2006 where emergency MRE is believed to have made a significant contribution toward protecting civilians from the large numbers of cluster munitions and other explosive devices left behind.

Community liaison. Community liaison, which is described as a key principle in mine action and a process through which the needs and priorities of mine-affected communities are put at the center of the mine-action activities, is another major activity that MRE programs often undertake. It is through this important function that mine action practitioners engage with communities and seek their active participation in the mine-action

process. Without proper community liaison, demining runs the risk of being an isolated activity dealing primarily with the land, but detached from the community for whom the land is actually being cleared. Many practitioners and stakeholders are aware of the extent to which land is cleared, but they do not have a solid understanding of the priority and impact on each segment of the community or the instances in which land is unused after clearance due to a lack of confidence in the clearance process.

Information gathering. MRE teams and networks can gather and provide a range of important data and information that is essential for informing the planning and implementation of mine-action activities. MRE teams and trainers, through their contacts and networks at the community level, are often the first to learn about the presence of dangerous areas/devices and any new accidents. The reporting of such information by MRE teams makes a major contribution to enriching mine-action databases, injury surveillance related to mines and ERW, and the deployment of rapid-response clearance or MRE teams, where available. As an example, through a network of more than 1,500 community-based volunteers established by Handicap International in five mine-affected provinces in Afghanistan, the program not only provided thousands of at-risk people with MRE, but it also received critical information about dangerous devices and accidents through contact with local communities.

Advocacy. MRE activities make a significant contribution in terms of raising awareness of the grave danger posed by mines/ERW and their impact on human rights and development; promote advocacy for the total ban on landmines and the initiation and implementation of mine-action activities; and contribute to the promotion of rights and services for victims. In some contexts, where the goals and intentions of demining may be looked upon with suspicion, it is often MRE and its networks at the community level that pave the way for the start of clearance and other mine-action activities. When successfully executed, MRE can uncover heretofore undisclosed information about the presence of mines in a conflict or post-conflict context, and contribute to risk reduction.

Measuring the Effectiveness of MRE

One frequently raised criticism of MRE 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.

As with all mine-action activities, distinguishing between outputs and outcomes has proven elusive. It is very easy to count the numbers of posters distributed or the number of square meters cleared, but the actual benefits that these activities provide to the 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 participatory programs have been undertaken in many countries including Cambodia, Croatia, Kosovo, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Sudan, among others. These



A group of children in Angola learns about dangers of mines/UXO through the use of story cards.
PHOTO COURTESY OF SHARIIF BAASER

programs normally are based on 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 is to pass on valuable 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 hallmarks of the industry. Many MRE programs no longer demonstrate "traditional" mine awareness, but rather combine this with a process of information transfer involving a dialogue with the community on not only the landmine/ERW threat, but also wider developmental concerns, and seeking possible solutions.⁵

In this context, messages evolve from discussions and focus on practical, detailed and precise alternatives as a way of promoting a reduction in risk-taking behavior. A key tool in this regard is village-risk mapping, which can also be fed into the mine-marking and prioritization process. In addition, as noted in the 2001 *Landmine Monitor Report*, “as a result of its community focus, mine awareness/community-liaison is also well placed to identify mine survivors who have unmet needs. Although community-liaison teams should not necessarily be expected to have technical expertise in mine-survivor assistance, sometimes amputees are not aware of the existence of prosthetics clinics, or believe that being fitted with a replacement or even a first artificial limb will be prohibitively expensive. In such a case, the simple transfer of information—and possibly the provision of transport—can suffice to make a world of difference to an individual and his/her family.”⁶

Similarly, a broader community-liaison approach can include rapid-response “spot” explosive-ordnance-disposal activities. In Cambodia, the focus of MRE is now on risk reduction in the widest sense. The country

modified its traditional information-based approach in favor of one focusing more on undertaking concrete steps to make a particular area safe. This process is accomplished through improved marking and removal of known and dangerous ordnance. The approach is aided by the fact that a team may spend many days in a village undertaking unexploded ordnance removal, proximity clearance, awareness presentations, discussions and mapping.

In order to better protect children from landmines and UXO, “child-to-child” training entered the MRE lexicon in 1999, with a number of organizations incorporating “child-to-child” methodology into awareness programs, most notably in Kosovo. In a context where teaching is typically authoritarian and learning is rote, child-to-child techniques can be liberating and empowering both for the children and their teachers. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that this approach also results in information sharing in the home and, as such, it can be used to educate parents via their children.⁷

Similar to demining, MRE should also demonstrate a clear and concise approach to prioritizing its activities. It is one thing to tar-

get thousands of people assumed to be “at some risk” through a well-designed community-based project or provide basic radio messages to millions, but it is quite another to make sure that all those who are truly the most at-risk are targeted, first with the appropriate messages and second, in a timely and systematic manner. Ongoing national surveillance systems on mine/ERW incidents, combined with survey tools on knowledge and practices, provide key data that can help identify the most at-risk groups of people in the most at-risk communities, adjust prevention messages and find the best channels to reach them.

Continued Necessity

MRE continues to evolve in tandem with the changing nature of the mine/ERW threat and communities’ needs to practice effective risk reduction. As such, MRE is no more about simple awareness-raising than demining is about just digging up landmines. MRE continues to be an integral part of our efforts and responsibility to meet the needs of those living in mine-/ERW-affected environments and to help fulfill their universal right to life. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 112



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