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Mine Action in Burma: Building Trust and Incremental Gains

by Greg Crowther, Josephine Dresner, and Michael Aaron [MAG, Mines Advisory Group]



A key informant shares his information with the MAG Community Liaison Team, using a Community Safety Map as a reference tool, Daw Ta Yoe village, Loikaw township, Kayah State.
All graphics courtesy of MAG (Mines Advisory Group).

Burma has long been known to be heavily contaminated by landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), with 3,693 casualties reported since 1999.¹ The area is a complex and dynamic environment for humanitarian organizations, with multiple overlapping and interlinked conflicts between a number of disparate Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) and the Burmese Armed Forces, fought over several decades. In this context, international humanitarian mine action (HMA) operators have not been able to provide any form of technical response; there is currently no mine action coordination center, no agreed national standards, and no demarcation, technical survey, or clearance operations recognized by HMA operators.

This article describes how, in a complex and challenging environment, MAG (Mines Advisory Group) has slowly built relationships with relevant stakeholders and, over a three-year period, moved from undertaking baseline assessments to delivering mine risk education (MRE) and conducting community safety mapping. In addition, MAG advocated for and received permission to undertake non-technical surveys in Kayah State in eastern Burma. This has enabled MAG to

record and map hazardous areas, the first time this has been possible for any mine action organization in Burma, giving both a better understanding of the nature, location, and impact of the problem, and providing a model for building trust and developing mine action activities in the country. MAG is sharing findings and lessons learned on an ongoing basis as part of its commitment toward transparency, effective coordination, and the aim of informing complementary non-technical survey efforts, future technical survey efforts, and clearance activities.

From Mine Risk Education to Non-Technical Survey

One of the greatest challenges in HMA is protecting people from landmines and ERW in situations where clearance is not possible or where the threat cannot be removed quickly. MRE aims to reduce the number of accidents by working with at-risk groups to recognize and avoid dangerous areas, items, and risk-taking behaviors. In Burma, MRE and community safety mapping have helped communities reduce risk and have enabled MAG to form relationships and build trust with stakeholders to gradually establish a dialogue on landmines and their impact.

Through baseline assessments, villages were defined as high, medium, or low priority based on the perceived threat (see Figure 1, page 40). This helped prioritize MRE activities and allowed MAG to develop operational plans. Through repeated visits and MRE sessions with different community members, MAG teams were able to build trust with people previously reluctant to talk about landmines. Non-technical survey activities were also informed by the existing safety mapping process, through which the community is encouraged to produce a simple sketch map identifying dangerous areas. This allowed MAG to define **probable areas of contamination**, which MAG presented to the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) to advocate for the pilot and target locations for non-technical survey.

Approval was obtained to conduct a four-month pilot non-technical survey in government-controlled areas in Kayah State, and in July 2016, MAG commenced the first non-

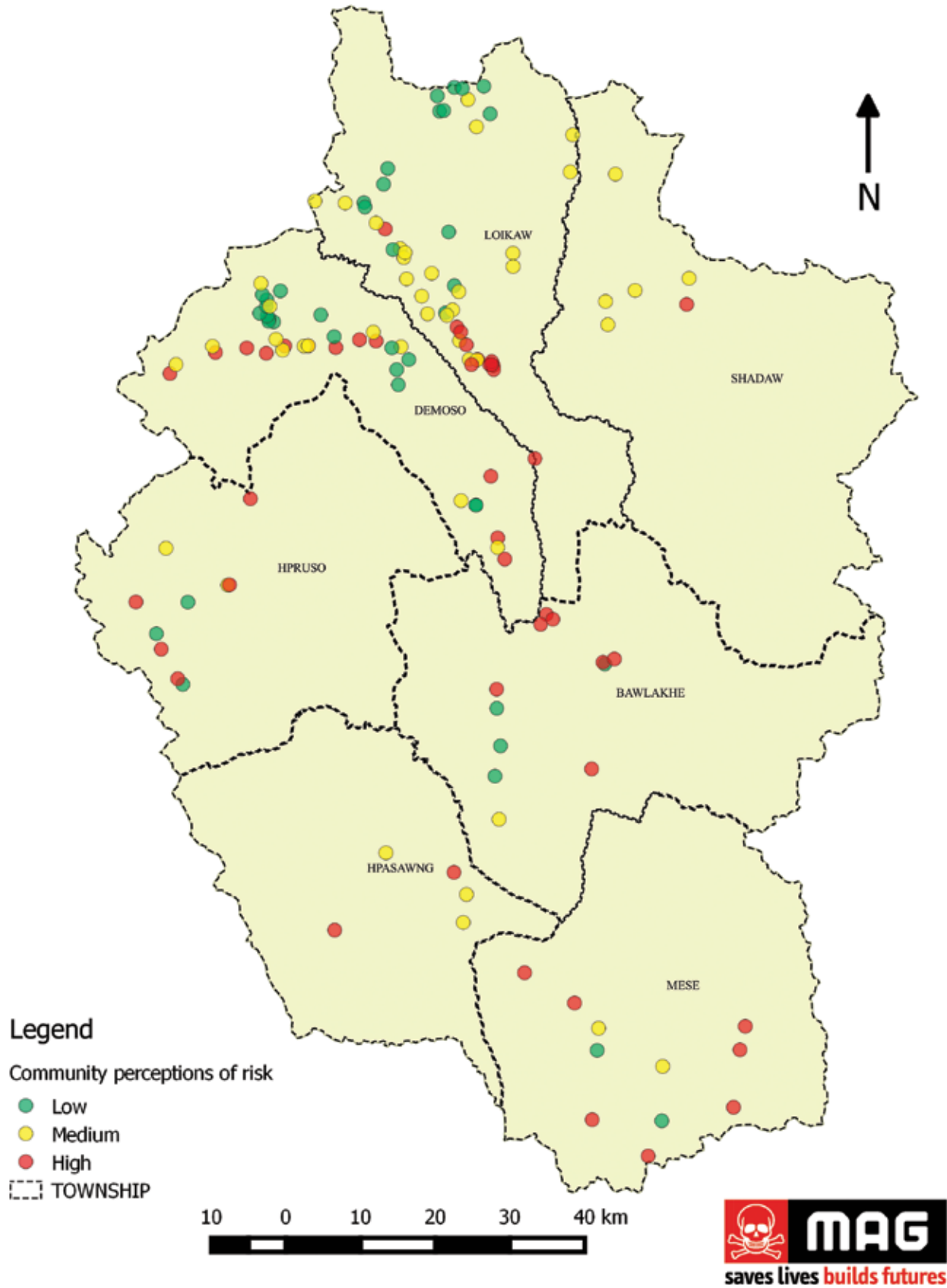


Figure 1. Community perceptions of risk in Kayah State: a map derived from the Conflict History and Situation Assessment conducted by MAG prior to delivery of MRE and undertaking of non-technical survey. This allows MAG to identify villages perceived to be high, medium, or low risk.

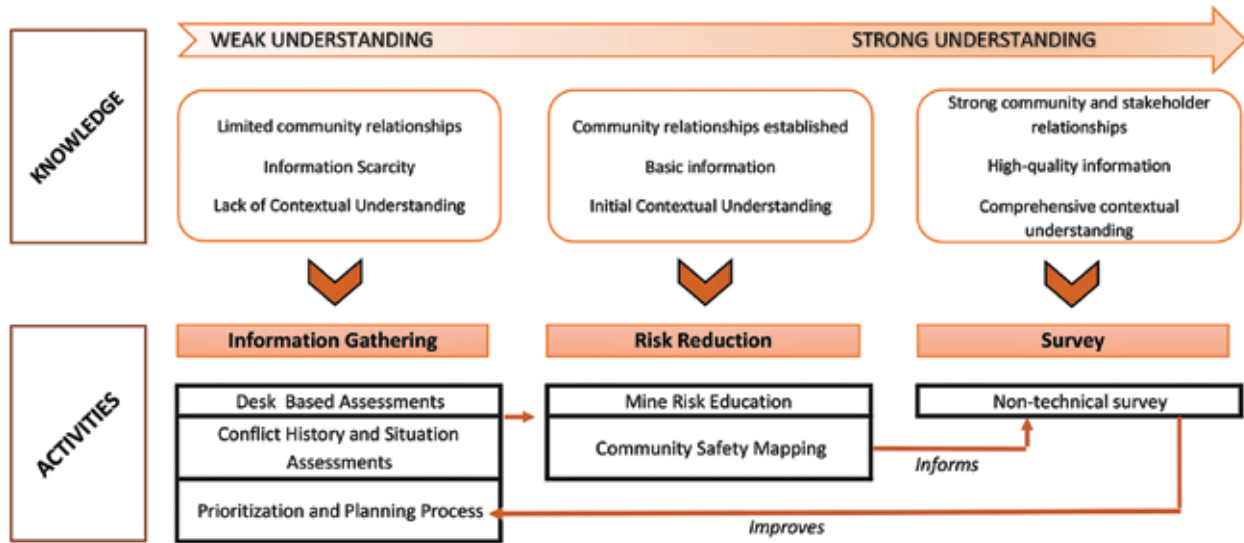


Figure 2. Diagram of process.



The village leader indicates the former location of a military camp. He had carried landmines for the Burmese military and delivered them to the top of this hill, Daw Ta Yoe village, Loikaw township, Kayah State.

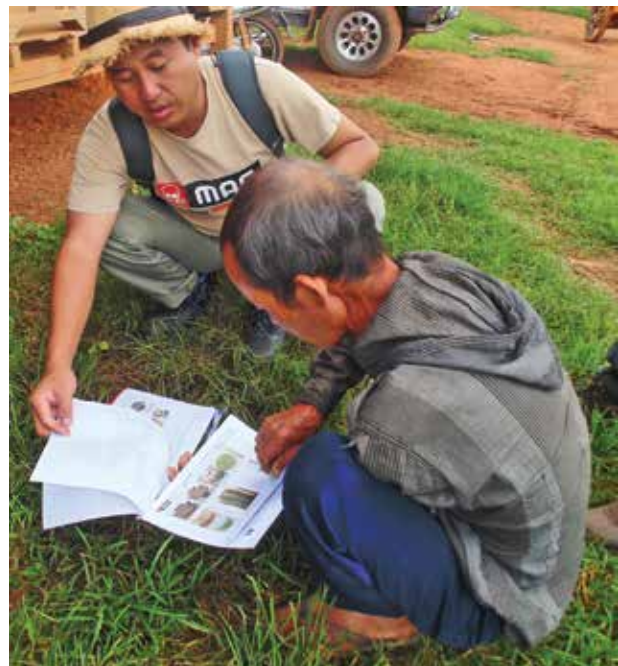
MAG also kept other key actors in Kayah informed of its activities, notably the Karenni National Progressive Party, the main ethnic organization in the state, and its social arm, the Karenni Social Welfare and Development Center (KSWDC). Again, MAG found that its updates were well received. The positive reception of non-technical survey activities by all stakeholders and the large number of hazardous areas identified highlighted a need to undertake non-technical survey in a broader geographical area.

In December 2016, MAG presented its consolidated monthly reports to the DSW and was given permission to expand non-technical survey activities to a further 74 villages in 16 village tracts, across six townships in Kayah State. Of 93 hazardous areas identified since starting non-technical surveys, MAG surveyed and mapped 78 by the end of June 2017 with a total area of 77,782 sq m (93,026 sq yd). MAG is now developing a partnership with the KSWDC to undertake further baseline assessments and begin community safety mapping

technical survey of contaminated areas in Burma. Surveys were conducted in Loikaw township, focusing on 16 villages in two village tracts, Lawpita and Hparlaung, leading to the identification of 47 hazardous areas. The response from affected communities was positive, often including requests for follow-up assistance, such as marking.

MAG in non-government controlled areas, where contamination is believed to be heavier.

This process, illustrated in Figure 2, has enabled MAG to move from a situation where understanding of the overall context was weak and contacts with affected communities were limited to a situation where understanding is strong and relationships with all key stakeholders are good. The initial assessments inform the MRE and community mapping activities, which in turn provide information that helps plan



A key informant is shown ERW recognition sheets to help identify an item that he had previously moved to what he believed was a safer place, Parlaung village, Loikaw township, Kayah State.



An LTM-76 AP fragmentation mine that was laid across a path leading toward a remote village. The path is no longer used, since there was an accident several years ago, near Lawpita village, Loikaw township, Kayah State.



A key informant shows the hazardous area around an electricity pylon. No fences or signs warn the local population, Pa Ra Hi Ta village, Loikaw township, Kayah State.

non-technical survey activities. The information gathered during the non-technical survey improves the content and informs the planning of ongoing MRE activities, which remain vital, particularly while clearance is not yet permitted.

Initial Findings in Kayah State

Although the number of surveys conducted so far is relatively small and exclusively in government-controlled areas, it was possible to identify some initial findings regarding the nature of the contamination, where landmines were used, and how they impact local people.

Nature of the contamination. Explosive hazards found during non-technical surveys undertaken so far consist mainly of anti-personnel (AP) blast and fragmentation mines, such as the India/British LTM-76 (see photo). Other ERW, such as mortars and grenades, were also found in limited numbers.

Location. Landmines have been used repeatedly around electricity pylons. Although the pylons are not always located in former conflict areas, landmines were laid strategically for protection against sabotage—this is a strong indication that survey should be conducted near other key infrastructure such as hydropower dams and development sites. Former military camps and bases are also key locations affected by landmines and ERW. Disused tripwire mines were found on paths between villages, and land used for livelihood activities was reported as being affected by scattered contamination.

Impact. Communities are aware of the presence of landmines near pylons, and some have basic fencing. However, children's movements are restricted due to concerns that they might enter these areas. The threat to infrastructure workers is significant, and military support is often required to ensure

their safety, increasing the complexity and cost of otherwise straightforward maintenance activities. Landmines and ERW impede access to land needed for livelihood activities including agriculture and hunting, and pose a risk to livestock. Trade and access to markets are hindered by the perceived or actual threat of landmines on paths between villages. There is also a psychological impact, as the presence of landmines contributes to an atmosphere of fear and acts as a constant reminder of former conflict.

Risk-taking behavior. Communities are often found to have moved items from the immediate area and placed them in locations perceived to be less risky. However, before MRE was widely delivered in Kayah, it was not uncommon for items of unexploded ordnance (UXO) to be collected and stored in or near homes.

Relevance of the Approach in Burma

As well as expanding its activities in Kayah State, MAG is drawing on its experience there to inform activities in Southern Shan State, Taninthayi Region, and Kayin State. Although political and conflict dynamics vary significantly across Burma, sustainable progress is consistently dependent on the approval and agreement of a wide range of actors. Securing access to mine-affected areas, particularly those under mixed or non-governmental control is challenging. Activities involving mapping, whether community-based or conducted through formal non-technical surveys, are particularly sensitive. As a result, permission to undertake different activities is often given incrementally—for example, beginning with baseline assessments and then progressing to MRE in a limited geographical area.


The assessments provide a platform to discuss the discovery of dangerous items or the occurrence of accidents, allowing communities to become increasingly comfortable talking about mine contamination with MAG's teams. At the same time, the initial data collection informs prioritization of areas and enables more targeted follow-up activities. Early community engagement also informs the appropriate local approach, allowing MAG to identify who is most at risk in communities, what types of communication and messaging will be most effective, and how best to maintain and strengthen relationships with community leaders. Data collected during this phase is an important advocacy tool with government authorities and ethnic armed groups.

Sustained engagement in Southern Shan State has enabled increased geographical access. While in Taninthayi Region, MAG developed a partnership with the Karen Department of Health and Welfare, and subsequently received permission to undertake baseline assessments and community safety mapping in several areas. Positive community responses are important factors in building trust with these key stakeholders, along with the local liaison led by MAG's national staff. Partnerships with community-based organizations and national NGOs are also important, facilitating access, and providing potential national capacity for the delivery of mine action activities.

MAG is committed to ensuring that lessons learned during these activities are shared with the mine action sector, and that methodologies are standardized to the extent possible. Early establishment of a coordinated approach to information management is essential. As the sector develops and coordination structures are established, the information gathered in these early stages of non-technical survey will be vital to assisting in the planning and prioritization of mine action resources in Burma.

Conclusion

Implementation of non-technical surveys in Kayah State and the first formal identification of hazardous areas in Burma represent a significant step forward for mine action in one of the world's most heavily mine-contaminated countries. It also offers an opportunity to replicate a successful approach in other parts of the country. Demining is a sensitive topic, particularly given its link to the peace process at national and local levels. Moreover, sustainable progress can only be achieved through detailed context analysis, accompanied by a sensitive approach when engaging with communities and other actors. With these factors in mind, significant progress in understanding the extent,

nature, and location of contamination can be achieved in preparation for future clearance efforts. 

See endnotes page 66

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