The Impact of ERW on Children

Known as killing fields in Cambodia and devil’s gardens in Afghanistan, areas contaminated with explosive remnants of war are known for their impartiality when claiming victims, the majority of whom are children. In Southern Lebanon, submunitions continue to injure and kill children returning home after the 2006 Israeli–Hezbollah War when they mistake them for toys. In Lao PDR, infamously the most bombed country in the world, children returning home from school are killed by handling submunitions they find on the roadside. In May 2011, a submunition, which the victim believed to be a ball, killed a 13-year-old boy from Western Sahara who was herding animals, and an old cluster bomb killed three boys ranging in ages six to 12 while they were playing in a garden in Southern Iraq. Also, Libyan children living amidst the ongoing civil war suffer injuries from cluster munitions and indiscriminate mortar and rocket fire.

Looking to the Future
Roots of Peace’s pilot humanitarian-demining project in Hushait, scheduled to launch before the end of 2011, will set a precedent of local-international cooperation in mine action in the country, helping build humanitarian-demining capacity and pave the way for public-private partnerships which will allow for the eventual clearance of all mine-affected communities in the West Bank and the sacred sites along the Jordan River. See endnotes page 82

Susceptibility of Children
Since rural areas are most often affected, using land for farming, grazing, hunting, collecting firewood and various other activities often brings civilians into contact with ERW. An inability to read and heed warning signs leaves children susceptible to mines, and their playful nature often leads to injuries. Their disabilities are seen as burdens to families, and as a result, girls represent an under-reported statistic. Along with an unfamiliarity of the various types of explosives and a tendency to play or work in hazardous areas, natural curiosity and a smaller body size render children more susceptible to the effects of ERW than adults.

This article provides a brief description of the threat cluster munitions, landmines and other explosive remnants of war pose to children worldwide. The discussion of children’s physical susceptibility and the psychological and socioeconomic effects that accompany wounds and disabilities provides a broad picture of the impact ERW have on children. The article also explores rehabilitative support, as several sources provide a variety of recovery strategies that focus on community support for the future well-being of child survivors.

Roots of Peace Founder Heidi Kühn and Tzachi Hanegbi, Chair of the Israel Foreign Affairs Defense Committee, plant a tree in Israel in July 2010. Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.

Heidi Kühn, Founder and CEO of Roots of Peace, began the organization in 1997. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley in political economics of industrial societies, König has been recognized by numerous awards including the Cal Berkeley Alumni Award for Excellence and Achievement, the National Jefferson Award for Public Service, the World Association of Non-Governmental Award for Peace and Security, and many others.

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Global Picture
While civilians constitute roughly 70 percent of all casualties caused by cluster munitions, landmines and other ERW, the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor reports that children make up one-third of casualties worldwide. UNICEF reported that from 2008 to 2010, children accounted for half of all civilian casualties. Among child casualties, boys constitute the highest percentage where the gender is known, composing nearly three-fourths of all ERW casualties. In fact, 10 countries report boys as their largest casualty group. ERW, however, also affect girls who are often more stigmatized for injuries. Their disabilities are seen as burdens to families, and as a result, girls represent an under-reported statistic. Along with an unfamiliarity of the various types of explosives and a tendency to play or work in hazardous areas, nature’s curiosity and a smaller body size render children more susceptible to the effects of ERW than adults.

Child from Lao PDR’s Khammouane province draws dead-ly bomblets from cluster bombs that still litter their play-grounds more than 30 years after the war ended. Photo courtesy of Sean Sutton/MAG.

Related Resources
Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor
The Global Impact of Landmines
UNICEF
Websites
International Campaign to Ban Landmines
United Nations Mine Action Service
World Disarmament Movement
activities that risk contact with unexploded, subsurface sub-
munitions and mines, effectively reducing the family income
while increasing its vulnerability.13 Alternatively, affected land
does not always prevent inhabitants from taking risks to earn
a living. To provide for their families those suffering from
poverty in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Lebanon and Vietnam often
feel they have no alternatives except to scour contaminated
land for scrap metal. In fact, an increase in unexploded sub-
munition accidents in Lao PDR between 2003 and 2005 can
be attributed to an increase in the scrap-metal trade.14

When compared to mines, areas affected by cluster muni-
tions may give inhabitants a false sense of security, because
people trust in their ability to avoid unexploded submunitions
that they believe are predominantly visible.15 On the other
hand, many Cambodian farmers, although aware of the
subsurface dangers, cannot afford to wait for contaminated
land areas to be cleared and will plow fields in spite of the
risks involved.16 This can result in additional child casualties
because the explosive charges of cluster munitions are much
greater than those of anti-personnel mines and can easily in-
jure others nearby.16 In subsistence cultures where victims
are frequently farmers, herdsmen or refugees, injury is espe-
cially devastating since day-to-day survival depends heavily
on physical abilities.16

Given that a high percentage of ERW are found in rural
areas, up to 25 percent of victims live from one to six hours
away from medical care providers.14 In Lao PDR, areas con-
taminated with cluster munitions may be a several-hour walk
from the nearest paved road.14 Remoteness and the low posi-
tioning of vital organs leave child victims highly vulnerable
to the concentrated explosive blasts of mines, submunitions
and other ERW. Physical injuries caused by AP mines typi-
cally include the loss of one or both feet or lower limbs, and
extensive shrapnel damage to the pelvis and abdomen.17

In a comparative study on the effects of landmines and
ERW among children in Cambodia, Cino Bendinelli wrote that children “sustained more invalidating disabilities, such as upper-limb amputation and bilateral blindness.”18 This increased severity of injuries was associated with a child’s tendency (especially boys) to pick up and handle un-
exploded ordnance, sustaining more upper-body injuries, whereas adults were injured most frequently by mines, re-
sulting in lower-limb injuries.14 Notably, cluster munitions
pose a greater threat because these explosives are specifical-
ly designed to kill, whereas most AP mines are designed to
incapacitate and wound.19 In “The Consequences for Chil-
dren of Explosive Remnants of War,” Hugh Watts notes that for
those fortunate enough to reach medical care, children

typically undergo multiple operations requiring large …
quantities of transfused blood, on average more than six times
as much blood as those injured by bullets or fragments.20

After sustaining injuries, child survivors suffer severe
long-term effects. The underdeveloped nature of a child’s
body requires multiple operations, and several amputations
may be necessary as bones grow at a faster rate than soft tis-
ue.21 Learning to use prosthetic devices is an important com-
ponent of rehabilitation, and in addition to multiple follow-up
surgeries, a child “may need up to 35 prostheses/modifications
during his or her lifetime.”22

Psychological Effects

The effects of ERW are not limited to children with sus-
tained injuries. An inability to understand war may heavily
affect a child’s psychological well-being, as one’s daily routine
becomes highly unpredictable.23 Mental-health issues often
result from traumatic experiences. In a report entitled “100
Incidents of Humanitarian Harm,” authors Esther Cunn and
Katherine Harrison report that children have been known to
suffer “flashbacks, nightmares and hysterical aphony, a
psychological disorder in which a person loses the ability to
speak following a traumatic event.”24 While the terror involved
in such a traumatic experience affects children, survivors are
also influenced by their family’s inability to cope with result-
ning disabilities; this often results in guilt.20 Moreover, com-
munity rejection or the rejection of one’s family can lead child
survivors to feelings of depression.20

Socioeconomic Impact

Whereas children are highly susceptible to the physical
and psychological impacts of encountering ERW, accompany-
ing socioeconomic effects can also be detrimental to a child’s
life. School attendance is low among child survivors, and stig-
ma and isolation in developing countries mean that many
children have little hope of receiving proper rehabilitation.25
In addition, the presence of ERW on many roads and paths
makes travel to hospitals or clinics hazardous.26

Regardless of whether the children sustain physical in-
juries, many are still greatly affected by the socioeconomic
impact of a family’s disability. When parents are un-
able to provide for themselves or their families, children may
be obligated to drop out of school in order to earn a supple-
tmental income and help support the family.27 This is espe-
cially problematic, as families suffering from poverty cannot af-
ford such treatment. Unfortunately, measuring assistance to
child survivors can be difficult since many service providers
do not commonly record detailed statistics; consequently, the
exact nature of treatment provided to child survivors is large-
ly unknown.28 According to the Landmine and Cluster Muni-
tion Monitor’s 2010 report, the Convention on the Prohibition
of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-person-
nel Mines and their Destruction (also known as the Anti-per-
sonnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC) implicitly requires
landmine survivors and their families to participate in the
convention’s implementation and be fully involved in victim-
assistance activities.29 Provided that friends and family are

In a post on The Blog of Physicians for Human Rights,
Deputy Director Richard Sollom relates the story of a young
Burmese refugee, a boy tending to his buffalo in an infect-
ed area when a mine claimed his left leg and severely injured
his right leg.21 Although Sollom writes that the story is one of
success—the boy received surgery, care and a prosthetic leg—
Sollom noted that the boy will be unable to attend school and
must continue to tend to his buffalo, the same venue that re-
sulted in his injuries.23

Rehabilitative Support

Socioeconomic reintegration may be difficult for children
suffering amputations and disabilities as appropriate programs
are often unavailable. Moreover, peers often do not understand
disability issues, and teachers are unable to prevent isolation
or exclusion of child survivors.20 The need for corrective sur-
gery and the continuous need for replacement prosthetics is
also problematic, as families suffering from poverty cannot af-
ford such treatment. Unfortunately, measuring assistance to
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notes from the field

Hiring children pose by the fence made with unexploded ordnance in Xiang Khouang, Lao PDR.

Photo courtesy of Paolo Bazzan.

offering support to survivors. Save the Children, an international nongovernmental organization, noted that these existing forms of local support should not be overlooked when seeking to implement new forms of support, such as the introduction of professional aid workers.18

In their book Globalization, Social Justice and the Helping Professions, William Roth and Katharine Briar-Lawson write that “the chief tenet for working with victims of trauma is to, first and foremost, remove the threat.” 20

Roth and Briar-Lawson assert that children who have suffered physically and psychologically will progress more quickly in the rehabilitation process when staying with family; similarly, children who have been separated from family members tend to fare better when placed with a foster family.21

While the threat of bodily harm involved in accidentally detonating a mine, unexplored submunition or some other ERW is evident, the psychological and socioeconomic impacts on a child’s life are less obvious. Children are physically scarred and mentally traumatized, and when families are unable to cope with a disability, the family becomes more vulnerable to the socioeconomic after-effects of the incident. Children require specialized rehabilitative care and additional ongoing support. By understanding the various effects these weapons can have on a child’s life, more appropriate, sustainable care can be provided to those in need.22

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New Database Provides Resource for Mine-action Community

Launched in July 2011, the World Bank’s Landmine Contamination, Casualties and Clearance database is a valuable resource for those working in mine action. The database allows users to create spreadsheets, reports and graphics based on a wealth of landmine-contamination data from around the world.

The Database

Recently, the World dataBank has expanded to include a new dataset: Landmine Contamination, Casualties and Clearance. Added in July 2011, this database draws from two data sources, the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor and the United Nations Mine Action Team, to provide accurate information regarding landmine and unexploded-ordnance contamination in 192 countries.

Users can create their own reports on the website by selecting the countries for which they want data; the source from which they would like the data; the specific variable measures or the specific data figures they would like to see; and the time frame for which they would like the data. Thus, the data, which cover most aspects of mine action, are divided into certain groupings that are broken down further according to more specific variables. The four main groupings of data are:

1. Country
2. Data source
3. Series
4. Time

Under the Country heading, information is organized into sections titled Income, Lending and Region. Under the Income heading, countries are divided into five sets, organized according to levels of income. Under the Lending section, countries are split into two groups: low-income countries receiving interest-free loans and higher-income countries receiving humanitarian loans for specific projects. Finally, under the Region heading, data is divided into seven different regions: East Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. These groupings provide users with a variety of criteria for country-data selection.

Once users have selected a country, or a group of countries, they must then select the data source. Sometimes the information found in both the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor

The World dataBank, http://data.worldbank.org, is an informational database launched 20 April 2010 by the World Bank as a part of its Open Data Initiative.1

Within the database are 27 separate databases containing information on topics ranging from finances and debt to the conditions of African railways. These databases are free and open to the public as a part of the World Bank’s mission to disseminate facts for journalists, academicians and other concerned parties. Most of the datasets are updated annually, although some economic and social datasets are available on a monthly or quarterly basis.2 According to its website, the World Bank hopes that this sharing and publicizing of information will lead to greater transparency and accountability because the World Bank acknowledges these attributes as “essential to the development process and central to achieving the Bank’s mission to alleviate poverty.”3