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The Gradual Process of Nationalizing MRE in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, a country torn apart by decades of conflict, is implementing a successful plan for national mine-risk education. Successes, strategies and at-risk populations are discussed and analyzed in this article.

by Samim Hashimi and Mutahar Sha Akhgar [MACCA]

As one of the countries most affected by landmines, Afghanistan has a responsibility to ensure mine-risk education is carried out in an effective and sustainable way in each part of the country. According to the latest figures, mines and explosive remnants of war¹ killed or injured over 700 Afghans in 2007. This number equates to an average of almost two mine-related accidents every day. Although it is a significant decrease since 2002 (see Table 1), this figure is still too high.

The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan, which is coordinated and supported by the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, has a 20-year track record of successful mine action. MACCA is now the lead agency in charge of handing over the responsibility of mine action to the government of Afghanistan. MRE and victim assistance are on the forefront of this transition and some exciting steps have been taken

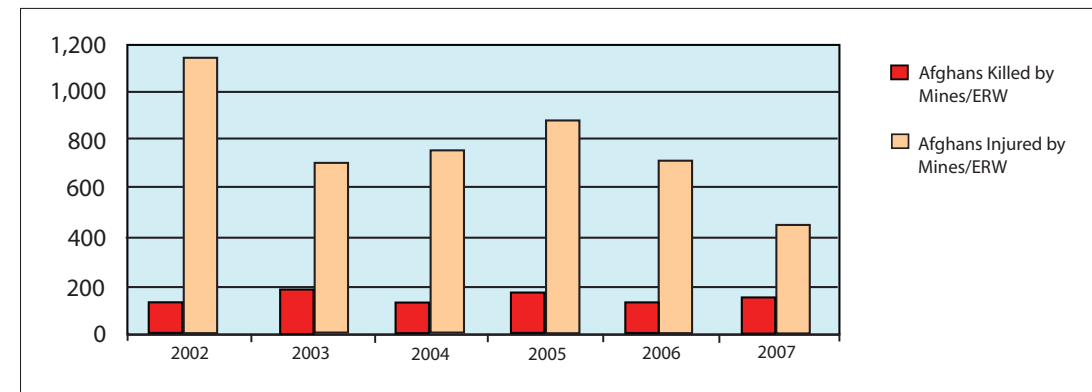


Table 1: Afghan mine casualties, 2002–07.
ALL GRAPHICS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

toward ensuring a sustainable national authority delivers quality MRE. This article outlines the way in which the steps taken toward nationalization of the MRE program in Afghanistan have resulted in high-quality, sustainable MRE being delivered where it is most needed. At the same time, it highlights the importance of a gradual and staged approach to nationalizing MRE so a focus on projects that are truly national—fitting neatly into an existing government ministry—does not result in the omission of people needing MRE because they do not fit into a current government structure.

Getting MRE into Education

In Afghanistan, as in many other countries, a high proportion of mine-accident victims are children. Therefore, MAPA identified the need for MRE to be incorporated into the national education system. There were three main parts to this plan: training teachers, incorporating MRE into the new national curriculum and distributing MRE materials to schools.

In order to train Afghanistan's 18,000 teachers, a strategy for providing "training of trainers" to the provincial child-protection officers was conceived. These officers both train and monitor the teachers in order to increase effectiveness. This training is now almost complete, with 16,000 teachers trained. In a country with many remote and inaccessible areas as well as ongoing insecurity due to anti-government elements, this achievement is quite significant. The government of Afghanistan itself largely funded the training,

exemplifying the national ownership of the program. The process of getting MRE in national-curriculum textbooks, as well as a range of regional textbooks in different local languages, is now in the final editing stage. It will be taught in classes throughout Afghanistan over the next two years. The MRE and victim-assistance messages are featured as individual lessons within these textbooks.

More than 10,000 MRE/VA kits have been distributed to child-protection officers and school teachers to support their sessions with students and community groups. These kits include three posters of actual-size mines and



Mine Action Coordination Centre implementing partner Mobile Mini Circus for Children conducts child-centered MRE.

ERW, 10 MRE/VA activity cards (seven MRE and three disability-advocacy cards) and a guideline for trainers.

The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan financially supports the Ministry of Education with the production of a quarterly magazine for schoolchildren called *Tarbeyat*, which is distributed in most provinces of Afghanistan. Four of the 50 pages in each issue are used for MRE/VA messages.

A directorate of mine action has been included in the new structure of the MoE. This directorate will take all responsibility for MRE activities within the MoE in the future.

Continuing Community-based MRE

Unfortunately, there are at-risk children who are not in school and, therefore, will not be reached by the national curriculum, nor will the large number of adults who also need access to MRE. For this reason, continuing community-based MRE is essential.

Community-based MRE in Afghanistan is based on the findings of MACCA's latest Landmine Impact Survey, victim data and data on movement of internally displaced people and returnees. MAPA's regional offices design the MRE strategy for their respective areas based on this information, directing teams to focus on the most at-risk areas and groups.

Teams from various nongovernmental organizations are then tasked with responding to the needs of communities through emergency response, community liaison and community monitoring for low-risk areas. There are also a variety of creative methods employed by the NGOs, for example, the Mobile Mini Circus for Children and the mobile theater. The mini circus communicates MRE messages through the medium of performance theater, which engages the children's attention and helps them remember the

messages. Another MAPA partner has a mobile theater, which is an effective way of drawing a variety of people from a community to listen to MRE messages.

Sustained MRE through Mass Media

Although it is important to focus national MRE efforts through the MoE due to the high number of child mine victims, we believe it is important not to neglect communications to other audiences. One such example is mass-media communications including radio, TV and newspaper campaigns. Currently, this method of MRE includes messages conveyed in five languages through five different radio stations, as well as through the MoE's educational radio and TV networks.

Specialized Approaches for Specific Situations

There is also the need to assess country-specific issues when designing MRE and making the transition to national-government responsibility. For example, Afghanistan has a large number of refugees and returnees who are particularly vulnerable to mine accidents, as they are new to an area and often the country. The approach taken involves running a specific program at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees encampment and transit centers, which returnees pass through as part of the repatriation process.

Lessons from Afghanistan

In conclusion, this article highlights the potential for successful transition of MRE to national/governmental authority. However, given the immense range of demands on the governments of mine-affected countries and the need for any change to be gradual, we believe that a staged, gradual approach is vital. MRE is literally a case of life and death since ne-

glecting some of the audiences served by traditional forms of MRE could result in a fatal accident. In the case of MRE, we cannot afford to let our guard down at any time. We must push toward nationalization as the most effective, sustainable way of carrying out MRE in a country, while maintaining the range of methods that ensures all at-risk populations are reached by the messages they need to hear. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 112



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