Mine-risk Education in Mine Action: How is it Effective?

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Mine-risk Education In Mine Action: How is it Effective?

While mine-risk education has faced questions about its effectiveness, it has been an important part of mine action for the past 20 years. As mine action continues to evolve, so does MRE and the ways in which it operates and works with at-risk communities. Continued success in many different countries has shown the effectiveness of MRE and the necessity of the discipline.

by Sharif Baaser and Hugues Laurenge [ UNICEF ] and Eric M. Filipponi [ GICHD ]

Mine-risk education has been an integral part of mine action since mine action began. It is one of the five pillars of mine actions, having evolved and adapted over the past 20 years to reflect best practices and lessons learned. Today, a variety of MRE activities takes place every day in many different mine-explosive remnants-of-war affected environments reaching large numbers of beneficiaries. With mine action entering its 20th year and the second Ottawa Convention review conference set to take place in Colombia on 30 November 2009, MRE is on the cusp of further change. As MRE faces questions about its contribution, impact and demonstrable successes, this article provides a brief discussion to address specific misunderstandings and misconceptions about the discipline. It starts by highlighting the importance of MRE, clarifies the role MRE plays within mine action, and finally looks at the impact of MRE and the measures of its effectiveness.

The Functions of MRE in Mine Action

When it comes to the function of MRE within mine action, a key challenge has been the lack of understanding of the full scope of MRE by many across the program sector. There are those who believe that MRE is simply about raising awareness and sharing safety information with at-risk populations. While this narrow definition of MRE may reflect the reality in some programs, MRE has evolved to encompass far more than simple awareness-raising and information-sharing. Some of the key additional functions and contributions of MRE within mine action are explained below.

Emergencies. In emergencies, MRE may be the quickest and most effective measure to reduce risks from explosives in the short term, and before or during clearance. The return of large numbers of displaced people to areas littered with explosive remnants is a common indicator. When measuring the effectiveness of MRE, one has to take into account all the points made above and not simply focus on reduction of victims as an indicator. Evaluating behavior change can be very difficult and hard to measure, but this is not the sole objective of MRE.

Community liaison. Community liaison, which is described as a key principle in mine action and is present in all phases of the program, is the bridge between the mine-risk education community and the communities it is working with. Without proper community liaison, denouncing runs the risk of being an isolated activity dealing primarily with the land, but detached from the community for whom the land is actually being cleared. Many practitioners and stakeholders are aware of the extent to which land is cleared, but they do not have a solid understanding of the priority and impact on each segment of the community or the instances in which land is used after clearance due to a lack of confidence in the clearance process.

Information gathering. MRE teams and networks can gather and provide a range of important data and information that is essential for informing the planning and implementation of mine-action activities. MRE teams and trainers, through their contacts and networks at the community level, are often the first to learn about the presence of dangerous areas/devices and any new accidents. The reporting of such information by MRE teams makes a major contribution to enriching mine-action databases, injury surveillance related to mines and ERW, and the deployment of rapid response clearance or MRE teams, where available. As an example, through a network of more than 1,500 community-based volunteers established by Handicap International in five mine-affected provinces in Afghanistan, the program not only provided thousands of at-risk people with MRE, but it also received critical information about dangerous devices and accidents through contact with local communities.

Advocacy. MRE activities make a significant contribution in terms of raising awareness of the grave danger posed by mines and ERW and their impact on human rights and development; promote advocacy for the total ban on landmines and the initiation and implementation of mine-action activities; and contribute to the promotion of rights and services for victims. In some contexts, where the goals and intentions of demining may be looked upon with suspicion, it is often MRE and its networks at the community level that pave the way for the start of clearance and other mine-action activities. When successfully executed, MRE can uncover how quickly undisclosed information about the presence of mines in a conflict or post-conflict context, and contribute to risk reduction.

Measuring the Effectiveness of MRE

One common criticism of MRE is that it has yet to demonstrate its effectiveness in a tangible, reproducible way. Again, this criticism belies the full range of goals that MRE strives to achieve. When measuring the effectiveness of MRE, one has to take into account all the points made above and not simply focus on reduction of victims as an indicator. Evaluating behavior change can be very difficult and hard to measure, but this is not the sole objective of MRE.

New Developments

Change is continually taking place in MRE programming, as it does in all of mine action, the constant self-reflection and efforts to improve are hallmarks of the industry. Many MRE programs no longer demonstrate “traditional” mine awareness, but rather combine this with a process of victim transfer involving a dialogue with the community on not only the landmines/ERW threat, but also wider developmental concerns, and seeking possible solutions.

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In this context, messages evolve from discussions and focus on practical, detailed and precise alternatives as a way of promoting a reduction in risk-taking behavior. A key approach is to support local risk mapping, which can also be fed into the mine-marking and prioritization process. In addition, as noted in the 2010 Landmine Monitor Report, “as a result of its community focus, mine awareness/community liaison is also well placed to identify mine survivors who have unmet needs. Although community liaison teams should not necessarily be expected to have technical expertise in mine-survivor assistance,” sometimes amputees are not aware of the existence of prosthetics clinics, or believe that being fitted with a replacement or even a first artificial limb will be prohibitively expensive. In such a case, the simple transfer of information—and provided the provision of transport—can sufficiently make a world of difference to an individual.

Similarly, a broader community-liason approach can include rapid-response “spot” explosive-ordnance-disposal activities. In Cambodia, the focus of MRE is now on risk reduction in the widest sense. The Cambodian government modified its traditional information-based approach in favor of one focusing more on understanding concrete steps to make a particular area safe. This process is accomplished through improved marking and removal of known and dangerous ordnance. The approach is aided by the fact that a team may spend many days in a village undertaking unexploded ordnance removal, proximity clearance, awareness presentations, discussions and mapping.

In order to better protect children from landmines and UXO, “child-to-child” training entered the MRE lexicon in 1999, with a number of organizations incorporating “child-to-child” methodology into awareness programs, most notably in Kosovo. In a context where teaching is typically authoritarian and learning is rote, child-to-child techniques can be liberating and empowering both for the children and their teachers. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that this approach also results in information sharing in the home and, as such, it can be used to educate parents via their children.

Similar to demining, MRE also demonstrates a clear and concise approach to presenting its activities. It is one thing to target thousands of people assumed to be “at some risk” through a well-designed community-based project or provide basic radio messages to millions, but it is quite another to make sure that all those who are truly the most at risk are targeted, first with the appropriate messages and second, in a timely and systematic manner. Ongoing national mine-surveillance systems on mine/ERW incidents, combined with survey tools on knowledge and practices, provide key data that can help identify the most at-risk groups of people in the most at-risk communities, adjust prevention messages and find the best channels to reach them.

Repeated Necessity

MRE continues to evolve in tandem with the changing nature of the mine/ERW threat and communities’ needs to practice effective risk reduction. As such, MRE is no more about simple awareness-raising than demining is about risk reduction. As such, MRE continues to use as an integral part of our efforts and responsibility to best suit the needs of those living in mine/ERW-affected environments and to help fulfill their universal right to life.

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The Challenges of IED and MRE in Afghanistan

Improved explosive devices have become a significant threat to the people of Afghanistan and we have surpassed the threat posed by other types of explosive remnants of war. In order to combat these dangers, the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan has worked closely with other groups to develop an IED-awareness booklet that supports current mine-risk education efforts.

by Mathias Hagström | Roskilde University

T he people of Afghanistan have seen more than their share of war over the past three decades of war and their consequenc es have been a part of Afghans’ lives since the 1980s. Mine-risk education has therefore been important in communicating the dangers of ERW. Children have always been among the most vulnerable to these dangers, and MRE campaigns are therefore usually aimed at them.

In the current conflict between the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and insurgents, civilians are again living with the consequences of war. With the rise of insurgent activity, IEDs have become increasingly common. IED casualties have risen tremendously and now surpass the ERW casualties. This development fostered discussing about where the mine-action community should create risk education materials about IEDs, culminating in the development of an IED-awareness booklet in 2008.

Mine-Risk Education in Afghanistan

MRE has gone through tremendous changes since its humble beginnings in the late 1980s. The first mine-awareness programs were developed by Operation Safe Drive, the United Nations’ emergency relief operation set up in Pakistan in 1988. At the time, the Soviet war in Afghanistan was at its peak, lasting until 1989, when the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the country became the scene of a vicious civil war.1

During the first years of Operation Safe Drive, it provided MRE mainly in refugee camps and along Afghan borders. MRE continues to use as an integral part of our efforts and responsibility to best suit the needs of those living in mine/ERW-affected environments and to help fulfill their universal right to life.

The fundamental methodology established under Operation Safe Drive still provides the basic framework for MRE. MRE is commonly taught by mobile teams, with two teachers and a driver. The teacher team normally consists of a man and a woman, giving them the ability to conduct gender-segregated classes.2

In general, MRE programs consist of lectures with the use of posters, silk screens, activity cards, brochures, pamphlets and postcards as education materials commonly termed “training aids.” The teacher introduces the students to ERW using posters.3 The IED awareness booklet is intended to supplement existing program materials.

To ensure that the guidelines and teaching tools set by the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan are followed, UNMACA’s quality-assurance teams perform routine checks of the MRE sessions. This system is established to provide feedback to the MRE teachers and non-governmental organizations running MRE programs in particular regions.4

The basic structure of MRE has changed very little over the years. The teaching system developed around regular MRE constitutes a teaching ideology that transcends Afghan MRE as a whole and reaches community-based training, as well as mine-risk education using mass media. The overall MRE messages UNMACA developed provide the basic framework for all MRE within the civilian sector of Afghanistan. The NGOs providing the teaching in the field also follow the UNMACA guidelines.

From the 1980s until the mid-1990s, materials were very technical, with detailed descriptions of types and models of ordnance and mines, and their individual effects. As time went on, it became clear that participants were receiving more information than they could absorb during the relatively short sessions.5 Since then, a series of messages was developed to simplify the MRE training.

Today there are 10 messages that constitute the core of Afghan MRE. The last major revision of the messages was made in the winter of 2008, when UNMACA developed materials that introduced several victim-assistance themes. The 2005 National Disability Survey Handicap International developed has been the foundation for understanding the importance of developing victim-assistance awareness within MRE.6

The new materials have been shaped so that the messages fit the Ministry of Education’s MRE plans and national curricula.7

When the International Security Assistance Forces approached UNMACA in 2007 about cooperating on the IED-awareness booklet, the framework for cooperation between UNMACA and the Ministry of Education was being prepared for the transition. This meant that ISAF, UNMACA and the Ministry of Education worked as semi-autonomous teams while developing the content and design of the IED booklet.8

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Children receive a mine-risk education class held in the village mosque of Garmsir, Wardak province, in the southwestern part of the capital province, Kabul, Afghanistan.