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Remote Risk Education in Syria

Unable to be physically present in Syria due to ongoing conflict, DanChurchAid (DCA) is collaborating with a network of journalists and activists in order to assess the need for risk education in the country. By framing its risk education curriculum and strategies around this information, DCA’s mine action initiatives are tailor-fit for the hard-to-reach populations of war-ravaged Syria.

by Nikolaj Søndergaard [ DanChurchAid ]

Due to security concerns, removing explosive remnants of war (ERW) in most parts of war-torn Syria is nearly impossible; however, the need for this type of work is enormous. After four years of conflict, the threat of unexploded ordnance (UXO) is a part of daily life for thousands of Syrians and will be for many years. Opportunities to address this problem are scant, pushing mine action agencies such as DanChurchAid (DCA) to think outside the box.

Since 2014, DCA has piloted an innovative project delivering safety messages to hard-to-reach populations inside Syria. The Risk Education Ambassador Project is modeled after the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) method, which seeks to understand security issues in humanitarian crises from a local perspective while adapting the global humanitarian response accordingly.1

International Media Support (IMS), a Danish nongovernmental organization, and Radio Rozana, an independent, Paris-based Syrian radio station with a network of freelance journalists in Syria, implemented the Risk Education Ambassador Project. Launched in June 2014, the project aimed to deliver risk education and create awareness of the threats posed by ERW in Syria. Additionally, the program was a trial to determine if this method would help them better understand the situation inside Syria and to develop new ways to diminish the risks. Nineteen new Syrian risk education ambassadors were selected and participated in two workshops in a country neighboring Syria.2 The majority of the 19 participants were journalists in contact with IMS or associated with Radio Rozana, while the remaining participants were activists who were already spreading information voluntarily inside Syria. After the workshops, participants returned to Syria to carry out the risk education initiatives.

DCA risk education coordinator Teresa Tavares, who was responsible for the project says, “We knew that there are Syrian media that are very innovative. They are, among other things, good at using social media and radio spots to spread information. We thought that we could use these and other methods to disseminate relevant safety messages. At the same time it would be a strength to cooperate with people who know the context and have access to some of the hard to reach places we would not otherwise have access to.”3

Working Remotely

Before starting the project, DCA needed information about the ERW situation inside Syria, which is where the L2GP approach first came into use during the project. The initial step of the process always involves asking affected individuals to name the most important threats and challenges they face. For the Risk Education Ambassador Project, obtaining this information was crucial to defining the shape and content of the workshop sessions as well as the risk education messages themselves, thus ensuring coherence with local knowledge levels. DCA therefore distributed a questionnaire survey among the 19 participants prior to the first workshop in order to gain a better understanding of their perception of the ERW threat inside Syria and how to mitigate it.

The result of the questionnaire showed that even without the ability to conduct a survey inside Syria, obtaining useful information on the threats and potential solutions outside the country is possible. The Syrian journalists and activists had significant knowledge of the ERW dangers facing the Syrian population, including a thorough understanding of the spread of ERW resulting from recent conflict as well as the most ERW-affected and accident-prone areas. The first Risk Ambassador Workshop was thus tailored to suit their knowledge levels.

“These journalist and activists came directly from the areas of fighting, and they have experienced it all up close. They live with the barrel bombs, suicide attacks, etc.,” explains Tavares.
Solutions Framed Around Survivors’ Needs

Part of the L2GP concept is utilizing the fact that people living in war-torn regions often develop creative coping and survival mechanisms and tactics. With a little assistance, the best and most innovative methods can disseminate further and benefit many more people. DCA’s experts provided the expertise and professional backbone in designing the exact type of information and quality assured content for distribution. However, the participants’ were responsible for developing actual solutions and implementing the project.

The Syrian journalists and activists were enormously resourceful and creative. Many of the participants had significant experience in communications. They were extremely enthusiastic about the trainings, and quickly absorbed the recommended ways of communicating messages related to building community safety and resilience. The main objective of the first workshop in the spring of 2014 was to draft work plans for the participants. Participants had different ideas and wishes regarding how they wanted to work in Syria; thus the workshop was used for planning the work and setting up mechanisms for quality assurance. It mostly focused on sharing knowledge, forming a network and planning the reporting of the activities.

“We created a Facebook group, which we could use to keep contact with the network, and we created action plans for each participant, so we knew what activities were planned and should be reported on,” says Tavares.3

Designing Risk Education With Creativity

DCA employees organized the workshop, and gave lessons on recognized and proven methods in disseminating safety messages. Special emphasis highlighted how to target different audiences using various messages and techniques. For example, risk education targeting children utilizes different methods than risk education for adults.

The second workshop took place in September 2014, and served as a means to assure the quality and standards of the work that had already been carried out as well as to help participants develop concrete activities for further exploration. DCA facilitators encouraged the free flow of ideas, and were awed by the participants’ investment and enthusiasm.
“There were some who created radio spots, while others used social media to get the safety message out. Some of them have created posters, and some got safety messages into a children’s magazine that have been spread in some of the IDP [internally displaced persons] camps inside Syria,” Tavares explains.³

DCA brought a graphic designer from its headquarters to assist the risk education ambassadors with knowledge and input on how best to convey messages graphically. Some examples of the initiatives resulting from this process include seven radio spots produced and broadcast inside Syria; articles and graphics published in Syrian magazines, newspapers, and a children’s magazine; and posters and flyers distributed inside Syria featuring ERW illustrations. DCA’s L2GP expert also attended the workshop.

**Obstacles and Successes**

Despite participants’ enthusiasm, the program faced many difficulties. The primary challenge is that the participants live in a war zone, which means that some of them can get wounded or even killed, or may leave the project for other reasons. Others have received an opportunity to leave Syria and have done so. Losing participants is a basic condition of this project, and DCA has tried to recruit new participants along the way. DCA has the utmost respect for the participants who take the risk to make a project like this reality. Additionally, the border between Syria and the country of the workshop is often closed, further complicating this project.

When working directly in war-affected areas is impossible due to security concerns, humanitarian agencies such as DCA can remotely support existing local initiatives. Even though this project faced challenges, DCA was able to provide lifesaving security messages to at-risk populations which were otherwise on their own. Similarly, DCA harnessed information from participants, gaining a fuller picture of the situation inside Syria which will benefit future projects. Many Syrians are very well educated and resourceful, making Syria a good place to use this approach.

“They are young educated people who just want to help their community. They see a problem, and they create solutions,” says Tavares, who believes the pilot project has big potential.³
There is already a proven spillover effect as the safety messages continue to spread inside Syria, almost a year later. During the project phase, safety messages reached approximately 38,000 beneficiaries by radio and 33,000 by articles, cartoons, posters, etc. People now know what to do when they encounter UXO.

According to Tavares, “The conclusion is that, for very little money, we can have an impact and reach some places that are otherwise very difficult to reach.”

No plans exist to orchestrate DCA’s workshops in other countries, as the Syria program is unique to its current, extreme political situation. However, with support from Norwegian Church Aid, DCA is running a project in Mali for the northern Kidal region—an area humanitarian workers also cannot access. In Mali, with support from local partner organizations, DCA selected nine qualified local persons in Kidal and flew them out of the area. Participants were taught how to collect information and make surveys to learn the locations of contaminated areas. Once given the green light to conduct clearance, teams can move in more quickly, allowing persons who fled to return home sooner.

There are significant challenges to working in Syria, e.g. instability inside the country and along the borders. DCA’s Syria program is evolving to meet the changing nature of the political scene. The Risk Education Ambassador Project is evolving along with these waves of changes.

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Nikolaj Søndergaard is a Danish journalist and worked for various media before he came to DanChurchAid (DCA) in 2013. Since then, he has been working as a communication officer with responsibility for covering DCA’s mine action activities.

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Landmines in Croatia Pose Threat to Incoming Refugees

After Hungary formally closed its border with Serbia on 15 September 2015, refugees fleeing conflict in the Middle East, Central Asia and Northern Africa have turned next to Croatia as a gateway to reach countries such as Sweden and Germany. The influx of refugees traversing the areas near the Croatia-Serbia border has raised concerns that refugees will encounter residual landmine contamination in Croatia as they make their way to Slovenia and Hungary. The contamination dates back to the four-year conflict which followed the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1995. The Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) estimates that there are more than 50,000 mines remaining in Croatia, amounting to a total suspected hazardous area of 496.8 km² that spans 75 cities and municipalities across 10 counties.

According to CROMAC, all minefields are surrounded by posted warning signs. However, there is concern that refugees unfamiliar with the terrain and the signs’ meaning may inadvertently wander into the fields. In order to spread awareness of this risk, officials are disseminating warnings and maps detailing the contamination to the refugees as they enter the country at the official border crossing points. Still, this method may not reach all refugees entering the country—particularly those that cross the border illegally. Multiple civil initiatives and groups have issued warnings via Facebook and other mobile social media apps and posted warnings along the Serbian route to warn incoming refugees of the contamination ahead in Croatia. Although Hungary reopened its main border crossing with Serbia after a week of political negotiations, many refugees are still passing through Croatia. The first surge of refugees entered Croatia on 16 September 2015, one day after Hungary closed its southern border with Serbia. As of 28 September 2015, about 78,000 refugees have entered the country.

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~ Megan Hinton, CISR staff