UNICEF in Latin America

Recognizing that children are the segment of the population most vulnerable to mine-affected areas, UNICEF has focused its efforts in Central America to disseminating mine awareness information, assisting mine victims and preventing future mine incidents in Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

by Mary Ruberry, MAIC

Background

As part of the United Nations system, in 1996 UNICEF began providing emergency aid for children impacted by war in Europe and China. Since then UNICEF has implemented programs worldwide to help children in need through its eight regional offices and 125 country offices. In the Latin American region, UNICEF focuses on four "problem" areas: Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala, and also aided El Salvador until 1994 during its post-conflict transformation.

Introduction

According to Ms. Nidia Quiroz, Regional Adviser for Emergencies in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF-LAC), children are more vulnerable than adults to landmines because of their natural curiosity, and also are injured more severely than adults because of their physical proximity to the ground. Whereas an adult might lose a limb in a mine accident, children usually kill themselves, especially under the age of five.

UNICEF-LAC describes its work thus: "In the context of each affected country, UNICEF has given support to different kinds of programs that combat the consequences of these threats. Basically, these have been prevention campaigns among the population in situations of risk, with the participation of teachers, social workers, local governments and numerous NGOs."

Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

UNICEF has no political power and hence functions as a facilitator for activities more like a consultant. According to Ms. Quiroz, "We have the knowledge, experience and lessons learned" to help implement programs in countries affected by landmines and UXO. "In Central America, the conflicts are now finished. Now the problem is demining"—and prevention, which is achieved through mine awareness programs.

Financial constraints pose the largest obstacles for UNICEF in Latin America. Because demining is such an expensive process, UNICEF cannot engage in demining directly but instead works with volunteers and other international organizations to raise mine awareness. UNICEF begins by determining where landmines are located. Either military records or information gathered from communities provides essential knowledge for preventing mine and UXO accidents. Working with the Red Cross, UNICEF creates prevention programs that recruit volunteer youth who post signs where landmines are located. UNICEF’s programs disseminate information through schools and health centers in each aided country.

At present, UNICEF is putting together a video that contains testimonies from mine victims and survivors. UNICEF disseminates "mine action strategies" as a means of ameliorating the effects of landmine contamination. "Strategies" include addressing landmines on a diplomatic level, as well as championing advocacy for mine action through local, regional, national and international channels. Additionally, UNICEF creates a variety of partnerships in its many programs, joining with organizations of all kinds to carry out mine prevention and assist mine victims.

Colombia

UNICEF works with 13,000 children in Colombia on three different activities:

1. Through the Red Cross, UNICEF engages over 1,000 children marking mine locations.
2. Working with the Scouts, UNICEF concentrates on "hot spots" to prevent accidents with mine awareness programs, and
3. With the Embassy of Canada, UNICEF trains radio promoters to disseminate information about landmines. At present, there are more than 100 radio shows in Colombia.

The Future in Colombia

UNICEF Colombia’s strategy for 2001–2002 is based on a three-pronged approach to mine action. First, to actively support mine awareness education with national civil and governmental allies. Second, to provide information about mine locations and effects of mines to "the government, location authorities and communities." Third, UNICEF will be working with other national and international organizations to urge the Colombian government to "attach [a] high priority" to the issue of landmines, and support mine action activities such as survey, mine field marking, clearance operations and information gathering/demining. For the first time, the Colombian government has made a contribution from this year’s national budget for a pilot program on mine awareness, data collection and victim assistance.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua’s high number of AP mines threatens a particularly impoverished segment of the population, especially children who are often unable to interpret warning signs even when mine fields are clearly marked. Due to the high level of contamination, many farmers have been forced to engage in amateur demining in order to recapture their land for sustaining life. UNICEF has identified the trend towards amateur demining as a serious problem in Nicaragua, along with an apparent lack of fear towards mines by adolescent and adult males.
Without a fully-integrated mine action program, efforts in Nicaragua have centered on clearence, leaving development of other aspects of mine action such as mine awareness education and victim assistance, lagging behind. According to UNICEF Nicaragua, "the weakest component of mine action in the country remains the social reintegration of victims.

The aftermath of war has left not only landmine deposit but also a variety of UXO, including bombs, fragmentation grenades, mortar and ammunition. According to UNICEF Nicaragua, "one of the main reasons for accidents to children is that children do not know the potential danger of picking up, manipulating or playing with landmines and UXO." In conjunction with the Nicaraguan Red Cross, UNICEF Nicaragua has implemented the "Child-to-Child Prevention Project," which trains youth to raise awareness among other young people in Nicaragua about the dangers of landmines through workshops held in the five areas of the country with the worst mine infestation (Somoto, Ocosal, Jinotega, Managua, and Rivas).

Last October, UNICEF signed an agreement with the OAS to implement joint mine awareness activities. UNICEF also plans to develop a "community liaison" project as a way to ensure effective communication between demining units and local residents, and to build trust in the National Demining Plan, thus contributing to a decrease in landmine-related accidents to children is that children do not know the potential danger of picking up, manipulating or playing with landmines and UXO. According to UNICEF, "one of the main reasons for accidents to children is that children do not know the potential danger of picking up, manipulating or playing with landmines and UXO." In conjunction with the Nicaraguan Red Cross, UNICEF Nicaragua has implemented the "Child-to-Child Prevention Project," which trains youth to raise awareness among other young people in Nicaragua about the dangers of landmines through workshops held in the five areas of the country with the worst mine infestation (Somoto, Ocosal, Jinotega, Managua, and Rivas).

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Conclusion

As the U.N.'s "local point" for mine awareness education, UNICEF pursues programs that reach affected populations with the aim to educate them at risk about the dangers of landmines and UXO. UNICEF professionals recognize that children are the most vulnerable segment of the endangered population because of their natural curiosity, mobility and usual inability to read. The programs in Central America disseminate information about landmines and UXO through public service channels and strive to gather information from local communities that can be used to prevent future tragedies.

UNICEF's national efforts are designed to address the particular situation found in each country. Work ing collaboratively with a gamut of organizations, UNICEF supports and creates projects that assist mine victims, helping to reintegrate them into society, all with an eye to aiding children. For Ms. Quirion says, "it is so important to save the lives of children."

Contact Information

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