Developing and Expanding Mine Awareness Programs

by Roger Hess, UXB International

Over the years I've seen various mines awareness programs (MAP) that were all very well intended. However, the actual content of the programs are in many situations, not in line with what the threat really is.

My involvement in Vietnam over the last two years has shown me some prime examples that the phrase "*know your enemy*" applies as much to a MAP system as it does to a clearance effort or Level-1 survey. For this specific region, the tasks, hazards, and requirements for all of these issues are totally different then working in the Balkans or much of Africa. The normal canned approach that has been developed and employed is worse then useless here since it causes funding to be spent to produce a product that is of no use to anyone.

Unfortunately, these programs do not seem to talk to each other enough because the same mistakes are often repeated or sometimes replaced by new ones. This would be very entertaining, if they were not so expensive.

Most of the MAP curriculum I've seen has a pre-prepared course of instruction that includes the local marking system plus the mantras of "Don't touch" and "Call the Authorities". Some have even recommend that anyone who finds themselves in a minefield to:

- Stop
- Find a non-metallic probe or prodder (*unless you are one of the few that carry one in your back pocket, this would likely involve wandering around*).
- Retrace your steps while prodding your way out (*unless you've just walked across a virgin snowfield or undisturbed mudflat, this is actually next to impossible*).

To improve on this program, we really need to look at what a MAP system is trying to accomplish and how it can be tied in with the rest of the mine action efforts for the country. I use the term mine action loosely since ***landmines may not be the most prominent threat of the country.*** However, it is a recognized term that everyone is used to, so we'll work with that for right now.

Here are some basic facts:

1. Education of the local population is one of the fastest ways to reduce the causalities.
2. Properly managed, the information gleaned from a good MAP system also supports the reporting system.
3. In order for the information flow to be effective, the central governing authority for the mine action system MUST be linked in to the MAP.
4. In order to ***keep it effective***, something must happen to that item once the information is reported, *other then placing it in a folder.*

To give an example on how this can be tied together as a functional program, I'll use the situation in Vietnam, Laos, and some parts of Cambodia as an example since they are very different from the Balkans and many parts of Africa.

Step 1: Assess the Threat.

Instead of trying to find out if there are landmines, look instead at what is causing the injuries. For many parts of SE Asia landmines were laid. In Vietnam, which is considered a severely mine-effected country, they were laid over 25 years ago and generally placed in defensive perimeters around the military bases or borders. The locals can show you where most of the mine fields begin and end. Instead of immediately pulling out the standard landmine curriculum, do a bit of Q&A on the situation:

Are these landmines still causing casualties? Age and corrosion has seized the firing mechanisms of most of the mines that have been found in the provinces.

Are casualties happening? For Quang Tri province, there is an average of around three to five a month that we know of. Many go unreported since the communication to many of the villages is very poor.

What is causing the casualties? If you ask the locals what is causing it, they will answer with "*Bom-Min*", which literally translates into *bombs and mines.* When you investigate the situation a little farther, you'll find the two main reasons are:

- Children playing with cluster bombs and 40mm grenades.

- Children and adults collecting UXO to sell as scrap metal in order to make a living.

If you look closer at this, you'll also be able to deduct something else: *The lions share of the injuries and deaths are caused by items that are in plain sight.*

So, is there a threat? Yes. The bottom line is that people are still being maimed and killed from **post-war explosive contamination.**

During the Vietnam war, these parts of SE Asia received more than double the tonnage of bombs dropped on it than was used against the European Axis powers during WWII, but it was dropped ***on about 25 percent of the landmass***. The only comparison I can draw to living here would be to try and raise your family in the middle of a well-used bombing range on a military training base.

Landmine threats are generally within the first 20cm of soil, though there are exceptions such as the western part of Cambodia around the Pailin area. According to the reports we received for that area, anti-tank mines have been buried past 1 meter deep with extension rods attached to the firing mechanism. In places like Vietnam, Laos, and many other parts of Cambodia, the threat continues well past 20cm and will stay active more then three times as long as a landmine.

Step 2: Develop a Plan That Helps to Reduce the Casualties.

First: Educate the locals about the hazards in a manner that properly address's their situation. To fully understand how to do this, you only have to look at your threat assessment to see what is causing the casualties.

In this case it is not walking along a path and something suddenly detonates under your feet, but it is primarily caused by the massive amount of UXO that are scattered across the landscaping.

In the situation I've provided, giving classes on landmine and UXO identification is near useless. These people have lived with these items in their backyard for over two decades, and you're going to show them what it looks like?

In many parts of SE Asia, if a MAP instructor holds up an inert cluster-bomb to show the children what it looks like the students will probably go outback and return with a handful of them to show the instructor what they looked like before the explosives were removed.

OK, so we definitely do not have a landmine and UXO identification problem. What we *do have is complacency problem* since they lack any fear or respect for the hazard. This will kill them just as effectively as a freshly laid landmine will. It is a problem that has to be addressed.

Complacency is a normal human reaction that comes with time and repetition. Anyone who has ever been in charge of landmine and UXO clearance projects will tell you that this is also the main problem most leaders face when managing clearance operations and one of the leading causes of accident in this profession is complacency of the deminers. If trained deminers have a problem with this, do you think the local population will be any different with enough time and exposure?

Second: Establish a reporting system with a central point of contact (POC) for the village, and someone for the POC to send the report to. Unless there is a central POC to report the problem, then going from province to province teaching school kids not to touch suspect items and to tell their parents about it is a hopeless effort. This is especially true for the remote areas that often feel neglected by international aid or governmental assistance. The residents of the remote villages often have very little faith in the government leaders, so to come out and teach them *"Don't Touch & Call Someone… Else"* doesn't go over very well and reinforces their doubts.

A system we are helping the local Peoples Committee in Quang Tri develop involves incorporating the local school teacher as the central point of contact for the village. The reasons are pretty simple:

a. The children are often the first ones to find the suspect items.
b. The teachers have in-depth involvement with the children on a daily basis and are generally very concerned about the children's welfare.
c. Most people in the village will know how to find the teacher if something is located.
d. In the same light, it's easier for an EOD response team to locate the village teacher than to try and track down someone that you only know by "Nguyen" or "Hoa".

Third: Ensure the reporting system ultimately goes to someone who can do something about the problem! This is commonly left as a generic part of the lesson plan that says nothing more than "*Contact the authorities*" and is one of the major flaws in a MAP system, though it is actually one of the most important steps of the entire process.

If the MAP system is not willing or able to follow through with a solution to the problem, then the locals loose confidence in the system and you've just wasted time, money, and effort, not to mention whatever the faith these people had put in to your program.

The most effective method I've witnessed to gain attention and respect for the hazard is a live demonstration of the destructive force produced by landmines and UXO. This is best done in conjunction with a MAP class and it should be planned for before the MAP team ever leaves the compound. More often then not, a perfect situation will present itself for a good demonstration since the locals will probably want to show you all of the hazards present in their immediate area. The same thing quite often happens with level-1 survey teams.

Our teams are just putting the final touches on a clearance project we did for PeaceTrees Vietnam in Dong Ha town, Quang Tri province. In a 16-hectare parcel that included an occupied village, we located and destroyed over 250 munitions. Many of these items were around the houses and included BLU-26 cluster bombs found at 30cm under the road we drove in on, and fired 40mm grenades at 50cm in gardens and back yards.

Accidents involving UXO happen frequently here and a young boy who was lucky enough to survive one of these accidents found a 40mm grenade beside a road that had washed out. This was the same munition that had nearly killed him a few years before, so he immediately contacted the PeaceTrees representative, who in turn brought it to our attention.

In response to this, our team actually performed the first foreign lead EOD mission on Vietnamese soil since the end of the Vietnam war. Not exactly something for the history books, but our guys are pretty proud of it.

Our public relations man went house-to-house and evacuated the people, the team leader set up protective works of old tires and sandbags to contain the blast, and the extra deminers searched the area for stray children. When everything was clear, the team detonated the grenade while the locals watched from a safe distance.

The tires flew about 5 meters in the air, the sandbags disintegrated, and a healthy "Boom" echoed for a bit. Afterwards, we talked to the parents and children to let them know that if anything else was found, to do exactly the same thing: leave it alone and contact us. The effect worked perfectly.

In the following 24 weeks, my teams disposed of over 40 items in this manner, most of which were close to or directly in occupied areas and had been known about for many years. Many of these items had been reported to the village leaders, but there was no one for them to call on in the past so they just tried to ignore the problem.

Step 3: Use the information gained to the maximum extent.

I've seen too many MAPs that express to the locals they are teaching that: "We're only here to teach you awareness." For the sake of a taking a few minutes to write down the information that the locals are offering and passing it on to the MAC, Civil Police, or an NGO with a Mobile EOD team, they could have organized the destruction of a hazard that if gone unchecked, may and probably will kill or maim someone.

Properly incorporated as a component of a bigger-picture mine action system, MAP programs can lend valuable assistance to the overall effort. Much can be learned from conducting the classes and organizing responses to the problems that the locals bring forward, which will help to paint a fairly accurate picture regarding the overall situation.

Instead of doing all the talking and only counting the numbers of people trained; we should also take the time to look, listen, and write down what the locals know. Then we can pass on the information to someone who can do something with it.

The information from an effective MAP program needs to be intergrated into the level 1 survey system and complimented with a EOD response program, since all are designed and deployed in the interest of public safety. This part of the program falls to six basic steps locals can be taught to help facilitate the first three.

1. Mark it.
2. Move the people away from it.
3. Report it.

Once the locals have done that, they have fulfilled their obligations. Then it's up to whatever the governing MAC, NDO, civil police, or Military HQ is for that area to deploy an EOD team to accomplish steps 4,5, & 6.

4. Protect the public.
5. Destroy or Render it safe.
6. Move on to the next one.

Having brought this approach up previously during landmine working group meetings, it always seems to bring on debates about sustainability and the cost involved with supporting this system. These debates are normally concluded with a statement like: "We must do a comprehensive study to ensure that the cost involved will benefit the maximum amount of people."

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Sadly, the people making these statements are normally those who have never cleared a landmine or destroyed a cluster bomb in their life, or have ever had to piece together what remains of a child that was disassembled by a UXO or landmine.

This MAP approach is completely different from the standard clearance methodologies and cannot be compared or evaluated in the same manner. It does not clear farmland, build schools, or develop any type of infrastructure.

What it does is add an asset to the program that is trained, organized, and equipped to rapidly respond to any reported hazard during and after the MAP training sessions, and by doing so will quickly reduce the amount of casualties sustained in their area of responsibility.

This EOD service is actually not a new concept. The U.S. EOD teams have been supporting the general public with this same type of service for around 30 years and are trained to do exactly this. This is not restricted to the continental U.S., but is often performed in the civilian communities near the military bases overseas, and is the same technique that our teams are in the process of passing on to the Vietnamese military.

Instead of studying and micro-analyzing if enough people will benefit from the cost involved, it should be viewed as how many lives and limbs will be saved because of MAP effort.

As for cost, our teams conducted the EOD responses in conjunction with the clearance effort. Doing it in this manner, the cost involved with missions was less then $200.00, including fuel, food, and explosives. That is the total cost for all of the missions. Based on that, the cost involved with the "comprehensive study" would likely fund a full years worth of EOD support to a MAP team.

If by chance the villages that receive the support may not happen to have a large enough population to justify the cost in some people's minds, then we would like to know the value placed on a child's limbs so we can plan accordingly. ■

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