There is already a proven spillover effect as the safety messages continue to spread inside Syria, almost a year later. During the project phase, safety messages reached approximately 38,000 beneficiaries by radio and 33,000 by articles, cartoons, posters, etc. People now know what to do when they encounter UXO.

According to Tavares, “The conclusion is that, for very little money, we can have an impact and reach some places that are otherwise very difficult to reach.”

No plans exist to orchestrate DCA’s workshops in other countries, as the Syria program is unique to its current, extreme political situation. However, with support from Norwegian Church Aid, DCA is running a project in Mali for the northern Kidal region—an area humanitarian workers also cannot access. In Mali, with support from local partner organizations, DCA selected nine qualified local persons in Kidal and flew them out of the area. Participants were taught how to collect information and make surveys to learn the locations of contaminated areas. Once given the green light to conduct clearance, teams can move in more quickly, allowing persons who fled to return home sooner.

There are significant challenges to working in Syria, e.g. instability inside the country and along the borders. DCA’s Syria program is evolving to meet the changing nature of the political scene. The Risk Education Ambassador Project is evolving along with these waves of changes.

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Nikolaj Søndergaard is a Danish journalist and worked for various media before he came to DanChurchAid (DCA) in 2013. Since then, he has been working as a communication officer with responsibility for covering DCA’s mine action activities.

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Landmines in Croatia Pose Threat to Incoming Refugees

After Hungary formally closed its border with Serbia on 15 September 2015, refugees fleeing conflict in the Middle East, Central Asia and Northern Africa have turned next to Croatia as a gateway to reach countries such as Sweden and Germany. The influx of refugees traversing the areas near the Croatia-Serbia border has raised concerns that refugees will encounter residual landmine contamination in Croatia as they make their way to Slovenia and Hungary. The contamination dates back to the four-year conflict which followed the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1995. The Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) estimates that there are more than 50,000 mines remaining in Croatia, amounting to a total suspected hazardous area of 496.8 km² that spans 75 cities and municipalities across 10 counties.

According to CROMAC, all minefields are surrounded by posted warning signs. However, there is concern that refugees unfamiliar with the terrain and the signs’ meaning may inadvertently wander into the fields. In order to spread awareness of this risk, officials are disseminating warnings and maps detailing the contamination to the refugees as they enter the country at the official border crossing points. Still, this method may not reach all refugees entering the country—particularly those that cross the border illegally. Multiple civil initiatives and groups have issued warnings via Facebook and other mobile social media apps and posted warnings along the Serbian route to warn incoming refugees of the contamination ahead in Croatia. Although Hungary reopened its main border crossing with Serbia after a week of political negotiations, many refugees are still passing through Croatia. The first surge of refugees entered Croatia on 16 September 2015, one day after Hungary closed its southern border with Serbia. As of 28 September 2015, about 78,000 refugees have entered the country.

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~ Megan Hinton, CISR staff