

Lessons learnt from mine awareness in southern Afghanistan  
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Mr Co-chair,

First of all, i would like to thank you for giving Handicap International Belgium the opportunity to share with you some of the lessons we learnt during the last 6 years we spent working in southern Afghanistan.

My presentation is going to be based on two key inputs:

- The external evaluation of our Community-Based Mine Awareness Programme: this evaluation was conducted by an external consultant during April and May 2001. When we asked him to evaluate our project, we wanted his evaluation to be very frank. We were managing this programme for more than 5 years and we wanted to get an impartial and critical vision of what worked and what did not work in the programme.
- Some stories about landmine/UXO victims. Stories are one of the most powerful ways to communicate a message in Afghan rural communities. Therefore, stories are one of our main tools.

These two documents are available on the table at the back of the room.

***“community-based mine awareness”***

I would like to start this presentation by telling you a story that was collected by one of our Afghan trainers (in Pushto “Nomainda”):

(it is called) The Story Of Shabaz

In 1998, I went to Sarar Qala village to give mine awareness training. As I was introducing myself to the villagers and explaining what I had come to do, one of the men began to cry. He told me that only two weeks before his two sons had been killed in a mine accident. I asked him to tell me what had happened. As he spoke tears fell from his eyes:

*Now it is spring, he said, and the deserts are green. We have a lot of sheep and the weather was good, so I asked my two sons, aged six and nine, to go a little way to graze the animals. Shortly afterwards, as I was at home, I heard a huge explosion. The other villagers and I rushed towards the sound. When we arrived the whole area was covered in dust and smoke. My two sons had been thrown far in the explosion. Many parts of their bodies were completely missing. We took what we could find of them back to our home. When we entered the village my wife, their mother, was there to meet us. She was weeping and screaming at the sight of the bodies of her children. I wish that God would take this disaster from our country. (and then, speaking to our mine awareness Nomainda) I wish that you (the mine awareness person) had come a month ago. Why should it happen so...?*

Apart from expressing the need for mine awareness, this story also provides the necessary background for the establishment of a community-based approach. This kind of stories are

part of the daily life of most communities living in southern Afghanistan. Therefore, they provide a very solid basis to refer to when one tries to establish a mine awareness capacity at a village level.

There are different ways to respond to the plight of this mother who says “*I wish that you had come a month ago*”.

- One way is to provide the community with the visit of a mine awareness trainer who is going to deliver a presentation to the community.
- Another way is to work with the community in order to enable it to tackle the problem on a daily basis with a limited external input.
- A third way is to work with the existing schools (mosques and madrassas in the case of southern Afghanistan).
- A fourth way is to use the existing media. In the case of Afghanistan, the BBC Pushto and Dari services.

What we did in Afghanistan was to try, with the support of the MACA, to combine the 4 approaches. Back in 1996, we called it “community-based mine awareness”, because the focus went to basing our work on existing structures at village/tribal level, while reinforcing the messages via:

- regular visits of our staff,
- training of teachers and mullahs
- provision of data and stories to the BBC Pushto and Farsi services,

and on another level:

- provision of data to the UN MAPA
- provision of clearance requests to clearance agencies.

Naturally, we were asked by communities to consider the mullah and/or the village chief as our starting point. We then, year after year, built up a network of volunteer mine awareness trainers that includes to date more than 1,400 voluntary mine committees. These volunteers, apart from providing regular mine awareness sessions to their community, are also the necessary link between communities and mine action as a whole.

This is maybe the most important output of the evaluation (i quote):

“The evaluation finds this approach to be the most appropriate currently in use in Afghanistan in terms of pedagogical approach and sustainability.”

The evaluation also recommends that HI-B “takes full advantage of the BBC dramas and makes it an immediate priority to provide decent radios and batteries to support and promote village (radio) forums among as many villages as possible. It may also be a good approach for Kuchi (nomads).” The evaluation also calls for more attention to be given to Kuchi nomads.

### ***Integration and quick response ?***

Another aspect, not so positive, was very well highlighted in the following story. This story was told by one of our trainers (*Nomainda* as we call them):

(it is called) *The Story Of Zahir*

*Once in 1999, as I was returning to Qalat City from a field trip, I noticed a small rocket lying on the ground, close to a new fuel station. The rocket looked like it hadn't been used, so I wasn't sure why it was there.*

*I asked some people around where the rocket had come from. They replied that they had no idea, but that it had only been there for a few days. I marked the area with red paint and put some stones, painted red around the rocket, to show the people that it was dangerous and shouldn't be touched. Then I wrote a report for a clearance agency to destroy the rocket.*

*I had waited 26 days and still no team had come to destroy the rocket. On the 27th day, a man named Zahir, who was well known for being a little crazy, dragged the rocket to a bridge on the Kabul-Kandahar road. Zahir began to hit the rocket with stones and drop it on the ground. He did this until it exploded, killing him.*

*Close to the bridge two boys were playing. They were severely injured by the explosion that killed Zahir. Some days later, one of the boys died from his injuries. The other boy survived, but had one of his legs amputated.*

The reason why i tell you this story is that it highlights a very important aspect of mine action as a whole: this is integration between different components of mine action. Obviously, if the ammunition report of this story had been followed by a quick action, this accident could have been avoided. This is one of the lessons we learnt with this project: collecting information on mines and UXOs is great, but requires somebody to reply quickly to the requests.

The evaluation therefore (i quote) “recommends HI-B to consider all possible mine action options when seeking to address the needs of mine risk communities and not restrict itself to mine awareness”. It says later that “The establishment of a national systematic and dedicated service for victim data collection is essential in Afghanistan, as soon as possible.”

As a conclusion, i would like to read you one more story. Yes, it still is a sad story, but it is less bad than the two previous ones. This story shows us what community-based mine awareness can provide but also what are its limits:

(it is called) *Moving House*

*In October 1999, a family decided to move to Qalat City, in order to find work. After moving the father found a job gathering wood to sell in the market. Since he was new to the city, he did not know the location of the minefields and travelled everywhere to collect wood without thought of the possible danger. One day when he was working on the side of Gormab Mountain, he stepped on an antipersonnel mine. Hearing the explosion, local residents ran to see what had happened. On arriving they saw the man lying screaming on the ground, without one leg. One of the villagers ordered everyone to stop, saying that there were still mines in the area. The man, who worked as a volunteer mine awareness trainer, proceeded to follow the wood-collectors footsteps to rescue him from the minefield and applied first aid. The man survived his injury, though he lost his leg.*

Thank you for your attention.