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Developing Alternatives: The Locality Demining Model in Cambodia

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Developing Alternatives:
The Locality Demining Model in Cambodia

Mines Advisory Group has developed a new demining model that trains local citizens to clear mines in their own villages. After using the model for almost 12 months, MAG shows this method is as thorough as Mine Action Team units and requires fewer resources.

Background
MAG's Locality Demining Model provides conflict-affected people a chance to rebuild their lives and communities through targeted clearance activities on the ground. In Cambodia last year, where MAG has been operating since 1992, it piloted a new initiative to address our donors' desire to get more productivity for their money and also to further engage local people in demining activities closer to their homes. The concept is called “locality demining” and at its centre is the employment of local residents where mine action or clearance is most necessary.

Following a period of monitoring and evaluation, MAG Cambodia has continued with the programme as an integral part of the “toolbox” approach to mine action operations. It has not replaced MAG’s traditional Mine Action Team concept—our pioneering alternative to a regimented “patrol” clearance—but aims to complement the routine drills associated with manual clearance in many rural areas, the poor having little or no land of their own and rely on work as daily labourers. This work is generally paid poorly, often as low as $1 U.S. per day, and sporadic, depending on the season. During periods when no daily jobs are available, families are reliant on other income-generating activities as direct employment opportunities are limited, and fruit from the forest or collecting scrap metal, all of which incur degrees of risk regarding contact with remnants of conflict.

It was necessary to decide on a salary level that would ensure jobs were not sought after by more influential and better paid community members or free riders. Untrained people, or those who have not received MAG’s vital mine risk education, can often put their families and their own lives at risk by doing what they believe may be right when faced with a dangerous situation. Even with both supervisors and workers, the supervisor’s responsibility to ensure staff are not working when ill.

The Positive Effects of Locality Demining
MAG did introduce an attendance bonus (as it did with all deminers around the same period), and a mobile supervisor was included who would stay with them (and their families and close friends should they share their knowledge of what not to do) all their lives. Better productivity for the donor. The locality model reduces operational costs; salaries are in line with local employment rates despite being higher than casual-labour wages. Also, with a traditional mobile MAT, a per diem and accommodation costs have to be paid.

Locality Model Characteristics
It was recognised that much of the routine drills associated with manual clearance in Cambodia (notably sweeping and prodding) do not require a highly skilled (or highly paid) team to undertake what is widely seen as a repetitive, dull task. Following this rational, a model was piloted where recruitment for MAG’s Locality Demining Model was carried out within the community at risk. Local people would be trained to the same level as MAG deminers and, in some instances, complement the more experienced and mobile MAG staff. The aim was to employ individual members of the neediest families with support in the selection process coming from development agencies working inside the area. This also coincided with the increasing trend in Cambodia of donors funding mine action through development agencies.

In conjunction with the Lutheran World Federation in Battambang province, MAG initiated a programme in selected areas working as well as those areas from the nationwide Level One Survey (a study on the impact of landmines in particular areas). Funding, brokered by LWF, was targeted at villages where agencies’ development work was being hampered due to mine threat, promoting positive links between conflict clearance and development activities. In terms of recruitment, vulnerable families were identified by LWF and proposed as candidates. MAG then carried out a selection process to develop a diversified workforce and the disabled—traditionally the poorest in a community—to get involved. Basic demining training equal to the normal MAG standards was given to the newly recruited teams.

Appropriate pay scales were researched prior to using the Locality Demining Model. In many rural areas, the poor have little or no land of their own and rely on work as daily labourers. This work is generally paid poorly, often as low as $1 U.S. per day, and sporadic, depending on the season. During periods when no daily jobs are available, families are reliant on other income-generating activities as direct employment opportunities are limited, and fruit from the forest or collecting scrap metal, all of which incur degrees of risk regarding contact with remnants of conflict.

However, the locality model’s main benefit is it employs local people at a higher wage than they can normally earn. Informal interviews confirmed that the majority of the employed population feared employment is a real benefit to landless and vulnerable households in the area. Wages are used to pay off debt, buy essential household items (such as housing construction materials), provide money for healthcare, etc.

There are also incidental benefits regarding the domestic situation of staff. A mobile MAT works in an environment without the normal discipline and routine of family life, far from home, and they can often find themselves exposed to the risk of daily life outside the safety of their family unit; it may seem extreme, but it can include exposure to the risk of HIV infection or gambling (common amongst male deminers). The locality model reduces the number of staff working away from home and supports the positive unity of a sound family environment.

Better management, better attendance. Although the program is still in its infancy, it has been found that the quality of the type of work a locality deminer does has been on a par with the clearance quality of a traditional MAT deminer. Additionally, attendance of locality deminers has proved better than those of the MAT. There is less absenteeism with locality deminers, possibly due to a closer attachment with the land being cleared. MAG did introduce an attendance bonus (as it did with all deminers around the same period), and a mobile supervisor was included who would stay with them (and their families and close friends should they share their knowledge of what not to do) all their lives.

The locality model reduces operational costs; salaries are in line with local employment rates despite being higher than casual-labour wages. Also, with a traditional mobile MAT, a per diem and accommodation costs have to be paid. The locality model eliminates these associated costs. This, in turn, means more metres are cleared for the same investment.

The Challenges of Locality Demining
There are many challenges to locality demining:

• The inter-relationship of development activities, priorities and planning in the locality model (i.e., donor interest in the model leading to implementation without consideration for its practicality)

• Inappropriate adoption where other tools would be better suited for the situation (i.e., donor interest in the model leading to implementation without consideration for its practicality)

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• Concerns about unofficial “village demining” taking place after contract is over development and planning. It is apparent that there must be clear and precise dialogue with development partners when undertaking the planning process for ground operations. While there is an established provincial-planning process, MAG knows the importance of liaising with development partners from the outset to ensure resources are being allocated to priority areas. The danger is to concentrate on areas where partners are working at the expense of areas with greater contamination where the partner agency does not work. MAG recognises it has an important role to play in working closely with development agencies to share experience and priority work on the ground.

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9.2 | February 2006 | Journal of mine action | Focus | 331
This will be monitored further at the appropriate time. Heightened sense of awareness of the risk of mines and village demining today takes place in areas of low threat in a particular area undertaking clearance, it is predicted. A reputable organisation. Also, by having a team located under close scrutiny and care. MAG also provides insurance of safety operating procedures and the employee comes but when the work involves demining, the concern is skilled deminer. But when the employment finishes, there are concerns but the local people is generally seen as a positive step, skilled deminer. For example, a development agency might be clearing different tasks a relatively short distance from each other. In normal circumstances, a MAT might undertake several tasks such as clearing sites for well-digging. The tasks must be appropriate; the site must be prioritised which areas need to be cleared first. Where MAG can look at other ways of involving communities address the problem of remnants of conventional weapons in mine-affected areas until these mined areas are cleared. This strategy may sound easy and fairly logical, but, practically speaking, it simply has not been done to the extent needed in order to claim victory in 2009. The mine action community needs the immediate attention of all States Parties to the Convention to fundamentally correct these things now. MAG can help. The aim is to ensure that MAG and local authorities work together to ensure the most appropriate method of clearing mines is used. It is the challenge for development agencies and MAG in the future.

Pre-conditions for Success

It is apparent that the locality model will not replace the MAT model. From programme experience over the last eight months or so, MAG recognises the need to complement the locality teams with mobile MATs. Technical Survey Teams and other elements of more traditional clearance activities. It is also clear that management plays an important part in the success of the model, as in most operations. Training must be rigorous and graded to lower levels of education, if appropriate. Indeed, a requirement for recruiting is a minimum standard of education, and this may prove difficult in communities deprofessionalised by educational facilities like long periods.

Unofficial “village demining.” Development of skills for local people is generally seen as a positive step, but when the employment finishes, there are concerns whether villagers are able to accommodate the whole group without splitting them into smaller groups (which may require further experienced supervision and medical coverage). In refining the model, it was agreed that, due to the involvement in training new deminers, a period of around two years was seen as appropriate for the life of a team. A period as short as four months, for example, would make the operation ineffectual in terms of initial investment in training. Bearing this in mind, the deployment of a locality team must be in an area with multiple tasks to support a team over an estimated two years or more. Moreover, the area of operations must be within easy reach by local transport; for example, in Cambodia, the trip to work for villagers is often a 10-minute bicycle ride.

Opportunities

One of the main opportunities for expansion is the value of employment for the households demining present an opportunity for the households; some of whom may have been former landmine victims. It is debatable whether village demining will take place. As locality deminer contracts have not yet ended, this will be monitored further at the appropriate time.

Many of the vulnerable households are crippled by debt; independent loan agents lend money to households at extremely high interest rates of 100 percent per annum and above. There is an opportunity to maximise the earnings potential of locality deminers. For example, the Ottawa Convention would ensure good management, articulated objectives and a plan for the implementation of activities to reach the goal. Demine Canada also promotes the Ottawa Convention model rather than seeking the solution best suited to the environment in mine-affected areas until these mined areas are cleared. This work plan should include clearing mined areas as priority and classifying those that in the meantime can do with perimeter marking, to render a safe environment in mine-affected areas until these mined areas are cleared. This is an area for further work with development agencies and MAG in the future.
One major constraint is the fact that this will be monitored further at the appropriate time. As locality deminer contracts have not yet ended, much work remains to be done. In other industries, this may not be an issue, but when the work involves demining, the concern is valid. As MAG operates under the tightest pre-conditions for Success that can be found in a more experienced multi-skilled deminer.

Unofficial “village demining.” Development of skills for local people is generally seen as a positive step, but when the employment finishes, there are concerns villagers may be tempted to offer their services for sale elsewhere. In other industries, this may not be an issue, but when the work involves demining, the concern is valid. As MAG operates under the tightest safety operating procedures and the employee comes under close scrutiny and care. MAG also provides insurance and the most suitable measures employed in order to carry out their work in confidence. Informal clearance does not provide this. As much as 60 percent of all land cleared is estimated to have been made so through informal clearance, so this model addresses the phenomenon face on, with a view to ensuring quality of work as well as maintaining levels of safety.

Villagers understand the benefits of working with a reputable organisation. Also, by having a localized team, MAG can respond more quickly and predict that the overall need for clearance by informal village demining will be reduced. This, aside from much informal village demining today take place in areas of low threat and MAG aims to have locality teams in areas of highest threat.

Team supervisors and mine action officers report a heightened sense of awareness of the risk of mines and believe that, due to more clearance taking place in their area, fewer landmines are present in their villages. In other words, it is debatable whether village demining will take place. As locality deminer contracts have not yet ended, this will be monitored further at the appropriate time.

It is apparent that the locality model will not replace the MAG model. From programme experience over the last eight months or so, MAG recognises the need to complement the locality teams with mobile MATs, Technical Survey Teams and other elements of more traditional clearance activities.

It is also clear that management plays an important part in the success of the model, as in most operations. Training must be rigorous and graded to lower levels of education, if appropriate. Indeed, a requirement for recruiting is a minimum standard of education, and this may prove difficult in communities deprived of access to educational facilities over long periods.

Also, unlike MAG, it is harder to break a locality team into smaller units to undertake tasks such as clearing sites for well-digging. The tasks must be appropriate; the site must be able to accommodate the whole group without splitting it into smaller groups (which may require further experienced supervision and medical coverage).

In refining the model, it was agreed that, due to the investment in training new deminers, a period of around two weeks was seen as appropriate for the life of a team. A period as short as four months, for example, would mean that a locality team would need to increase its investment in training. Bearing this in mind, the deployment of a locality team must be in an area with multiple tasks to support a team over an estimated two years or more. Moreover, the area of operations must be within easy reach by local transport; for example, in Cambodia, the trip to work for villagers is often a 10-minute bicycle ride.

One of the main opportunities for expansion is the value of employment for the households engaged in the locality demining. With a majority of employment over the forthcoming period, there is some guarantee of income for the households. It is the challenge for development agencies working together with MAG in these areas to ensure maximum benefit that is derived from the regular income from a job with MAG.

Many of the vulnerable households are crippled by debt, independent loan agents lend money to households at extremely high interest rates of 100 percent per annum and above. There is an opportunity to maximise the earnings potential of locality deminers through debt reconciliation; the development agencies pay off the debt of the household and in turn the household pays back the loan at cost to the agency. This way, the loan may be reduced more rapidly than normal so that wages paid can be concentrated on assisting the household instead of paying off crippling loans. This is an area for further work with development agencies and MAG in the future.

Conclusion

The locality model aims to provide more community-oriented and cost-effective action in line with MAG’s overall mission to find solutions that not only put people first but are appropriate. Importantly, MAG has found that it can train villagers in the core skills and, with supervision and good management, undertake demining as effectively as long-serving, multi-skilled and better-paid mobile teams.

It is clear the locality demining model presents a number of clear advantages. Most notably, it helps communities understand the problem of remains of conflict, in their own backyard. Also, it is no coincidence that staff attendance is high amongst locality deminers because the desire to work for a steady wage is strong. We believe that the desire to clear their own villages also provides a keen interest. With this programme, MAG can look at ways to involve local households and villagers more to give a greater say in prioritising which areas need to be cleared first. While locality demining is appropriate to the area, MAG is making positive strides towards promoting the wider use of non-military approaches to best serve the communities right now and for the generations to come.  

Notes

1. Many authors use “locality demining” and “locality model” and any text from this article, whether derived from the regular income from a job with MAG. See “References and Endnotes,” page 104.

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Endnotes and References

Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]

Endnotes

1. On Sept. 18, 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 55/2, the United Nations Millennium Declaration. As observed by MAG Cambodia’s technical operations manager, Gary Fenton.

2. A Landmine Impact Survey, or LIS, is a community-based national survey that measures the extent of the impact of the landmine problem in a country, based on the number of victims, socio-economic blockages and type of trauma.

3. The Leahy War Victims Fund works on behalf of civilian victims of war and people living with disabilities. See http://www.leahy.org.


5. Most work in Iran is for a national client. International clients demand IMAS standards and international quality assurance/quality control companies to inspect work.


7. One square kilometre is equal to about 0.386 square mile.

8. These individuals are often called landmine survivors. For a complete definition, see http://www.icbl.org/lm/2004/intro/survivor, accessed Dec. 2, 2005.


12. See www.mineaction.org/MAIs/2004/09/05/05/050703.html

13. On Sept. 18, 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 55/2, the United Nations Millennium Declaration


18. Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Rights-Based Approach to Cambodia, Campbell [from page 45]


21. From page 45


23. See www.mineaction.org/MAIs/2004/09/05/05/050703.html

24. From page 45

25. From page 45

26. From page 45

27. From page 45

28. From page 45

29. From page 45

30. From page 45

31. From page 45