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How to Improve Demining Activities Through Gender-sensitive Mine Risk Education

Until recently, mine action was widely perceived as a military and technical field where an almost exclusively male staff planned and implemented activities. However, there is still a need for a better understanding of what mine-affected communities can gain from including gender and age perspectives in mine action and how the different pillars of mine action mutually improve the quality and impact of mine action programs.

by Abigail Jones, Arianna Calza Bini and Stella Salvagni Varó [Gender and Mine Action Programme]



MRE at a school in Juba, South Sudan, 2008.
Photo courtesy of Åsa Massleberg.

Communities like to feel involved in the landmine action process, including the decision-making and priority-setting processes. The consultation and involvement of women, girls, boys and men at all stages of the mine risk education project cycle helps to facilitate this process, particularly during survey and clearance activities. Current MRE processes do not always adequately incorporate community liaison and information sharing about demining activities. By systemati-

cally keeping all stakeholders informed of local demining initiatives, any questions and misconceptions can be answered and clarified. Gender-sensitive MRE is a fundamental part of the mine action process and is integral to improving the effectiveness and impact of other demining activities.

Why Gender Matters in MRE

Landmines/explosive remnants of war pose a significant threat to the lives, well-being and socioeconomic develop-

ment of communities in many countries worldwide. This threat affects people in different ways. Within a community, individuals often have distinct gendered roles and responsibilities, and consequently their exposure to and knowledge of mine/ERW risks will differ. For this reason, their MRE needs will vary, and this must be taken into account at all stages of the project cycle.

MRE contributes to risk reduction of physical injury from mines and ERW. Gender-sensitive MRE ensures that all community members are aware of the risks from mines/ERW and are encouraged to behave in ways that reduce the risk to people, property and the environment. The overall objective is to reduce the risk level so that women, girls, boys and men can all live safely and social development can occur free from the constraints imposed by landmine contamination. In support of this, the 2010 Cartagena Action Plan explicitly called for a gender-sensitive approach, suggesting that States Parties must “[p]rovide mine risk reduction and education programmes, as part of broader risk assessment and reduction activities targeting the most at-risk populations, which are age-appropriate and



A female teacher trained as an MRE facilitator carries out a session with her class in Bolomba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2012.

Photo courtesy of Abigail Jones.

gender-sensitive, coherent with applicable national and international standards, tailored to the needs of mine-affected communities and integrated into ongoing mine action activities, in particular data gathering, clearance and victim assistance as appropriate.”¹

General Mine Action Assessment

Claims suggest that “the single biggest weakness of MRE is that projects are too often planned and implemented without an adequate assessment of needs and existing capacities. Experience has shown that assumptions about who is at risk and why this is so are frequently wrong. The consequence is that the targets and strategy of an MRE project are therefore also probably wrong ...”² Conducting a comprehensive MRE needs assessment is essential to identify and analyze the local mine/ERW risks and to assess the capacities and vulnerabilities of the women, girls, boys and men in affected communities. These must be recognized and taken into consideration to identify the most appropriate options for conducting MRE in ways that are not only nondiscriminatory and inclusive but also more efficient, professional and sustainable in nature.

In the broader context of mine risk reduction, the information gathered as part of the MRE needs assessment is directly linked to the general mine action assessment. The collected data is instrumental for operational planning, resource prioritization and the subsequent deployment of mine action resources in areas with the greatest need. Due to the high cost

of technical survey and clearance, it is more cost effective for demining actors to invest heavily in the initial data-gathering phase and in the identification of community preferences for clearance. This ensures the accumulation of high-quality data for analysis and task prioritization.

The significance of this is that data for MRE needs assessments should always be collected and analyzed as part of the general mine action assessment and in conjunction with other mine action implementing organizations. This requires a systematic gender analysis of needs in the field as well as of the balance of women’s and men’s voices in consultations at all decision-making levels. At the community level, mine action personnel must actively seek input from individuals representing all gender and age groups in each mine affected community. This widespread input allows personnel to obtain comprehensive and accurate information for identifying MRE needs and also community preferences to influence prioritization of clearance tasks. Consultation with the full range of stakeholders increases the quality and relevance of information gathered, which can be used to make decisions on targeted MRE as well as the cancellation, reduction or clearance of suspected hazardous areas and confirmed hazardous areas.

Measures to Improve MRE

When certain tasks are prioritized for clearance, the allocation of scarce resources to one purpose means fewer resources

available for others. Where available funding for mine action is insufficient to conduct technical survey and clearance on all reported SHAs and CHAs, task prioritization means that some areas remain contaminated due to lack of funding. In this context, gender-sensitive MRE can be used strategically to facilitate risk reduction by raising awareness of threats and teaching how to mitigate risks. Special consideration must be given to accessing all the different groups in the community because a fundamental principle underpinning MRE is that all affected people have a right to receive accurate and timely information about local landmine risks and other hazards. The following measures should be taken to overcome questions of access to mine risk reduction activities:

Collect and analyze sex- and age-disaggregated data on distinct at-risk behaviors and attitudes. Sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD) is an essential part of gender analysis, which should be carried out at all stages of the MRE project cycle. It ensures that MRE providers understand and respond to the different male and female vulnerabilities, needs and access to services.³ The United Nations *Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes* explicitly points out the significance of collecting SADD, recommending to “collect and analyze data and information that reveal the distinct attitudes held by women, girls, boys and men with regards to landmine/ERW risks and threats.”⁴

Hire and train female and male MRE trainers. In some countries, male mine action teams struggle to access women and girls to obtain their information regarding contamination and land use. Not consulting with the female community members can result in some valuable information not being taken into consideration in the planning process. One straightforward and effective solution is to have gender-balanced teams, enabling the organizations to liaise with and collect information from all ages and genders. Because pre-existing attitudes among teams can have a direct impact on data collection and MRE practices in the field, training survey/clearance teams to consider gender and recommending best practices in data collection and communication with both sexes is essential.

Conduct sex- and age-segregated MRE sessions when needed to ensure meaningful female participation. Participatory methodologies tend to traditionally focus on communities as homogenous entities with singular interests. However, viewing a community in this way obscures the differing interests of the social groups and does not acknowledge their varying MRE needs. Therefore mine action actors must consult with females and males of diverse age groups as part of the MRE needs assessment. They should also conduct gender-



An MRE facilitator with his class in Afghanistan, 2007.
Photo courtesy of OMAR.

and age-targeted activities to facilitate discussion and develop an accurate and inclusive understanding of mine/ERW risks and the correct behaviors that community members must adopt to prevent accidents.

Ensure MRE meetings are held at times and locations that are appropriate for and accessible to women and men. The division of labor between women, men, boys and girls means that mine action actors must devise creative and proactive efforts to ensure that MRE activities reach all stakeholders in a community. This necessitates conducting meetings at times and locations conducive to the participation of all community members in separate or mixed groups, depending on the local context.

Use easy-to-understand gender-sensitive MRE awareness-raising materials. MRE material should include photos of both genders. Multiple audio and visual media (drama, poster, video, radio, television) should address illiteracy and/or mobility restrictions. Furthermore, it is important to critically assess the methods used to convey the MRE safety messages. Sex and age highly influence the literacy rate in many countries. Songs, role plays and dramas can be very effective nondiscriminatory means of communicating safety messages while encouraging participation.

Designing and producing relevant MRE material is essential for effective awareness activities. The material should reflect the local culture and traditions, and women, girls, boys and men should be able to identify with scenarios portrayed by the material. Age- and sex-specific activities need to be highlighted, as different activities result in distinct exposures to risks. For example, in some cultures boys will be more exposed to the danger of mines because they have greater freedom to play or conduct other activities away from where they live, whereas girls and women are encouraged to remain

closer to the home. For instance, women and girls gathering water from a river will have knowledge of different areas than men who hunt in the forests.


Track SADD on MRE attendance. Mine action organizations must disaggregate all data collected during MRE by sex and age. This will help to provide a clear indication and social analysis of the knowledge, attitudes, practices and beliefs that put community members at risk from mines or ERW, while indicating who is reached by MRE and the effectiveness of different techniques.

Conclusion

The nature of MRE has changed radically since its inception as mine awareness in Afghanistan during the late 1980s when projects were largely based on the distribution of leaflets and posters and information dissemination tended to be one-way, with the

“experts” providing information to the “unaware.” It is now generally accepted that nonparticipatory projects like these should be restricted to emergency situations where conflict is ongoing, such as the current situation in Syria.

In other countries, for instance Cambodia, where people have been living with the residual effects of ERW for many years, the delivery of effective MRE is more complex. This is because local populations are often better informed about local mine/ERW threats than experts, and civilians are frequently forced by poverty to take intentional risks for economic reasons. Behavioral decisions such as these are affected by cultural, social, political and economic factors. Consequently mine action organizations are required to broaden their focus to include an examination of structural factors and local perceptions of risk held by all stakeholders.

In this context community liaison support of demining activities can provide a powerful mechanism for involving key community stakeholders in developing their own solutions, enabling them to change their behavior to reduce the risk of mine/ERW injury. The consultation and involvement of women, girls, boys and men at all stages will ensure that mine action actors can plan activities to meet the mine risk reduction needs of all stakeholders. This is not a process without challenges, as in many cultural contexts access to women and girls is difficult and literacy levels can vary significantly, meaning that for MRE to be successful, targeted interventions for each segment of the population must be designed and implemented. 

See endnotes page 64



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How to Improve Demining Activities Through the Integration of Gender-sensitive Mine Risk Education by Jones, Bini and Varó [from page 28]

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