

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

---

Volume 4  
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 9

---

October 2000

## Integrated Mine Action: A Collective Approach to Mine Awareness

Margaret S. Busé

*Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Busé, Margaret S. (2000) "Integrated Mine Action: A Collective Approach to Mine Awareness," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol4/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).



# Integrated Mine Action: A Collective Approach to Mine Awareness

*An interview with Andy Wheatley, Community Liaison Manager, Mines Advisory Group (MAG)*

*by Margaret Busé,  
MAIC*



*Survey and data gathering in Angola.*  
Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

## *How did MAG get started with integrated mine action?*

Andy Wheatley: MAG was started in 1991 by Rae McGrath, our first executive director, who undertook a mine assessment in Afghanistan, which eventually led to the creation of the U.N. Angola program. Much of the initial work that MAG actually was involved in in the early days was assessments, surveys and getting information on the mine threat facing communities out into the open. Information gathering and dissemination of the impact of mines on civilians was considered as important as landmine removal at that time. MAG produced a joint report



*Integrated mine action team ready to deploy.*  
Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

with Human Rights Watch, in 1992, on the impact of landmines on civilians in Somalia, which focused on the mine threat there. In terms of programs, our first clearance and mine awareness programs were Northern Iraq, beginning in 1991, and Cambodia and Angola in 1992.

## *What did your full-scale programs involve?*

AW: Programs today follow an integrated approach wherever possible, with much stress placed initially on comprehensive information gathering and analysis. Community liaison teams gather information in order to understand clearly the nature of the mine threat, what assistance and how work should be prioritized. Those same teams are also involved in mine awareness and educational activities. No two countries are the same in the nature of the threat and how we respond to that threat, and that goes for both the mine awareness and the clearance side as well. The issues for us are trying to minimize the distinction between the data gathering and mine awareness work on the one hand and then the clearance side on the other. We are aiming for combined, integrated small teams that are multi-disciplined and then can pick up on a variety of functions.

## *Are your teams comprised of researchers, deminers and mine awareness people?*

AW: Yes, the approach outlined shows how we are trying to pioneer—MATS, Mine Action Teams, which are made up of 13 to 14 people. These teams would include maybe eight or nine deminers, a driver, a medic, a team leader and one or two community liaison specialists, and those teams will be very much self-supporting. Staff in those teams will have the capacity to undertake information gathering, mine field survey activities, marking and clearance activities. MAG has learned the hard way that the community liaison and clearance teams need to work closely together or the quality of the work suffers.

## *What about the attitude held by many demining organizations that you can't do everything well and some aspect, if not many aspects, of mine action will not be successful if they are integrated?*

AW: I think that is true to a point, but the work of NPA and HI have shown that mine action can, at times, combine well with wider humanitarian goals of rehabilitation of infrastructure or victim assistance. MAG will listen to communities' needs and try and respond to that. The key is to listen to what you are being told by the communities and be guided by their needs. There are always requests, which MAG will not be able to respond to for a variety of reasons, in which case, we will try and pass these requests on to other organizations. But sometimes there are areas outside of the immediate HMA sphere that MAG may be flexible enough to respond to, like assistance with EPI programs or logistical assistance or rehabilitation of water points or schools, for example.



*Community liaison at work.*  
Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

## *Has the MAT team approach been successful?*

AW: Yes, it is how we operate in Angola and Cambodia. It pays dividends. What I have been saying so far has come from what MAG has learned through successfully operating teams. It works—it's efficient and it's effective. It may not work in certain circumstances. There will also be sites, which require an alternative approach—the use of mechanical clearance or dogs, for instance. We see success on the ground, and it results in a safer environment for the community. Just asking people about their environment, where they work, where they play, can give quick results.

## *Where does mine awareness fit in?*

AW: I think it is central, certainly a cornerstone. I don't think many people will claim mine awareness



*Mine awareness leader facilitating group discussion.*  
Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

is an answer for the long-term, but most recognize that mine awareness in the short-term saves lives.

## *What type of mine awareness tools and educational materials does MAG use?*

AW: Our tools differ from country to country depending on the target audience, the nature of the threat and the nature of the population you are working with. No two countries are the same. For instance, in Laos, people have been living with UXO for 25 years. This is different from the population in Kosovo for whom it is a very unknown threat, and the people are not aware of or had to deal with it in their lives. The mine awareness approaches will be very different. There are also cultural differences; the way we work in Northern Iraq will be very different than how we work in Angola. Our programs will differ from place-to-place, program-to-program, cultural groups, age groups and ethnic groups.



**Do you have any method of measuring the effectiveness of the techniques that you are using?**

AW: It is very difficult to measure because you are dealing with people, and each situation is different. We are, in effect, talking about risk minimization. The effectiveness of mine action programs will come down to a number of things—the effectiveness of how you present that message, the regularity of that message, whether it is practical, realistic, appropriate, and whether it is interesting. If it is not interesting from the start then you are not going to grab people, and they are not going to listen to you, and therefore, they are not going to act on your advice. We are offering advice and suggesting alternative ways that people can make themselves safer in a mined environment. But at the end of the day, it is up to the individuals whether they act on that advice.

**Is there anything markedly different in your mine awareness approach for children?**

AW: Trying to influence the behavior of adolescents is extraordinarily difficult. The messages we give out vary. For example, in Kosovo, we relied on the Child-to-Child Program, which is an approach that

uses peer pressure to bring about change. With guidance from us, children developed a series of messages and ways of delivering that message—plays, songs, games, etc. MAG teams went from school to school working with teachers and kids to develop messages, and it seems to have worked better than we initially thought it would. In March 2000, there was an instance in Kosovo in a village called Braboniqc. MAG's Child-to-Child team had been there in November working with the kids. In March, a bunch of children playing in the hills came across a NATO cluster bomb strike. Some of the kids had only recently returned from the refugee camps and had not received any awareness training. They thought because the bomblets came from NATO that they must



*Through open discussions with the community, mine action teams can learn what their needs are for surveying, demining, assistance and mine awareness education.*

Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

have already exploded and began playing with them. The kids who had received training followed the correct procedure—keeping a distance and lying flat. I believe that MAG's Child-to-Child training minimized the number of children injured in the resulting explosion.

**Do you get the community involved in passing on mine awareness information?**

AW: Well, in Northern Iraq, we have a community-based program working with the schools [and] the mosques, using people of influence to pass on messages and be key workers in mine awareness work. In Kosovo, we are using schoolteachers [who make] mine awareness a part of the new school curriculum. In Vietnam, we are hoping to work with the authorities on putting mine awareness into the school curriculum.

**Have there been any cultural or tribal problems that you have encountered in teaching mine awareness?**

AW: Different cultures perceive the mine threat differently. In certain countries in Southeast Asia, there is the attitude that if people are hurt, that is their fate. Likewise, in Afghanistan, much is put down to God's will. That is very difficult to work with. In Laos, people have been living with UXO for 25 years so they don't see it as an especially dangerous thing because it is such a part of their environment, much as we accept the dangers of living near busy traffic in [Great] Britain. That can be a challenge. Also, there is a value in scrap metal, and initially, communities were suspicious of our teams, thinking maybe we were rival dealers! But over time, as communities came to un-

derstand what we wanted to do and how this benefited them, the message has slowly gotten across. Our Lao mine awareness teams spend over a week with individual communities and can try a variety of approaches in getting the message across regarding the dangers of landmines.

**Do your mine awareness educators receive any special training, or do you look for people with specific qualities?**

AW: All staff, expatriate or national will receive substantial training and orientation, and new staff is teamed with more experienced members. When recruiting, it is a person's attitude rather than the skills [he/she] brings that is most important—although the right experience and training is always welcome. We look for certain qualities in people—their approach, their attitudes, their cultural sensitivity. Increasingly, we are looking to recruit development professionals from more mainstream NGOs, such as Oxfam or Save the Children Fund. We find these people often have the skills and experience we are looking for.

**One thing that struck me about your organization was the humanistic approach that seems to underlie MAG's work. MAG seems to stress cultural sensitivity and awareness of the economic and social tolls landmines have on the communities while combining this awareness with the nuts and bolts of demining and mine action. Why is this so important to MAG's operating philosophy?**

AW: I think this can be true for much of the mine action community, but is certainly true with MAG. I think many NGOs reflect the spirit of those who start them up—and in MAG's case, that spirit was one of anger, outrage and injustice at the devastation mines and UXO can cause to innocent civilians long after a conflict has moved on. We have channeled that anger into an approach that allows us to do something effective to respond to that danger. To be effective, we have to be well-informed. The people with the information are the people living with landmines. This is the approach that proves itself time and time again. The trick is learning to access that information, to listen to what we are being told and respect information given. This is meaningful people-centered information gathering.

**How does MAG respond to the problem of people farming, grazing livestock and using paths and waterways before an area is considered safe or demined?**

AW: It is very difficult. Often, we do find that good surveys result in mine field reduction—that is, mine fields are actually smaller in reality than at first thought. Good surveying does free up suspected land. But you have to recognize that people will assess risk against necessity and do what they must in order to survive. Yes, land may be mined, but if the only choice is to utilize that land or to sit and watch your family suffer, of course someone will take the risk that cultivating their land entails. People need food, water and firewood, and to get it, they are often forced to take risks. The trick is to try and minimize the risks people expose themselves to.

**Where have you had the most success with your mine awareness programs?**

AW: What comes to mind occurred in our Angolan program in Luena, Moxico Province, which



*Most communities must live, work and socialize directly alongside mine fields.*

Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG

was a very large program. We were forced to leave there when the country slid back into civil war. What I find quite amazing and heart warming was that the mine awareness teams continued to work after our departure and the community continued to come to them when there was an accident or to report a landmine they had discovered. Those ex-staff members continued to act as an interface between the civilian population and the military lobbied for the removal of mines. They were so active that they were eventu-

*Effective mine awareness education can reduce the number of mine victims.*

Photo c/o Sean Sutton/MAG



ally hired by a German NGO, Medico. This sums up a lot for me about the *esprit de corps* at MAG. This is not just a job—it touches people quite deeply. In this instance, you had people living in extraordinarily difficult circumstances and continuing to work in a voluntary role in mine awareness.

***What are MAG's plans for the future?***

AW: We will continue to make our programs indigenous in Laos, Cambodia, Northern Iraq and elsewhere and slowly reduce our presence in Kosovo. Increasingly, we are involving ourselves in short-term work, either through the United Nations or by directly [establishing] indigenous capacity in many countries. We are shortly to start the second stage of training with OSIL, a local demining organization in southern Sudan. OSIL is one of the few indigenous mine action organizations in East Africa. We are working alongside of them training them in mine clearance, mine action and mine awareness activities. We are helping to reinforce their skills and build up their capacity to respond to the mine threat.

Other programs will depend on our ability to continue to attract donor funding.

***Is it one of the main goals to hand the programs over to the governments or local capacity?***

AW: We try to create a sustainable program with

self-sufficient capacity in the countries we work in. That is always the ideal or the goal we work towards. In Laos, that worked very well. The Mennonite Committee and the Lao government invited us in 1994 to join a small-scale clearance and mine awareness program. That was so successful that the government set up a national program called UXO Lao, which, with a lot of UNDP support, has been successful in managing mine action in many of the provinces. ■

**Andy Wheatley** has worked in relief and development for over 10 years, in northern and southern Sudan, Rwanda, Zaire, Mozambique and Sri Lanka. Most of that time was spent with Save the Children Fund (SCF) UK. More recently, he was the MAG Program Manager in Laos and is currently the Community Liaison Manager based at the MAG HQ in Manchester, UK.

**Contact Information**

Andy Wheatley  
MAG

45/7 Newton St Manchester M1 1 FT

Tel: 00 44 0161 236 4311

E-mail: [andy.wheatley@mag.org.uk](mailto:andy.wheatley@mag.org.uk)