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## C4D in Humanitarian Action



# Ukraine 2016 Superheroes against mines

Edutainment approach  
to engaging children in  
mine safety

A case study

## BACKGROUND

Ukraine is one of the world's most mine contaminated countries in the world. From 14 April 2014 to 31 August 2019, at least 1,059 civilians were killed or injured in, unexploded ordnance<sup>1</sup> (UXO), and landmine related incidents: 630 men, 225 women, 166 children and 38 adults whose sex is unknown.

In 2014, armed conflict erupted in the Eastern part of the country and 580,000 children were affected. Over the course of the fighting, many areas where communities used to live were used as battlefields. Families who were coming back to these former battlefields after the conflict, and those who remained in the post-conflict areas of the Donbas region, are now exposed to the dangers of landmines and other explosive devices left behind by the fighters. Lack of knowledge about safe behaviour around these UXO could lead to injuries or death.

There was a clear need for mine risk education among children but a hindering factor needed to be taken into consideration: children were reluctant to listen to adults about the necessary precaution measures to avoid mines. In fact, traditional booklets and brochures

explaining basic mine safety rules produced by UNICEF in 2015 did not sufficiently motivate and engage children to learn these important rules.

On the other hand, children are particularly at risk of mine injury because of their innate curiosity and love of play. The solution that UNICEF Ukraine found to address these factors was an edutainment approach: let superheroes teach children about mine safety rules. The edutainment<sup>2</sup> multicomponent campaign centered around a team of comic book superhero characters and included digital promotion of the mine safety rules through the website, a web-based game, videos featuring a world class celebrity, offline edutainment events, a series of comic cartoons and a variety of printed products. The edutainment campaign eventually reached 2.4 million children online. Among them, over 500,000 children received comic books, posters, stickers and about 200,000 children were engaged in direct training sessions during the 2016 to 2017 period. This case study will discuss how the country office developed their education entertainment program to address the need for mine risk education, using multiple platforms to reach children with lifesaving information.

## METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

Among the affected communities there was a general lack of knowledge about the dangers of landmines and other explosive devices. Looking specifically at children, Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) survey results<sup>3</sup> showed that they

were not properly informed about how to stay safe in areas where UXO were present: 45 per cent of children aged 6 to 11 didn't know the number to call to report UXO; and 43 per cent of children were not able to recognize explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Given these findings, the insight that children were reluctant to listen to adults although their natural curiosity about mines and other explosive devices, a new educational approach was needed. This approach had to deliver the necessary life-saving information from a source that children find engaging. With the aim of protecting school kids and preventing injuries among children, the resulting strategy was to create an edutainment intervention program to educate children about safe behaviours with a focus on conflict-affected areas. The campaign objectives were to (a) build knowledge about risks from mines, Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) among children; and (b) to motivate safe practices with mines/ERW among school-aged children. Key messages were developed based on the KAP baseline conducted with main audiences.

The program, called 'Superteam against Mines', was conceptualized as a comic book featuring a team of four superheroes appealing to children with lifesaving rules educating them on how to avoid landmines and ERW including UXO. The most critical safety practices were embedded in the characteristic of each Superteam member: Notice! Step Back! Report! Don't Panic! Their adventures played out on both digital and print formats featuring short, simple storylines where children find themselves exposed to mines and ERWs and demonstrate the positive safety behaviours.



<sup>1</sup> Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) include Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) and Abandoned Ordnance. These ERW are cartridges, bombs, shells, grenades, cluster munition and other munitions that did not explode when they were employed or were abandoned and still pose a risk of detonation.

<sup>2</sup> Edutainment is entertainment with the purpose of providing educational information to the target audience.

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge, Attitude and Practices Survey, DDG-UNICEF, 2015.



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## Multi-platform approach

The campaign used multiple platforms to reach children living in high-risk areas including the edutainment website ([www.inforce.team](http://www.inforce.team)), social media<sup>4</sup>, printed comics, stickers, posters, school diaries and notebooks.

The edutainment website was set up to host the online version of the comic book. In addition, the website talked about mine behaviour rules and described different explosive objects. A game was added to the website to make the learning experience more interesting for children. Site visitors could play the game as a way to test their understanding of mine safety.

A video<sup>5</sup> featuring Hollywood star and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Orlando Bloom was developed to reinforce lifesaving practices among adolescents, motivating them to actively use the website to seek related information. In it, Bloom can be seen standing against a backdrop of a war-torn building. He is talking directly to the audience about the importance of knowing basic safety rules in a conflict-affected environment: Avoid unknown places, don't touch dangerous objects, keep family informed of your whereabouts and call a designated phone number to report suspicious objects. It ends with a call to action inviting viewers to read the UNICEF 'Superteam against Mines' comics or visit the website to learn more about safe behaviour in conflict zones. The video was distributed on social media channels<sup>6</sup> and screened at children's movie festivals.

<sup>4</sup> Social media used include YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

<sup>5</sup> The video is available at <https://goo.gl/bCfPSa>

<sup>6</sup> Social media used include YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

<sup>7</sup> The cartoons are available here: <https://bit.ly/2iRdKg7>

To reach children offline, branded information products were printed: leaflets, comic books, stickers, diaries and t-shirts. These printed products were also used during in-person training sessions with children living in the most conflict-affected areas. Finally, a series of three comic cartoons<sup>7</sup> were developed telling the story of three kids living in an area where it is easy to encounter mines and ERW. In each episode the children are engaged in various activities like doing extreme sports, exploring abandoned houses and walking in the woods. They eventually see ERW and manage to avoid the dangerous object, staying alive only by following the lifesaving rules which are emphasized by the superheroes in the end of each episode.

## Partnerships

Schools became particularly interested in holding the in-person direct training sessions for their students as the children were keen to get the campaign's branded products.

In addition to schools, partnerships with local departments of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and State Emergency Service were established. Relationships with international nonprofits working in the field of mine risk education (MRE) were also established – with Danish Demining Group (DDG) and Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD). These two international nonprofit partners also helped further popularize the 'Superheroes against Mines' comic book, even using those comic books and other campaign materials in their own direct training sessions on MRE.

## Evaluation

An innovative monitoring and evaluation mechanism was used to assess the effectiveness of the campaign. Instead of traditional offline surveys that are commonly used to gather feedback from the target audience and assess the awareness and behaviour change, an online survey was conducted among children via social media networks.

Children in Ukraine are active users of various social networks, including those main communication channels used in the campaign: YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Using these digital channels allowed the team to deliver the survey to those who were exposed to the campaign messages.

This provided representative data about which of the campaign components worked and what changed in terms of awareness and practice of risky behaviour. This methodology was deliberately chosen to provide quick and reliable data about children's knowledge and behaviour. Moreover, using these digital channels allowed the team to deliver the survey to those who were exposed to the campaign messages.

## Expanding the programme

Since the campaign, the edutainment approach has been further applied to produce other digital products in cooperation with youth bloggers. These youth bloggers worked with qualified professionals to produce MythBusters-inspired videos where they correct misconceptions and demonstrate how dangerous and destructive landmines and ERW explosions can be.<sup>8</sup>

Another edutainment application was done through peer-to-peer (P2P) training sessions among children on mine safety rules. In these sessions, children teach fellow children how to avoid landmines and ERW using, among other things, edutainment content. The P2P programme was developed in response to an identified need for improved methods of information transfer to adolescents within the 12 to 17 age group. Children within this age group are at a formative age where they naturally challenge traditional sources of information such as that which is received from parents or teachers in a classroom environment. The delivery of key mine safety messages through direct peers resulted in enhanced uptake and retention of messaging. The children selected as 'master trainers' were chosen because of their leadership abilities and desire to develop



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<sup>8</sup> The video is available here: <https://youtu.be/ggZlxRYuxnk>

their own knowledge and skills. A 50:50 gender balance amongst the participants was ensured to equally cover both genders with MRE safety messaging.

For children master trainers, participation in the P2P project was even more than improving knowledge about mine safety. They were motivated to improve their social and leadership skills as well as help their peers to stay safe.

“ I met a lot of interesting people, became confident speaker and understood that I can help at least some of my friends to stay alive in our conflict affected region. ”

- Alina,  
One of the Master Trainers

## RESULTS

- ✔ For the first time during the conflict, children heard the key messages in a way different from the boring leaflets or military news.
- ✔ The campaign reached 2.4 million children online.
- ✔ Over 500,000 children received printed comic books, posters, stickers and about 200,000 children were engaged in direct training sessions during the 2016 to 2017 period.
- ✔ The post-campaign survey showed that knowledge and intended practice of safe behaviour when observing mines increased by 12 per cent among children in affected areas.
- ✔ The ability among children to identify risky areas increased by 15 per cent.
- ✔ The ability to identify suspicious and dangerous objects increased by 20 per cent among teenaged children living in affected areas.
- ✔ UNICEF Ukraine received multiple requests from government and non-government partners at the local and national levels for the comic books and other printed materials, training and video sessions.



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## **LESSONS LEARNT**

The campaign proved that children were less receptive to traditional media, had lower risk perception about the dangers of landmines and ERW, and were open to trying new things.

Increasing risk perception among children in humanitarian contexts is difficult to do using traditional communication approaches – which usually includes showing consequences of unsafe practices. For example, showing pictures of people who suffered from mine-related blasts did not work as the children were already traumatized by shelling and conflict-related real life images. It is important to remember that children in humanitarian contexts

are already traumatized and many of them face psychological distress as a result of their current situation. Edutainment offers a more positive and empowering way of conflict-affected audiences to follow safe practices.

Another main lesson is that when designing for children, it is important to regularly consult and test the product with them. To ensure children liked and properly understood the comic book and all the subsequent products, the team regularly tested content with children. In the future, the plan is to broaden the testing beyond content and to include communication channels used to deliver the information to children. This is in recognition that children like to try new things and change their preferences quite often.

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