

Notes for ICRC Intervention on "mine risk education"

Standing Committee on Mine Clearance Geneva, Wednesday 27 May 2009

Thank you, Madame Co-Chair.

On behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), I wish to provide some comments based on the ICRC's experience in implementing mine risk education as part of our preventive mine-action activities in the field.

Although mine action is not the primary operational activity of the ICRC, it is an important element of our overall approach to protecting and assisting the victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence. Our objectives include reducing the impact of weapon contamination on people but also ensuring safe and effective access for the delivery of food, shelter, water and protection activities.

In addition to its own programs, the ICRC also has a lead role within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in accordance with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement Strategy on Landmines adopted in 1999. In fact, up to 70% of our ongoing programmes are focused on building the capacity of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies working in their own countries.

The ICRC's approach to (mine) risk education, and mine action more broadly, has evolved significantly over the past few years. In 2005, a new preventive mine action framework was approved by the Directorate of the ICRC. It moved away from the previous "mine awareness" focus towards a more flexible, multidisciplinary and solution driven approach, adapted to the capacity and characteristics of the institution. In practice, this "multidisciplinary approach" means that mine action has been integrated into relief, assistance (such as economic security, water and habitat activities) as well as protection activities. We have also adopted the term "weapon contamination" in order to reflect the diverse range of contamination resulting from today's conflicts. The concept of weapon contamination covers anti-personnel mines, unexploded cluster munitions and all forms of unexploded and abandoned ordnance. Consequently, we no longer use the term "mine risk education", but now refer to "risk education" more broadly.

While clearance is of course the only solution to removing the threat to civilians posed by mines and explosive remnants of war, as we know this can be a long and slow process. Pending clearance, it is therefore necessary to implement 'interim' activities that seek to protect civilians from death and injury and to facilitate safe access to food, water and the other basic necessities in contaminated areas. This is the approach that the ICRC has adopted, integrating the issue into the assessment and planning procedures of our assistance division as 'just another source of vulnerability'. Examples include the use of micro grants to reduce the economic need that drives people to gather unexploded ordnance as scrap metal or to enter mined areas to gather food for sale, the provision of safe alternate water sources, or the reconnection of a gas supply where people are forced to scavenge for firewood in dangerous areas.

As we are pursuing more effective strategies in preventing and reducing the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war, our own approach is constantly evolving based on new operational experiences and as we adapt our strategies to specific contexts. With regard to risk education, we would like to share some of the key lessons we have learnt over the past five years:

- Stand-alone mine awareness and mine risk education activities have limited effect. Such activities can have a role to play, for example in an emergency phase in areas experiencing new mine and explosive remnant of war contamination or when populations that are unaware of the threat return to contaminated areas. However, mine risk education is not an appropriate stand-alone response in the longer term and its effectiveness in preventing new accidents quickly diminishes with time, unless it is part of a more flexible and integrated approach to risk reduction.
- There is a need for greater flexibility regarding the 'pillars' of mine action. Mine risk education must be considered in conjunction with mine clearance and victim assistance. Among others, mine risk education is a critical element in data gathering for both clearance and victim assistance.
- In this regard, there is a need to break down internal barriers to communication within the mine action sector. Communication between different sectors is often poor and needs to be improved. This is often reinforced by the physical separation of the relevant entities. The development of more integrated strategies, information-sharing and cooperation should be encouraged.
- As the Co-Chairs have rightly pointed out in their non-paper, mine risk education should not be seen as one-way mass communication of information. One of the most important lessons learnt in the last five years is the importance of community liaison as part of mine risk education. Community liaison is essential to ensure that mine actions operations are responsive to the needs and priorities of the community. For example, it helps set priorities for clearance by bringing in community knowledge on the type, location and impact of contamination. It is also critical to designing appropriate and viable risk reduction strategies. In short, it represents the voice of the community while clearance is on-going. Community liaison also has the potential to contribute to victim assistance, for example by connecting victims and their communities with the providers of health and rehabilitation services.
- The importance of a quickly and effectively responding to information provided by the community is a critical issue. If the response is inadequate, mine risk education activities lose credibility and the community will start to deal with the problem itself. The result is often that fewer dangerous items are reported and that more deaths occur. Clearance and mine risk education either fail together or succeed together and that needs to be recognised and responded to.
- Finally, we fully agree with another important point made in the non-paper. Each context is different and this is important to keep in mind when considering lessons learnt and best practices from other situations. Strategies must always be adapted to the specific situation. Related to this, is the fact that most international learning in the area of mine action focuses on post conflict situations – as an international community we need to focus more on what can be done during conflict as well. This aspect is rather weak at present.

To summarize, mine action needs to further develop with more innovative, common sense approaches that move beyond the traditional separation between the different mine action pillars.

Thank you, Madam Co-Chair.