

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 9
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 25

August 2005

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Recommended Citation

Cantini, Pia and Crini, Valentina (2005) "INTERSOS: Thinking Over and Practicing MRE in Iraq," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss1/25>

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INTERSOS: Thinking Over and Practicing MRE in Iraq

By: Pia Cantini and Valentina Crini, *INTERSOS*

Mine risk education (MRE) has become ever more essential to any humanitarian mine action programme and, recently, to any reconstruction and development strategy of mine-/UXO-affected countries. MRE has been passing through an evolution, both in terms of policies and international/national capacities.

In the past several years, U.N. agencies, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reached important achievements that contributed to development and strength of good MRE practices to better address the needs of the humanitarian workers and especially of the local affected communities.

First, a substantial challenge was promoted in a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) meeting, held in New York in September 2001. At the meeting, most of the participants (NGOs, UNICEF field representatives, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, etc.) agreed to change the term "mine awareness" to "mine risk education," highlighting a nominal and formal change of name, as well as a different concept and way to carry out activities in the field. Originally implementing the sensitisation and awareness activities in mine action projects, MRE activities now encompass much more. They include all the educational aspects aiming at changing risky behaviours of affected populations, which often need creative and concrete solutions to deal with severe socio-economic constraints. Also, they comprise a substantial shift in improving the quality and diversity of interventions. MRE shifted from a more information-oriented approach, based mostly on quantitative indicators, to a more education-oriented one, based on qualitative indicators.

Furthermore, the importance of strengthening the integration of MRE in mine action and humanitarian aid programmes has been also stressed. In this frame, the need to reinforce procedures and practices to keep a high level of success in the implementation of projects became ever stronger. In 2001, UNICEF subsequently started drafting MRE international standards to be incorporated in the International Mine Action Standards, which at that time already existed for demining. Therefore, thanks to the good example of demining standardisations already in practice, it was decided to produce MRE guidelines and national MRE standard operating procedures in the coming years.

The process is ongoing, so it is too early to analyse its effectiveness and impact at the field level. The risk of strict standardisation for MRE is inherent in the nature of the kind of activity that requires a certain degree of creativity, inventiveness and flexibility. Moreover, there is one additional thing that is fundamental to mention when speaking about the standardisation process: it is crucial that any mine action organisation (local or international) participate more actively in the elaboration of national standards and curricula, so that all can bring their best practices and precious knowledge of the field into their standard policies.

Over the past several years, UNICEF has assumed the leading role in the MRE sector, and the

good work of a number of mine action centres has improved coordination of MRE organisations (national and international) and MRE activities in the field.

A new effort in strengthening MRE practitioners' backgrounds and skills was instilled, mostly empowering national capacities and updating international staff's knowledge on new approaches and techniques. A lot of work was done in the last few years by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, Cranfield University, James Madison University's Mine Action Information Centre and other relevant sources to capitalise previous experiences and lessons learned, especially related to demining. Various training courses have been organised at the field level for middle and senior managers of the mine action sector. The hope is that this trend can be extended to MRE operators in order to consolidate skills to manage and implement efficient MRE projects in the field, with a particular focus on impact evaluation over performances and approaches.

Finally, it is crucial to mention the importance of mainstreaming mine action programs into development planning. As described by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Mine Action Team in its 2004 publication *Mainstreaming Mine Action Into Development*, mine action can "significantly reduce direct and indirect casualty rates and at the same time generate high social and economic rates of return.... Mine action has also proved to be a powerful confidence-building measure when negotiating and/or sustaining peace. It eliminates some of the signs of war and is a tangible indication to the population that trust is being restored." In this respect, in the near future, it will be necessary to work toward a new vision of MRE for development. MRE is, among mine action pillars, a "cross sector" for liaising with the other mine action and development activities and for creating a link with local communities to build confidence and trust among the affected population. If the future of MRE will be more integrated into development programs and peace-building operations in general, it is necessary to consider that fact in standards and procedures as well as in donors' policies and in pilot project activities in the field. Evolutions and changes in every sector are long and complex processes to manage, but they are vital and valuable to better address the international effort for a more sustainable and mine-/UXO-free world that we all foresee and hope for our planet.

During the last five years, INTERSOS, an NGO committed to assisting the victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts, has been part of the above-mentioned process, facing from time to time the challenges emerging from diverse contexts and situations, and finding different MRE solutions to better address the needs of communities affected by mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) in the field. In this respect, INTERSOS would like to introduce a summary of one of its specific projects implemented in the field in an emergency phase (the complete report is on the INTERSOS website, <http://www.intersos.org>).

Introduction

With the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003, most Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries—mainly Iran and Saudi Arabia—began to return to their homeland. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) set up procedures on both sides of the borders (country of origin and countries of asylum) to ensure volunteer repatriation with safety and dignity.

Within this framework, UNHCR funded INTERSOS support to Iraqi returnees to facilitate the voluntary repatriation process to southern Iraq. At the beginning of August 2003, INTERSOS refurbished a hangar at the port of Basra, located on the Shatt-Al-Arab riverside, to establish and manage a transit centre (TC) for returnees. At that time, about 14,161 returnees were registered at the TC and were provided assistance and accompanied to their areas of origin. Of the activities INTERSOS carried out, one of the most important was MRE.



INTERSOS-UNHCR Transit Center,
Maqal Port, Basra.

Emergency Mine Risk Education

Strategy adopted. INTERSOS decided to implement MRE through two different activities in order to meet all the needs of returnees. The strategy adopted in the first phase aimed at covering a large number of returnees in a short amount of time, warning them about the risks from ERW they might face during their travel back home and during their re-settlement due to ERW and landmines.

In a second phase, INTERSOS initiated a community-based activity in the villages where returnees were arriving, identifying and training community volunteers to spread MRE messages. In this phase, INTERSOS implemented an educational and sustainable approach intending to influence the behaviour of the beneficiaries in a lasting way for medium- to long-term results.

Factors conditioning the adopted strategy. In the first phase of the project, many external factors imposed a specific decision-making process in MRE implementation. In such emergency situations, INTERSOS preferred to adopt an MRE information profile through the following:

- Simple and direct messages
- Messages passed in a clear, quick, attractive and culturally sensitive way
- Repetition of messages in different situations and through various means
- Gender- and age-specific messages and means

The following are factors that mainly conditioned the "emergency phase":

- Limited time for MRE sessions
- Limited space for overall activities
- Need for integration of MRE sessions into other activities
- Beneficiaries' state of mind

The implementation of MRE activities in the TC. Returnees that arrive in the TC are obliged to pass through a process that involves the following:

1. Visual medical screening
2. Customs policy registration
3. UNHCR registration
4. INTERSOS registration
5. Vulnerable cases screening and registration
6. MRE
7. Non-food items distribution
8. Food and water distribution
9. Final loading of household belongings on the trucks and hand luggage with returnees on the buses.

Upon arrival at the TC, men are separated from women and children, as they have to follow a different procedure. Only men, in fact, are asked to register the family. Families are reunited only at the end of the process.

MRE Activities

To facilitate the above process, INTERSOS organised three MRE stations: one for men, one for women and children, and another one in the waiting hall placed next to the exit. MRE sessions are carried out at each station by the responsible MRE team. The two MRE stations for men and women are organised with posters—designed, produced and field-tested by INTERSOS with the help of a local artist from Basra—and fake minefields, marked strictly forbidden with conventional dangerous area warning signs and fake mines and items of



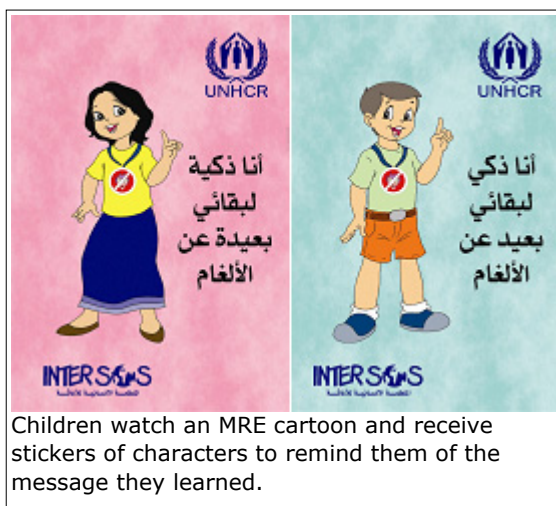
Visitors to the TC in Basra receive

UXO exposed on a surface of ground soil.

important mine-risk warnings.

The MRE station placed in the waiting hall is organised with a desk for distribution of INTERSOS MRE materials, mainly colored leaflets and stickers produced by INTERSOS. The wall surrounding this area is painted with murals showing key MRE messages. At this station, the two female local trainers are in charge. As soon as the participants complete their session in the "women's area," they reach the waiting hall. In the waiting area, there are benches on which to sit and a closed-circuit broadcast (on five TVs) of a 10-minute MRE cartoon. This MRE cartoon was created and produced by INTERSOS, with the financial support of the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), and specifically targets children. This asset creates an opportunity: it reiterates the messages and asks for questions or concerns. It is impossible for people seated inside the Centre to avoid seeing the cartoon.

As the video gets everyone's attention, it provides the two women of the INTERSOS Iraqi staff with another opportunity to further stimulate children on this matter with a testing card that reiterates simple visual MRE messages. With this simple tool, it is possible to estimate that at the end of the process, about 80 percent of children comprehended the messages properly. After this test, children also receive a gender-specific sticker based on cartoon characters with the MRE message "I am smart; I stay far from mines." A female and a male, the protagonists of the cartoon, are represented on two different stickers.



Children watch an MRE cartoon and receive stickers of characters to remind them of the message they learned.

All three MRE stations have a banner, printed on cloth two meters (6.96 feet) in length, with the following Quran Sura written in red: **ولاتلقوا بأنفسكم** **والتهلكة** **ألى التهلكة**, which means "Don't spoil your life by your own hands."

After an assessment done in conjunction with local experts, results showed that drawing Quran words near MRE messages is an effective way to make people reflect deeper on the consequences of their behavior. The field tests of this message assured that the message was suitable, relevant, and simple, while at the same time understandable, persuasive, and respectful of the dignity and tradition of the Islamic religion. Also, the feedback received from returnees was absolutely positive. INTERSOS decided to use this Sura in its MRE activity with the implication that it strongly links MRE messages to the Islamic Arabic culture and avoids the risk of MRE being perceived as an "external" and "Western" activity.



Banner with Quran Sura warning TC visitors: "Don't spoil your life by your own hands."

Community-Based Approach to MRE

As soon as the TC was up and running and returnees' flow increased, the second phase of the MRE plan was developed. In 2004, INTERSOS started a community-based mine/UXO risk education activity to address the threat of ERW in Basra governorate. The activity's aim was to develop a sustainable community-based network of volunteers able to spread MRE messages to their community, focusing on returnees. MRE aims to ensure that communities are aware of the risks of mines and UXO and are encouraged to behave in a way that reduces the risk to people, property

and the environment, the objective being to reduce risk to a level at which people can live safely, free from the constraints imposed by landmine and UXO contamination. Due to the unreliable security situation in Iraq, this activity has been deemed a "pilot project" in the framework of the UNHCR project.

At first, a needs assessment was implemented to identify the geographical area to cover and the main MRE needs to be addressed. Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources of information. After data was compiled and compared, the province of Al Sanger, located in Abu Al Kaseeb district of south Basra, was selected as top priority. Al Sanger shows high ERW contamination and an increase in population due to returnees. High consideration has been paid as well to the security issue in order to permit the MRE trainers to easily access the area.



MRE team with young returnees.

The INTERSOS MRE experts trained the Iraqi INTERSOS MRE team in the following:

- Reinforcing communication
- Using teaching/training skills to implement the community-based approach and participatory learning
- Selecting community volunteers
- Analysing situations
- Applying monitoring processes
- Clarifying project goals and INTERSOS MRE team responsibilities.

The INTERSOS MRE team selected and trained MRE community volunteers mainly among community leaders, including official leaders (e.g., Al Sanger local municipality employers and the district of Abu Al Kaseeb municipality employers), teachers and doctors. The train-the-trainers workshop for community volunteers is based on the INTERSOS MRE community volunteer guidelines and the results of INTERSOS' lessons learned. Unfortunately, security issues have dramatically limited the pilot project work plan.

Conclusion

During the past year-and-a-half, the two key words that influenced the INTERSOS MRE strategy in Iraq were "emergency" and "security." In these circumstances, INTERSOS chose to give two kinds of responses in order to address the needs of refugees during their travel back home and during their reintegration into their homeland. The goal has been to give basic MRE information to the largest number of returnees through public information in the Basra TC and at the border to spontaneous returnees in order to warn them about the ERW/mine risk they would encounter. Simultaneously at the MRE TC, a more sustainable response was focused on changing behaviours and training the community once returnees arrived. Of course, the entire process, especially the second phase, has been conditioned by the precarious security situation. Most of the targeted areas could not be reached and many communities could not be properly monitored. Education, sustainability and empowerment are all concepts that need a stable environment to be effective. Nevertheless, the involvement of the communities in INTERSOS activities has been impressive.

The lack of security also had other consequences. In April 2004, INTERSOS expatriate staff relocated to Kuwait and worked in remote management. To work from outside Iraq was a tricky and challenging task for the local staff as well as for the expatriates. Even though INTERSOS and UNHCR staff had to face these and other constraints and difficulties, the overall objectives and the specific objectives of the UNHCR project have been fully achieved.

**All photos courtesy of the author*

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7/28/2016

INTERSOS: Thinking Over and Practicing MRE in Iraq, by Pia Cantini and Valentina Crini (9.1)
Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction, Vol. 9, Iss. 1 [2005], Art. 25

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