

The right to play, a global issue: Living with landmines in Kurdistan/northern Iraq

By Harry Shier

In many parts of the world, landmines deprive children of their right to play. This paper describes a unique community arts training programme which took place in the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq in 1997. The programme helped local Kurdish arts and media workers develop a community arts approach and use a range of creative play activities to help children and families learn to keep themselves safe from landmines.



Photo MAG 1996

Kurdish children using the cases of anti-tank mines as toys, New Kirkuk, northern Iraq.

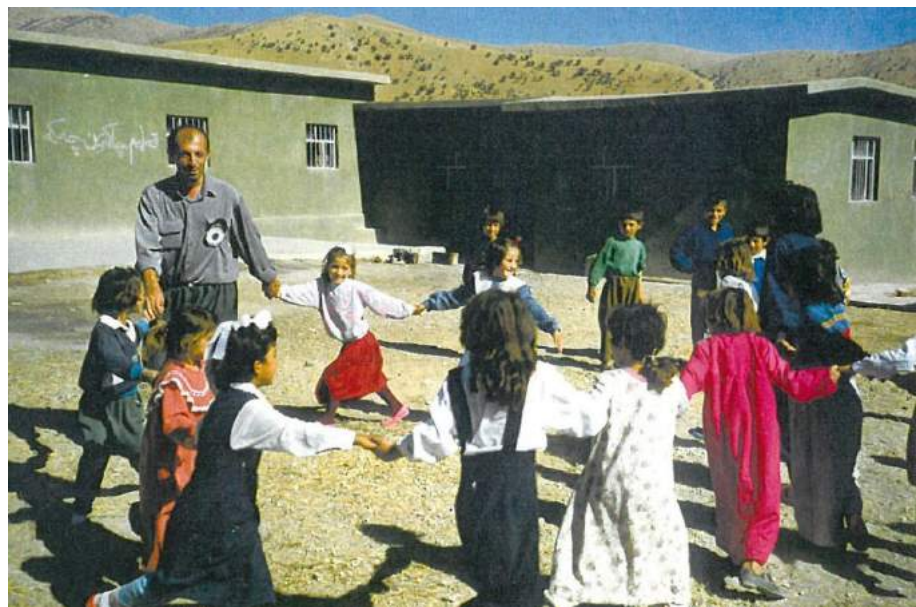
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Living with Landmines

In many parts of the world, land-mines deny children their right to outdoor play (this is in addition to the economic and social damage land- mines cause to adults and children alike in rural communities). Most obviously this affects those thousands of children who have become disabled as a result of mine injuries, but the fear of this hidden danger deprives whole communities of access to their traditional play space.

The United Nations reckons there are more than 110 million landmines scattered in 64 countries around the world. That is one landmine for every twelve children alive today. Another 100 million are stockpiled ready for use, and more are still being produced.

Children are particularly at risk from landmine injury because of their curiosity and love of play. In many parts of the world, landmines are scattered in areas where children have traditionally played, so the children are denied the use of their play space. Nevertheless, children still love to play outside, even in heavily mined areas. Young children have often mistaken mines for play-things, as some types of mines are made of coloured plastic and look like toys. In some areas, there are so many landmines that children get used to them and forget the risks involved. Kurdish children in northern Iraq use landmines to improvise toys and play equipment.



Learning about land-mine safety through games in the school playground.

Because of their small size, children who step on landmines are more likely to be killed than adults. Those that survive are often permanently disabled, losing arms, legs or eyes. Losing an arm or leg is worse for a child than an adult because they are still growing, so even if they are given a false arm or leg, they will soon grow too big for it and need a new one.

Kurdistan, the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, is one of the world's worst affected areas. The UK-based Mines Advisory Group is one of the leading non-government organisations working to clear mines and return land to the community. It currently has projects in northern Iraq, Angola, Cambodia and Laos, Zambia and Congo. MAG is one of the partner organisations in the International Campaign to Ban Land-mines which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.



Young goatherds. The subsistence farming economy places children like these especially at risk from mine injury.

Community Mine Awareness Programme

As well as surveying and clearing minefields, MAG runs community mine awareness programmes helping those who live in mined areas to keep themselves and their families safe. It will be many years before all the mines can be cleared, so this work is equally important in saving lives and preventing mine injuries.

The Community Mine Awareness Programme (CMAP) in northern Iraq was established in 1992, making it one of the longest established in the world. By the beginning of 1997, MAG had carried out over 4,300 mine awareness programmes. Mine awareness activities include:

- mine awareness programmes in schools;
- “Child to Child” mine awareness programmes, where children are trained and supported so they can take the lead in activities to increase mine awareness among their peers;
- village consultation, mine awareness and safety programmes carried out by MAG Advance Teams; v training programmes for teachers;
- production of mine awareness posters, leaflets, stickers and other visual materials;

- public education mine awareness campaigns, using a range of media including radio and television (widely available in towns and cities, though less so in rural areas);
- production of mine recognition kits;
- production and distribution of a quarterly children's magazine, Awat and Hevi, which communicates mine awareness messages through stories, cartoons, children's artwork, poems, songs and games;
- mine awareness education programmes for other agencies including UN and NGOs working in mine affected areas.

In keeping with MAG's commitment to sustainability and developing local control (indigenisation), all the above activities are organised, carried out and managed by local (i.e. Kurdish) workers employed by MAG. The Programme has just one UK expatriate officer as Programme Manager.

Due to the difficulties of travel to and from north Iraq, all training and development needs of the local workers must be met through locally devised and delivered programmes.

This extensive, and still growing Community Mine awareness Programme requires a wide range of resources and materials. Due to the difficult and at times dangerous nature of the north Iraq autonomous region, all NGOs, including MAG, have to be as self-sufficient as possible in terms of logistics, I communications, materials and equipment. Resource materials for the CMAP, therefore, have to be developed and produced within the region. This is made difficult by the lack of access to modern production facilities such as quality printing facilities, and unavailability or chronic shortages of most basic materials.



MAG field workers use a stencil to spray paint mine safety information on the schoolyard wall. Ahmed, the male worker used to be a MAG de-miner until he lost a leg in a mine accident and, after a year off work, was redeployed as a field officer in the advance team.

Resource Production Unit

On the other hand, there are individuals with professional skills in all aspects of art, design and media production. It must be remembered that before the Gulf War and the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish region, Iraq as a whole was a wealthy, highly developed state. Although conditions in the North are now very difficult and resources are scarce, there is still a reservoir of modern professional arts and media expertise.

MAG therefore established a specialist Resource Production Unit (RPU), with the specific task of producing the resource materials needed for the growing CMAP. Based at MAG's north Iraq headquarters in the city of Suleimaniyah, the RPU team consisted of twelve people: Resource Co-ordinator/team leader, three visual artists, two photographers, two media directors (specialising in video/ TV production), calligrapher/Arabic-Kurdish DTP specialist, scriptwriter, TV presenter and translator.

This team has undertaken a wide range of resource production assignments including:

- a wide range of posters, aimed at different groups of people at risk
- a quarterly children's magazine;
- games and teaching aids;
- leaflets, booklets and stickers;
- mine awareness kits for schools;
- a regular television programme;
- a radio soap opera;
- a series of video dramas for children.



Designing and testing mine-awareness games.

MAG felt that the RPU's effectiveness could be increased if methods for the design, development, testing, targeting and evaluating of resources could be improved if the team worked more closely with the communities for whom the resources were intended, particularly by using a community arts approach, and working creatively with local children.

Community Arts training programme

In 1997 I travelled to northern Iraq, to lead a training programme for the local team to develop new ideas and introduce a community arts approach.

The agreed aim of the training programme was, "To contribute to the saving of life and limb for the people of Kurdistan/ North Iraq, by enabling the MAG Resource Production Unit to design, test and produce increasingly effective awareness resource materials".

Based on this aim, a series of twelve specific learning objectives was drawn up, centred on the underlying issues of communication, but covering also children's rights, disability equality, creative use of games to aid learning, and a range of practical arts and media techniques.

An eleven-day training course was then designed, using a wide range of participatory and experiential methods to address the agreed learning objectives. The approach to training placed an emphasis on co-operative learning, sharing and problem-solving in groups. These are recognised as fundamental principles of community education, and reflect the approach advocated in all MAG's mine awareness programmes.

The entire programme had to be delivered through the medium of Kurdish. As the trainers did not speak Kurdish, this meant everything had to be translated. The RPU team included a very able interpreter, and two other members also spoke good English and were able to share the load.



Using drama to promote land-mine awareness.



Screen-print workshop: Pulling the first print.

Conclusions

An evaluation was carried out at the end of the training programme, which showed it had been very successful in meeting its objectives. A number of tentative conclusions can be drawn from the experience.

The first is that there are many opportunities for children who have to live with landmines to learn practical safety information, safer behaviour and positive attitudes through creative arts, games and imaginative play. Training local workers to facilitate this kind of playful learning is a viable approach which has much scope for development, both in northern Iraq and other areas.



First day's work: prints made with cut paper stencils.

This project also demonstrative the effectiveness of a participatory approach to learning in the training of adult Mine Awareness Workers. Although new and unfamiliar to most of them The participants agreed that this approach was superior to traditional teaching. They particularly valued methods such as working in groups to solve problems. The MAG RPU team showed themselves willing to adapt to this new approach.

This suggests that there is much further scope for the training of local mine awareness educators, using arts, play and creativity, rather than traditional didactic methods.

Some months after the training programme, MAG decided to re-structure the CMAP. Instead of having one centrally-based arts and media team, they decided to deploy arts workers more widely throughout the programme, making it easier for them to implement the lessons from the training programme by working directly with children and families.

The right to play is very much a global issue, and it is often global forces beyond their control that deprive children of this right. By using play itself as a tool to facilitate learning, and so help children keep safe, this project showed how practice of play can become a tool to restore the child's right to play.

Harry Shier 1998



Although it is one of the areas worst affected by land-mines, Kurdistan has no national campaign for a ban. Here the team is designing an exhibition to launch a Kurdistan national campaign to ban land-mines.