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Sebastian Kasack  
*UNICEF*

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# Lessons Learned: Sri Lankan Mine-action Staff Visit Cambodia and Lao PDR

The need for a comprehensive mine-action program is not always recognized as countries pursue demining efforts. This article describes Sri Lankan mine-action groups' efforts to create a more comprehensive and cohesive mine-action program through regional visits to Cambodia and Lao PDR. It offers insight and advice to groups interested in pursuing the same avenue.

by Sebastian Kasack [ UNICEF ]

**H**ow do we build mine-action capacity? How can we create accountability among national stakeholders regarding comprehensive mine action or, for example, specifically for school-based mine-risk education? How can we empower mine-action staff nationally and internationally?

UNICEF Sri Lanka has taken many measures to address these questions, but one solution in particular focuses on regional visits to countries affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war.<sup>1</sup> Trips to other national programs provide an intense learning experience. These visits allow hosts an opportunity to present their program's achievements and compare experiences to those of another country while also encouraging participants to reflect on their own program. The combined support of UNICEF Sri Lanka's principal donor, the European Union, and colleagues from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Sri Lanka, enabled these trips to take place.

Sri Lanka, Lao PDR and Cambodia have longstanding mine-action programs with many similarities, but they also include some important differences. While the Vietnam-American War-era bombing and Lao PDR's internal conflict stopped more than 35 years ago, and Cambodia's conflict ended in a Peace Settlement in 1991, Sri Lanka's armed conflict did not end until May 2009, resulting in different contamination situations for the three countries. Additionally, of the three, Cambodia is the only State Party to the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction*,<sup>2</sup> and Lao PDR is a Party to the *Convention on Cluster Munitions*, as of October 2010.<sup>3</sup>

## Cambodian and Lao PDR Visits Realized

In October 2009, a group of nine individuals<sup>4</sup> visited Cambodia's mine-action programs over the span of one week, and in June 2010, a group of eight<sup>5</sup> visited Lao PDR for 10 days. Various national and international stakeholders, including the respective governments, nongovernmental organizations and UNICEF coordinated agendas and logistics. All but one of the participants were Sri Lankan nationals, comprising a deliberate mix of government staff, NGOs and UNICEF staff. The participants who traveled to Cambodia were from the Ministry of Nation Building (which is in charge of mine action), the Ministry of Education and two UNICEF officers. The visit to Lao PDR concentrated primarily on Sri Lankan NGO participants and local UNICEF staff from field offices. This group branched into the military field as well with the addition of a lieutenant colonel from the Sri Lankan Army involved with MRE.

To encourage team building and peace building among Sri Lanka's main communities and religions, members of the three main communities of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims,<sup>6</sup> and the four main religious groups of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were represented. Achieving a gender balance proved more difficult with the first Cambodia visit and included only male participants. With some encouragement from UNICEF, however, the second visit had an equal number of male and female participants. These efforts to promote diversity and team building seemed to pay off as a colonel from the Sri Lankan Army and two Tamil members (from an NGO and UNICEF) shared a room soon after the end of a violent armed conflict and the three became close friends.



A children's theater group performs a play warning about collecting war scrap metal in Cambodia. All photos courtesy of the author.

Cambodia's mine-action program has come a long way in both mine-risk education and risk reduction, and has worked hard to increase community participation in mine action by engaging local students and teachers.<sup>7</sup> In Lao PDR there is a need to address war-scrap-metal collection and use, and the mine-action program focuses on this issue. Lao PDR has also undertaken an impressive study on mine/ERW victims.<sup>8</sup> In addition, both countries apply school-based MRE.<sup>9</sup>

The two visits surpassed the participants' expectations regarding capacity building, ownership and empowerment. Why were these visits such a success? One possible explanation is that exposure to a new environment and the ability for participants to learn at their own pace created a rewarding learning experience. Witnessing programs first-hand provided a perspective unparalleled by formal training from field experts. Also, learning and observing away from the participants' own immediate history of conflict provided a more relaxed learning environment.

The visits focused on MRE, overall coordination and management of mine action, clearance, and victim assistance. Cambodian field visits to Rottanak Mondul district and to Pailin district enabled participants to observe a school MRE session, disposal of unexploded ordnance found near the school the day before and

a children's MRE drama performance. These activities were all coordinated by the village mine-action committees responsible for identifying UXO hazards surrounding each village and warning new residents of their dangers. Visits were also made to mine victims receiving livelihood support. The days in Phnom Penh allowed participants to meet with several key officials and implementing agencies.<sup>10</sup>

The first field visit in Lao PDR took the group to Sepon, where it observed UXO Lao and Handicap International risk-education sessions. HI also educated the group on its efforts to establish household gardening as an alternative to scrap-metal collection. The second Lao PDR field visit took the group to Xieng Khouang province, Nong Het, and focused on MAG's (Mines Advisory Group's) community liaison, surveying and clearance activities. The group also traveled to Vientiane and collaborated with a diverse group of mine-related organizations.<sup>11</sup>

## The Impact

Prior to the visits, Sri Lanka's mine-action program predominantly focused on demining with a lesser emphasis on MRE and victim-assistance services; the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education considered MRE to be primarily a UNICEF



Handicap International in Lao PDR supports a home-gardening project as an alternative to collecting war scrap metal.

responsibility. School-based MRE was neither fully understood nor regarded as an indispensable component of the national syllabus. Now, one year after the first visit to Cambodia, government stakeholders have fully embraced MRE and recognize the importance of incorporating victim-assistance services into mine action. Additionally, prior to the trip, Sri Lanka's MoE representative for MRE did not have direct links to the director of the national mine-action center. Now they communicate on a regular basis, and the MoE specialist for MRE attends mine-action coordination meetings.

The Lao PDR visit also proved beneficial. In March 2010, UNICEF, with its partner Community Trust Fund, trained more than 60 Army engineers to conduct MRE. However, the vast majority of the engineers do not speak Tamil, the language spoken in the mine- and ERW-affected communities, and they require the cooperation and assistance of national NGO partners when operating in the former conflict areas. Prior to the visit, the lieutenant colonel who had joined the visit was not convinced that MRE is really needed. Now, as he revealed in various debriefings, he is convinced that MRE must be in place before demining starts and must continue for many years to come, as the Lao PDR experience taught him.

#### Practical Issues to Consider

In order to organize trips and visits, the following has to be considered:

**Cost.** Costs were approximately US\$13,000 and \$20,000 for the Cambodia and Lao PDR visits respectively. The relevant counterparts in the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority/Cambodia Mine Action Centre and Lao PDR's National Regulatory Authority, as well as UNICEF offices, covered some expenses. All groups had to be very clear from the beginning about the trip's expected costs and the expenses for which participants were responsible.

**Timing.** Host-country weather, seasons and public holidays need to be considered to provide the best possible participant experience. With regard to the trip's length, eight to 10 days proved to be the appropriate time span. Less time would not have justified the significant effort it took to plan the visits; more than 10 days may have demanded too much effort from the hosts.

**Travel permits.** Visas had to be arranged, and invitations came from a government body. Consequently, the invitations took a considerable amount of time to obtain.

**Selection and number of participants.** The important question was not so much whom to select, but how. Selecting the right partners proved difficult when the number

of participants was limited and the demand was immense. Successful identification and staff nominations had to come early, as international travel authorization is a lengthy process in government institutions. For the Cambodia and Lao PDR trips, selections were geared toward those who would remain in the organization or field of work for at least two years. In addition, a van can hold

activities. Souvenirs also illustrated information about the participant countries and organizations. Additionally, integrating the group and host vehicles allowed for more experiences in an informal setting.

**Recommendations.** Many of the Sri Lankan participants had never traveled outside the island, so additional time was required to orient and assist them. When hosting such

#### Conclusion

The Sri Lankan visits to Cambodia and Lao PDR proved beneficial for the Sri Lankan mine-action program's development, and the visits served as a source of team building between various organizations to create a more cohesive mine-action approach among the organizations. The national capacity of Sri Lanka's program increased as governmental, NGO and UNICEF staff worked together and became familiar with each other's programs. The visits promoted new mine-action ideas and collaborations among participants, while empowering and rewarding them for their hard work. ♦

see endnotes page 81



A visit is made to a landmine survivor and his family. Assistance is provided to the family through the Cambodian Red Cross.

between 10 and 12 people, including hosts, guides and a driver, so a group of less than 10 was ideal for travel and management.

**Preparation.** The Cambodia and Lao PDR trips showed that visitors should know their program well. Bringing mine-action-related materials helped better demonstrate how organizations conduct MRE

a visit, an agenda that leaves enough time for each stakeholder and field visit is important. To allow for proper feedback, visitors must be aware of the time, personnel and money invested in a visit. Finally, encourage constructive criticism from participants, including inviting them to highlight what they learned during the visit.



Sebastian Kasack worked as the UNICEF Mine Action Specialist in Sri Lanka from May 2008 to November 2010. Kasack started his mine-action work in 1996, specializing in mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy. He worked for the German NGO Medico International, including two years in Angola promoting the *Bad Honnef Framework* for a development-oriented mine-action approach. From 2003 to 2005 he was UNMAS MRE Officer, then became Global MRE Editor for the *Landmine Monitor Report*. He also has published several articles in *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*.

Sebastian Kasack  
Former Mine Action Specialist  
UNICEF Sri Lanka  
Lohmühlenstr. 1  
20099 Hamburg / Germany  
E-mail:  
sebastiankasack@googlemail.com