The Children's Plight in Cambodia

UNICEF's mine action initiative in Cambodia puts victim assistance, risk education and community awareness at the forefront. Efforts have helped produce a national mine incident database, which aids in planning and evaluating fundraising.

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A Sobering Context

Mine action agencies in Cambodia continue to face a major challenge. In the past decade they have only been able to partially address the vast mines and UXO problem. This article seeks to show that despite this sobering context there are positive and important lessons to be learned from the Cambodian experience that need to be shared with the global mine action community as models for progress. Specifically, this article represents some lessons learned from UNICEF's mine action involvement in Cambodia, as highlighted in a recent external evaluation conducted for UNICEF.

UNICEF Gets Involved

UNICEF Cambodia first started assisting mine victims as part of its support to disabled persons in 1992. Direct support of mine action activities began in 1994 and has increased over the years toward the present more comprehensive multi-action support. UNICEF is now involved in a range of programs in the field of mine action, victim assistance and provision of basic social services, as well as community development in mine-affected communities.

UNICEF Cambodia is unusual in that it has been closely involved with mine action initiatives beyond its usual role of mine awareness in other countries (1). To assess its progress to date and as a guide for future direction, UNICEF commissioned an external evaluation in mid-2000 to assess activities supported for the prevention of mine/UXO accidents. A selective summary of the external evaluation (2), containing important lessons for other country programs are presented below. However, to put these findings in context, the more sobering overview of mine action in Cambodia should be presented.

Official Mine Action

Cambodia is considered to have one of the longest running and most comprehensive mine action programs in the world. Over 3,750 people are directly involved in the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), along with the two demining NGOs, Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and HALO Trust. Commercial demining groups have had very limited involvement in the last decade. The overall operational profile includes mine clearance, mine field marking, survey, mine awareness, EOD rapid-response, mine detection dogs and mine incident data gathering.

But in the eight or nine years of operation only a fraction of the mined areas and an extremely small proportion of the millions of mines and UXO have been successfully addressed (3). There are still very large numbers of large, identified mine fields awaiting marking and clearance, and probably many more small ones that have yet to be identified. A national Level One survey was only started in Cambodia in 2000, eight years after the international response had begun.

Estimates of the total number of mines in Cambodia have been reduced from 10 million to 4 million-6 million (and many millions of UXO) (4). Some claim the true figure of abandoned mines may be much lower(5). Numbers, however, are not the key issue: the vital issue is where they are and whom they affect through injury, death, land denial and socioeconomic debilitation. Despite the significant decrease in the past two years, the number of new mines/UXO accidents remains one of the highest in the world. Since 1979, an estimated 40,000 persons have lost limbs as a result of mine/UXO accidents and will require physical and socioeconomic rehabilitation for the rest of their lives. Mines and UXO still constitute a threat for thousands of families and an obstacle to the development of these communities. In 1998, civilians represented 50 percent of all casualties and soldiers 50 percent. In 2000, as a result of the end of hostilities and the return of the population to former conflict areas, the proportion of civilian causalities has risen to 93 percent with 30 percent of these being children under 18 years of age.

The efforts and efficient use of the resources of mine action greatly depend on effective prioritization and targeting. Also, the end-use of cleared land and who exactly benefits from mine action is of central importance. In Cambodia, a community-level request approach is being formalized and empowered through the new provincial land use planning mechanisms.

The number of mine incidents is now dropping significantly. From 1996-98 the average monthly casualty rate was 202 incidents. However, from 1999-2000 there was a dramatic decrease to an average monthly rate of 77 incidents. In October 2000, there were just 36 casualties reported. This is a very hopeful trend. Interestingly, the statistics do not indicate that the declining figures are directly linked to mine action in most areas (6). Other factors seem to be more important: the end of armed conflict and population movements, and possibly the widespread prevalence of "village demining." Although the trend is very encouraging it also suggests that planners need to understand the context in more detail to establish when, how and what type of mine action has a direct beneficial impact on levels of injury and death as well as on the socio-economic development of communities living in mined areas.



American Red Cross rehabilitation center. *c/o ICRC / Darren Whiteside*

Unofficial Mine Action

In numerous communities of subsistence farms, people have no choice but to live, travel and work in high-risk areas. In many cases people have taken it upon themselves to address the problem independently. Villagers who demine are unprotected, unofficial and work with inappropriate equipment and no safety backup. It will never be known how much land has been cleared by locals, how many villagers have been killed while attempting demining by themselves or by using land only partially cleared by other villagers. The number of mines destroyed and area of land cleared by unofficial demining is far greater than that accomplished by professional mine action agencies (7).

To some degree the prevalence of village demining and the number of people living in mined areas so many years after conflict has ceased to be an indictment of the use of landmines as well as the shortcomings of the international response to the landmines crisis.

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Findings and Lessons Learned

The following are projects supported by UNICEF for the prevention of mine incidents, which are highlighted in the recent external evaluation:

1. The Cambodian Mine Incident Database with the Cambodian Red Cross (CRC) and Handicap International (HI).
2. Community Mine Marking (with CMAC).
3. Mine Risk Education (with MAG and World Education).
4. The Integrated Mine Database (with CMAC)(8).

Mine Incident Database (MID)

UNICEF is supporting this important initiative, which it first began in 1994 in partnership with MAG. The Mine Incident Database (now implemented by the CRC/HI) charts, in detail, the changes in monthly accident rates throughout the country. Additional information collected through the victims' questionnaires provides important keys to understanding the dynamics of how and why certain groups and communities in Cambodia continue to sustain mine accidents. Addressing mine problems in a post-conflict/rehabilitation or development context is never straightforward and this database provides an excellent tool for analysis, evaluation and, more importantly, strategic planning through prioritization.

When mine action started in 1992 there was, as in all mine-affected countries, a great information deficiency concerning mine incidents and details of accidents. Initially, UNICEF supported MAG to gather mine incident data in the five most affected provinces in Cambodia, which was used to develop mine awareness messages, monitor the severity of the mine problem and advocate a global ban on their production, sale and use. Only later was it recognized as a strong planning tool for mine clearance.

Looking for a sustainable national partner, UNICEF pushed for CRC to be the main implementing agency instead of international NGOs. Unlike the international NGOs, CRC had a strong national presence with volunteer networks throughout the country, which could be harnessed to assist with data collection.

The current project structure uses 24 CRC staff data gatherers and the CRC communication network to cover the country. The data gatherers are deployed in the most affected provinces. In less affected provinces networks of communication have been created in order to remain cost-effective. Data gatherers all have motorbikes for transport and remain in constant contact with a range of local authorities and community centers (schools and health posts/hospitals) in order to ensure that every incident is reported. They individually visit every reported mine or UXO victim and complete a mine victim report form, which is sent to Phnom Penh for processing every month.

The village level incidents are collected nationally, compiled and processed in a database able to generate reports for dissemination or respond to specific queries. The total incident figures are processed with a breakdown of information that assists analysts to understand sociological details of mine victims, location of accidents, the activity, age and sex of victim, whether the victim knew they were in mined areas or not, whether it was a mine or UXO, etc. The detailed breakdown proves to be important information for mine awareness and clearance teams.

Monthly reports are distributed in both Khmer and English to government ministries and provincial departments, mine action agencies, disability organizations, embassies, donors and advocacy groups inside Cambodia, as well as internationally (9). Over 600 copies per month are printed and distributed. A bi-annual report for the 1998-1999 period was recently released. By July 2000, the whole country was covered in the most comprehensive and only national mine incident database in the world.

External Evaluation Central Findings

- The MID is performing a vital and unique function within the mine action context in Cambodia and provides valuable information that actively assists different agencies and government bodies in multiple areas of their activities: program planning, evaluation, monitoring and fund-raising.

- Considering the MID's contribution to the mine action community in Cambodia, the evaluation judged the MID to be cost-effective and inexpensive and giving great added value to the national mine action effort.

- The focus has to be on the quality of the product (i.e. the monthly report) and its effective use. As CRC depends more and more on community networks and volunteer networks it needs to work hard to establish, maintain and monitor the system. Strategies need to be developed on monitoring, testing and evaluating these emerging networks. This deals with the issue of developing quality control.

- If the currently occurring incident reduction continues, there may be reduced need for an MID in coming years. Such a situation should be welcomed by all stakeholders in the mine action sector. The role of an MID should be finite.



Population having settled in a suspected area.
c/o Chris Horwood

Lessons Learned Of Use to the Global Landmine Community

1. An information vacuum in an affected country can lead to a simplistic understanding of the mines/UXO problem and a severe lack of planning and monitoring tools. Mine action agencies need authoritative and detailed information for strategic planning. It is a false economy to bypass this baseline information system.

2. Once a database is established, it needs to be promoted and end users shown how it can serve them in their work. The database project should be seen as a service provider to enhance the added value it offers the mine action end users. Central mine action authorities should expect mine action agencies to be actively using such a tool for resource targeting and accountability.

3. It is important that certain information be broken down beyond the province, district and commune level, right down to the village level as well as provide a service to end users for customized and targeted data breakdown. For certain agencies only the most detailed and specific breakdown will assist their targeting.

Community Mine Marking (CMM)

In 1996, confronted with the limitations of mine awareness and the shortcomings of traditional mine clearance, UNICEF became involved in the start up of the Community Mine Marking (CMM) project within CMAC. CMM consists of small mobile teams engaged in survey and high priority limited clearance accompanied by long term marking to indicate safe and/or suspected areas.

Despite its small size, CMM provides valuable service. With 12 small teams (of five men with two detectors) it has performed over 300 tasks in three years. The tasks CMM selects for marking or limited clearance are targeted and prioritized to maximize benefit from each task. One UNICEF technical advisor was attached to the CMM from July 1997 to October 2000. The project is now managed by national CMAC staff.

These de facto "mini-mobile" units of CMM fill a gap in CMAC's operational profile as CMAC has no other mobile team capacity. Comprising only 60 workers out of a total CMAC staff of over 2,750, they represent a very small unit. Large demining teams are very inflexible to smaller community needs and can only conduct a few tasks each year. Largely for logistical and administrative reasons, CMAC deploys platoons in large numbers to work on large mined areas. In addition, its top priority is to clear land for resettlement, whereas the primary goal of CMM is to decrease the risk in already mined communities.

Hundreds of communities need clearing and marking of safe passages, access and facilities in village areas that are mined. Most of the 300 tasks completed have provided safe access and/or construction of wells, schools, health centers, pagodas, roads and bridges. In all cases they have been prioritized directly by the communities themselves or by development agencies working in the areas. CMM is hence contributing to reduce the mine threat to mine-affected communities and enabling the development of basic social services, which these communities often lack.

When CMM mark the areas to be cleared they use permanent concrete markers, which are designed to indicate both the area that is guaranteed safe and the suspected area. In this respect, its marking system differs from the standard marking process that seeks to identify the boundaries of a suspected mined area, which is often imprecise. CMM is assisted by the CMAC mine awareness teams (posters, TV spots, meetings, etc.) to inform the villagers of the role of the long-term markers and the villagers' need to maintain them.

Central Findings From the External Evaluation

- In the absence of mobile teams within CMAC, CMM fulfills a critical function of response to requests in high-risk mined areas.
- CMM is flexible, highly responsive and efficient when deployed for appropriate tasks. It is also housed and based close to its area of operation to minimize daily transportation etc.
- The impact of CMM's work benefits a disproportionately high number of people when considering the relatively small areas where CMM has cleared/marked. The impact in terms of facilitation of NGO/IO intervention, community access to essential needs and access for larger CMAC demining platoons is evaluated as highly positive.
- CMM can be very effective in

facilitating rehabilitation and development work by NGOs and other U.N. agencies in terms of well drilling, school and health clinic building, etc.

Lessons Learned for the Global Mine Action Community

1. The profile of any national mine action capacity should include small mobile teams that are able to respond with speed and provide limited clearance and marking services.
2. The efficiency of such teams is highest when working on very limited clearance and marking tasks.
3. The CMM concept should be available in as many mine-affected areas as possible both in Cambodia and other affected countries. The recommendations of the external evaluation are that CMM be expanded in terms of number of teams and into other high-risk provinces as soon as possible. It may be noted that as a concept it would prove to be very attractive to various donors who may wish to fund individual teams etc.
4. CMM is effective but must be supplemented by larger-scale clearance and mine awareness. It is a damage limitation concept to offer villagers at-risk safer options, but it is by no means a full solution to a community's mine problem.
5. Limited clearance in a mined environment requires long term marking both for indicating to people the safe and suspected areas and for recording the area cleared in preparation for large scale clearance.

Mine Risk Education (MRE)

Since 1994, UNICEF has worked in partnership with MAG to develop mine awareness education with a specific child focus using various different approaches, such as community presentations, night shows, day shows, special presentations to children and women, school presentations and training sessions for teachers. These activities were carried out by MAG staff—raising questions about the sustainability of the interventions.

Based on the assumption that mine risk education in schools would be needed for many years as long as children were growing up in mined environments, UNICEF sought to support and promote mine awareness that was more sustainable, and where the Ministry of Education (MoE) had greater ownership of the approach and activities. The current MRE program was established and funded in early 1999. The new approach required the development of a close partnership with the MoE. Since 2000 UNICEF has been working with World Education (an education-centered NGO) to implement this program.

Through its funding of World Education, UNICEF is contributing to what is becoming a sustainable and formalized mine awareness program in all primary schools of Cambodia. A more intensive program for schools located in the 30 most affected districts will reach more than 1,000 schools in 130 clusters (10).

The activities of the MRE program go beyond mine awareness and the simple transfer of knowledge. The training of teachers emphasizes the use of participatory approaches, which are essential for skills, qualities and competencies that aim to affect behavioral and attitudinal changes. UNICEF expects that the whole primary education system will benefit from the improved teaching methods.



Community Mine Marking teams colaborate with local communities to set up long term markers indicating both safe and suspected areas. *c/o Chris Horwood*

Central Findings from the External Evaluation:

- The evaluation found that children receive the MRE well and the teachings are effective in terms of being able to identify safe and unsafe behavior in mined environments.
- Children not attending school in the areas targeted by MRE had limited information on mine risk behavior and were from the most vulnerable economic groups with greater daily risks to mine accidents. As a result, World Education is putting a greater emphasis on the development of techniques to reach out to school children.
- UNICEF's current strategy of developing a school-based education program in mine awareness is contributing to what is becoming a sustainable program for all primary school students in which the MoE newly enjoys a high sense of "ownership."
- The MRE program is at an early stage but has benefited from lessons learned from the previous approaches of mine awareness.

Lessons Learned for the Global Mine Action Community

1. The key lesson learned for UNICEF is that its close involvement with the MoE in the MRE should have happened some years earlier and that it is problematic developing a national and child-based program without the MoE having a strong involvement and in the initiative.
2. The MRE program is no longer being implemented by a mine action agency, but instead by an educational NGO. The evaluation found this to be an appropriate switch for UNICEF to make in terms of working towards a sustainable educational impact and should be noted by other donors who have previously only considered mine action NGOs for such a role. Clearly mine awareness education does not require mine-related technical expertise, but instead education-related expertise.
3. Any program focusing on a school-based education approach needs to develop a complementary, parallel approach to ensure that out-of-school children also receive mine awareness education.
4. The link between mine awareness and actual impact on children and their risk-taking behavior is still unknown. It is not possible to establish a direct correlation between mine awareness (as with mine clearance) and incident reduction anywhere in Cambodia. This, however, should not reduce efforts to maximize awareness and mine risk education.

Endnote

Cambodia and Afghanistan were the first countries to alert the world to the critical need for humanitarian mine action. The learning curve for these and many other national mine action programs has been steep and sudden. Mine action is still a new sector in humanitarian intervention and the challenges it faces are still immense. Although it has not been possible so far to show any direct correlation between any type of mine action and accident reduction due to the multiplicity of factors involved, various approaches to mine action should continue to be developed. It is very important to establish mechanisms to allow the most promising elements such as the ones in this article to be considered for potential implementation in other affected countries. ■

The opinions reflected in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of UNICEF.

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1 UNICEF is the designated focal point responsible for mine awareness education within the United Nations structure.
2 "External Evaluation of UNICEF-Supported Activities to Prevent Mine Incidents" report (by Chris Horwood and Andrea Crossland) can be obtained from Michel Le Pechoux, Children Affected by Armed Conflict Project Officer, UNICEF Cambodia.
3 Approximately 2 percent of "registered mined land."
4 "Hidden Killers: Global Demining Crisis." U.S. Department of State Publication 1998.
5 *120 Million Landmines Deployed Worldwide: Fact or Fiction.* Ilaria Bottigliero 2000.
6 The evaluation analyzed data in detail cross-referencing accident location with specific mine field clearance location as well as mine awareness education. Almost no direct correlations could be made between mine action and accident reduction.
7 Handicap International is currently completing a study of "village" or "spontaneous" demining in Cambodia. The report should be available in early 2001.
8 This section will not be included in this article due to limitations of space.
9 Reports can be obtained from the CRC office at crc@camnet.com.kh and through the Handicap International mines coordinator at himines@bigpond.com.kh.
10 A group of schools around a main school equipped with a resource center.