



## Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme

by Edwin Faigmane [ UXO Lao ]

*In this article, UXO Lao reports on its development from 1996 to the present. Focuses include issues related to productivity, quality control, capacity building, gender equality, UXO clearance, and development and funding.*

The Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao) is the national UXO clearance operator in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Established in 1996, UXO Lao has operations in nine of the most cluster-bomb and UXO-affected provinces in the country, including Attapeu, Champasack, Huaphanh, Khammuane, Luangprabang, Saravane, Savannakhet, Sekong and Xiengkhuang. UXO Lao conducts area clearance, roving or explosive-ordnance-disposal emergency spot tasks, General and Technical Survey, and UXO-risk-education and community-awareness activities.

Over the last 14 years, UXO Lao has cleared more than 19,161 hectares (74 square miles) of land, including 1,055 hectares (4 square miles) released through Technical Survey. In the process, the organization has destroyed 949,982 UXO items, including 446,711 submunitions from cluster bombs. It has also conducted 8,162 risk-education activities reaching more than 1.26 million people.

In 2008, the Lao government and United Nations Development Programme commissioned an evaluation of the UXO sector in order to assess the sector's progress against the National Strategic Plan's objectives and evaluate the UXO sector's structure, level of government and donor support, as well as UXO Lao's efficiency and effectiveness. The results were gathered together in a list of recommendations that include:

1. Using the results of the scoping exercise to develop a time-bound program for large-scale clearance of UXO
2. Integrating UXO strategic planning with national socioeconomic planning
3. Targeting high-risk groups such as scrap-metal collectors and local villagers who wrongly consider themselves bomb experts to prevent accidents
4. Expanding roving teams to deal with quick UXO removal when small numbers of items are found (spot tasks)

In 2009, the Lao government began a series of extensive consultations with sector stakeholders (government ministries including health, education, agriculture and forestry; UXO operators, survivor-assistance groups and risk-education groups) to replace the initial 10-year National Strategic Plan for the UXO sector with the Safe Path Forward (2003–13). The aim of the revision was to take into account several important developments that had occurred since 2003, as well as the sector evaluation's 2008 findings. The Safe Path Forward II (2010–20) takes into account the government's National Socio-Economic Development Plan. The document is still awaiting government approval.

The UXO sector's 2008 evaluation in Laos by Griffin, Keeley and Sayyasouk identifies 200,000 hectares (772 square miles) of land that could be used for agricultural purposes out of a total contaminated area of 500,000 hectares (1,930 square miles) within the 47 poorest districts of the country. At the 2008 rate of clearance, clearance would take 50 years, and a cost-benefit analysis determined that clearing much of this land at 2008 market prices would be economically beneficial. From a financial perspective, it would be cost-effective and would take approximately 16 years at 2008 speeds to clear all potential paddy fields and 20 percent of potential upland rice fields with the remaining 80 percent of potential upland rice fields released through Technical Surveys. With more resources and increased

productivity, the time needed to achieve these goals could be reduced to 10 years. While this time period will not meet the obligations set forth in the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which states “clearance and destruction shall be completed as soon as possible but not later than ten years,” it will hopefully reduce contamination to a level that the Lao government can manage alone, independent of any international support.<sup>1</sup>

### Increases in Productivity

UXO Lao contributes heavily to meeting the Lao government efforts in socioeconomic development. In 2005, UXO Lao cleared 1,566 hectares (3,870 acres). This amount increased every year, reaching 2,552 hectares (6,306 acres) in 2009 despite no overall increase in the staff numbers. This success rate can be attributed to a number of factors:

1. **Use of discretionary detectors:** After a study and a detector trial to determine the detector best suited for the country’s situation, and with Japanese government funding, UXO Lao acquired 132 units of the Ebinger 421GC detector for use in its operational areas. In late 2006, UXO Lao began procuring the Vallon VMXC1 detector, and it now owns 480 units. With 612 discretionary detectors in total, every deminer in the field has access to a discretionary detector or a UXO detector.

Unlike a conventional detector, a discretionary detector ignores small pieces of metal that are unlikely to be mines and UXO, and this makes the clearance process faster. A deminer using a conventional detector could average around 150 to 175 square meters (179 to 209 square yards) per day while one using a discretionary detector could reach up to 275 square meters (329 square yards) per day.



A UXO Lao female deminer clears a common farming area for a village in Luangprabang province, Lao PDR.  
All photos courtesy of the author/UNDP-UXO Lao

**Cross-training of medics and drivers as deminers:** A review of personnel job functions revealed the potential of using medics and drivers as deminers if two or more were on each operation’s site. At the end of 2008, UXO Lao qualified 115 medics and drivers as deminers. This number, added to the existing 547 personnel, increased the total number of deminers in the organization to 662.

**Use of Technical Survey:** Technical Survey was applied to UXO Lao operations beginning in late 2007 and was fully implemented in 2008, resulting in 1,055 hectares (2,607 acres) of released land.

### Quality Management

In late 2009, UXO Lao’s quality management unit began carrying out quality-assurance and quality-control inspections of UXO Lao field operations with an initial focus on area clearance. These inspections ensured that all land UXO Lao cleared met the quality requirements stated in the Lao National Standards and that all activities were carried out in a safe and consistent manner. With the recruitment of national staff, three regional QM roving teams covering nine provinces formed. The U.S. Department of State and Swiss government each fund two Technical Advisors to assist with UXO Lao’s QM initiatives.

### Capacity Building

In early 2010, an additional five UXO Lao Senior Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technicians graduated from the National Regulatory Authority’s Level 4 EOD course, bringing the total to 24 SEODs within the organization. Each province has at least two local SEODs, thus supporting the organization’s strategy to decrease the number of international EOD advisers in the field. The international advisers and the regional QM roving teams support the SEODs as needed.

### Gender Concerns

Reflecting the Lao government’s policy on gender equality, UXO Lao increased its number of female deminers from 50



A UXO Lao SEOD leading a bomb disposal team in Khammuane province, Lao PDR

in 2007 to 84 in early 2010 (including one female team leader). This number does not include the one female Senior EOD technician and the female medics trained as deminers (including two female medic team leaders). In addition, UXO Lao has revised its UXO-risk-education messages to target specific groups, including women and children.

### UXO Clearance and Development

In 2006, UXO Lao began maintaining a database to document clearance activities. The database has helped in identifying the need for development agencies to incorporate UXO clearance into their project planning.

### Funding

UXO Lao receives most of its funding through UNDP and national donors including Australia, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. UXO Lao

funding began to rise from US\$2.59 million in 2005, peaking in 2007 at \$7.17 million, and declining to \$5.48 million in 2009. This decrease in funding can be at least partially attributed to the effect on donors of the global financial crisis. In addition, some donors provided multi-year declining contributions. These contributions were initially high, then gradually declined each year until the end of the commitment.

### Claiming the Future

The entry into force of the Convention on Cluster Munitions in August 2010 brings the Lao government hope of securing increased funding from the international community. The United Nations Development Programme has established a multi-donor trust fund to mobilize additional resources needed to enhance UNDP program activities related to the full implementation of the Convention on Cluster Munitions in the Lao PDR within the Framework of the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. This fund makes it easier for donors to provide support.

UXO Lao will play the major role in meeting the Lao government's obligations under the Convention. Although complete destruction of cluster-munition remnants within the Convention's 10-year time frame will probably not be possible, Lao PDR will do everything it can with the resources available to expedite the process. For UXO Lao, completion will mean continuing its operations and also expanding to meet the country's obligations.

Expansion plans include the establishment and training of 27 dedicated roving clearance teams to cover the nine provinces where the organization operates. These dedicated roving clearance teams will be tasked to cover three additional UXO-affected provinces where a clearance capacity does not exist. Nine of these new roving teams will specialize in large-bomb disposal. The establishment of these new roving teams will allow UXO Lao to deal with spot and emergency tasks quicker, as well as expand its capacity to conduct clearance in three other UXO-affected provinces. Expansion will also create a need for new equipment and vehicles—a need UXO Lao has faced annually. With secured multi-year funding, UXO Lao can plan to expand its capacity, support socioeconomic development plans, meet the government's obligations under the Convention and help claim the future for the country's next generation.

### Endnotes

1. "Article 4: Clearance and destruction of cluster munition remnants and risk reduction education." *Convention on Cluster Munitions*. (30 May 2008.) [http://www.clusterconvention.org/pages/pages\\_ii/ia\\_textenglish.html#art4](http://www.clusterconvention.org/pages/pages_ii/ia_textenglish.html#art4). Accessed 19 October 2010.

### Biography





**Edwin Faigmane** is a development professional with more than 13 years of experience with UNDP, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector and academia. He has worked in Angola, Lao PDR, the Philippines and Thailand. Faigmane holds a Master of Business Administration from the Roman Catholic Institute of Colegio de San Juan de Letran–Calamba (Philippines) and is researching a topic for his dissertation for his Doctor of Business Administration from De La Salle University–Manila (Philippines).

### Contact Information

Edwin O. Faigmane  
 Programme Specialist  
 UXO Lao  
 United Nations Development Programme  
 Lane Xang Avenue  
 P.O. Box 345  
 Vientiane / Lao PDR  
 Tel: +856 20 5552 6621  
 E-mail: Edwin.faigmane(at)undp.org



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