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## Community Empowerment and Leadership in Cambodia

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# Community Empowerment and Leadership in Cambodia

In an effort to strengthen the ability of Cambodian villagers living with landmines and explosive remnants of war to manage the mine/ERW threat, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre implemented the Community-Based Mine Risk Reduction project. The CBMRR project, with support from CMAC, helps local populations participate in mine-action projects and access victim-assistance services and community-development activities to alleviate mine risk.

by Ruth Bottomley [ Mines Advisory Group ] and Chan Sambath [ Cambodian Mine Action Centre ]

Established in 2001 by the Cambodian Mine Action Centre in northwest Cambodia, the Community-Based Mine Risk Reduction project, through a network of local-level committees, aims to put village populations living with landmines and explosive remnants of war at the center of the mine-action process. Supporting the networks to define, analyze and address their contamination problems, CMAC also helps link them to mine-action and victim-assistance services and to community-development activities that could contribute to risk mitigation.

This article outlines the principles and implementation of the project and analyzes some of the lessons learned regarding the culture of volunteering and community mobilization in Cambodia. Finally, the article summarizes some of the new developments in the mine-action sector that draw on the CBMRR network, endorsing both its longevity and its key position as part of the local mine-action planning process. Today, the CBMRR project is cited internationally as a leading example of community-based planning and mine/ERW-risk reduction.

## Background

The CBMRR project was developed at a time when Cambodia had reached a juncture in its mine-risk-education activities. Up until the end of the 1990s, MRE was generally aimed

at audiences that CMAC was assumed would have limited knowledge of the landmine problem. The message-based approach focused on raising awareness and providing safety information, often through presentations by mobile teams. The participation of the local population in MRE activities was relatively cursory and there was commonly little integration between these activities and other mine-action components.<sup>1</sup> While this approach had previously been necessary to disseminate information quickly to refugees and internally displaced persons returning to their homes after the cessation of conflict, by the end of the decade it became increasingly apparent that alternative methodologies were needed.

As Cambodia began to recover from the years of conflict and communities became more stable and less transitory, villagers developed good local knowledge of the contamination in their vicinity and began adapting to sustain their livelihoods. Poverty and the continuous struggle to meet life's basic needs were now the primary factors forcing people into areas they knew to be mined, rather than a lack of education regarding the nature of the landmine threat. Individuals and communities were interacting with mines and ERW, including taking intentional risks to clear mines from agricultural and residential land.<sup>2</sup> The traditional awareness approach for MRE was no longer adequate in addressing the issue.

Informative rather than participatory, it often failed to take into account local knowledge, existing coping strategies or the livelihood pressures that were driving some villagers to take risks.

In response to the changing nature of risk and accidents, CMAC and UNICEF requested Handicap International Belgium partner with them to develop a new project that would aim to be more responsive to the

projects that could assist with providing alternative income-generation activities for groups at risk

The CBMRR Project was based on the premise that local people living in dangerous environments have already developed coping mechanisms and risk-reduction strategies, but often these are not formalized within the community, nor are they recognized by outside actors.



A CBMRR village mapping session in Pailin province.

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Villagers perform problem analysis in Pursat province.

realities faced by the local people living in contaminated areas. It was believed that this goal could be achieved by broadening the approach of traditional risk education through increased community participation and better integration with mine action, community-development and victim-assistance services.

### The CBMRR Concept and Implementation

Although initiated under the Mine Awareness Branch of CMAC, the CBMRR project was developed with much broader aims than purely the provision of MRE. The project developers believed that mine/ERW risk could be reduced through a combination of elements:

1. Supporting communities to play a greater role in determining the mine-action priorities in their villages
2. Providing ongoing risk education at a local level to civilians at high risk
3. Ensuring greater integration with victim-assistance services and community-development

Studies on risk-taking in Cambodia<sup>2</sup> highlighted the fact that communities often felt disempowered by agencies that acted to define the problem for them rather than working collectively to better understand the local complexities and to find solutions acceptable to both parties. It was believed that the greater involvement of mine-affected people in the mine-action process would allow for better identification of the risks they faced and their priorities in terms of clearance and risk education. This inclusion, in turn, would also help to mobilize and empower the communities to work together to find ways to implement their own local risk-reduction strategies and provide a longer-term solution to the mine problem.

The initial project design was developed in 2000 and piloted over a one-year period in six districts with an identified high level of threat in the northwestern provinces of Battambang and Pailin.<sup>3</sup> The project has evolved over the years, but the basic design remains the same. It involves setting up a network of locally elected volunteer mine/unexploded ordnance committees

at the village, commune and district levels. The committee members become the focal points for all mine/UXO activities in their locality. The volunteers receive training from CMAC to facilitate meetings and participatory activities, organize fellow villagers to take action, and plan and provide MRE. Equipped with this training, the volunteers lead a series of Participatory Learning and Action activities at the village level to help local residents visualize and clearly define their mine/UXO problem, while identifying who is at risk. Based on the analysis, the villagers then develop an action plan that prioritizes the problems, outlines the solutions, identifies those who will lead the action and determines the expected timeframe for action. The action plan may involve outside interventions such as clearance and development assistance, but it should also include activities the communities will undertake themselves to address the identified problems (for example, ensuring newcomers to an area are informed about the dangerous areas, submitting requests for clearance of mines and UXO, providing specific MRE messages to local children, and marking or fencing visible ordnance).

The PLA activities are intended to get a comprehensive picture of the mine/UXO risk in the village as identified by a broad cross-section of people from all socioeconomic levels within the village, including women, girls, boys and men, long-term residents, new residents, former military personnel, people with disabilities, and the authorities. Mined areas, UXO and accident locations, and high-risk households are marked on village maps drawn by the villagers. Agricultural land and natural resources are indicated to show how these are impeded by contamination. Risk-taking is analyzed through seasonal calendars, and households and individuals are assessed according to levels of risk through risk-ranking matrices. Activities may be conducted with mixed groups or with single-sex groups to allow for a comparison of the concerns, roles, mobility levels and differing viewpoints of men and women. The activities help to act as a catalyst for community discussion and analysis of the contamination problems. A key principle of the CBMRR project is that CMAC acts purely as a support to the network, while the processes, materials and information generated through the activities are kept within the village. This approach means that other organizations working in the village can also make use of local-level resources and knowledge. Using plastic overlays, village maps depicting the mine/UXO

threat are annually updated by the volunteers as clearance and other work progresses so as to provide a record of the change within the village. This information is useful not only for CMAC's monitoring purposes, but more importantly provides a visual record for the villagers of what they have achieved since setting up the mine/UXO committees. All activities are also recorded by the volunteers in log books.

The CBMRR network provides an ongoing surveillance system regarding mine/UXO issues within local communities. The volunteers ensure mine/UXO accidents are recorded, contaminated areas are prioritized and clearance requests submitted, and spot UXO<sup>4</sup> are quickly reported and removed. The network can also monitor post-clearance land use within the communities and ensure that MRE is provided on an as-needed basis.

Village activities are supported and monitored by a district focal point, a local person recruited as a salaried staff member of CMAC. The DFP is a mobile position that works with the volunteers at the village level to facilitate the participatory activities and to build up the village capacity to both interact with mine action and other services, and implement basic threat-reduction strategies themselves. There is also a CMAC provincial coordinator that is a salaried CMAC position at the provincial level. CMAC training and monitoring officers provide ongoing monitoring and regular refresher training to the networks of volunteers.

The CBMRR project has a gradual phase-out strategy, whereby the DFP is able to reduce input into villages once the mine/UXO committees are established and trained and have assumed responsibility for mine-action activities in their village. Follow-up visits are maintained to continue to show support to the committees and to help problem-solve, but the DFPs are then able to expand their work to other high-priority villages within the same district. As the mine/UXO threat diminishes in a village, input in terms of time and resources from the DFPs and volunteers decreases, although the committees remain the local focal point for mine action and continue to maintain the PLA materials and information in the village.

### Discussion

The CBMRR Project, while "community based," was conceived and designed by agencies at a central level rather than emerging organically from the communities themselves. In the early days, the network was often





A CBMRR signboard outside the house of a village volunteer in Banteay Meanchey province.

referred to as the “CMAC network” and action plans developed by communities sometimes omitted any tasks to be carried out by the members of the community because they thought they were not important enough to include in the action plan. These problems were perhaps indicative of moving from a service-style approach to one that mobilizes local people to work on issues that have traditionally been dealt with by outsiders. However, the CBMRR project has found that local-level ownership has developed over time and the committees have taken on management responsibilities and decision-making while contributing a great deal of their own time and resources to the network. This dedication is perhaps for two interrelated reasons: the volunteers have, through their work with CBMRR, increased their own self-esteem and status within their communities, and the benefits to the community have been visible and proven relevant.

The mine/UXO committees comprise volunteers elected by their local communities. The volunteers are

not remunerated but receive materials and training to enable them to do their work. While volunteering at local levels in the Cambodian context is a familiar development approach, it is often not successful. Villagers living in rural areas often lack the time and resources to volunteer, and individual and family needs maintain priority over community altruism. The CBMRR experience has shown that volunteerism is a fine balance between the wants and needs of the individuals and the desire to help their communities. Initially, people tend to volunteer for the role of the committee representatives because of the status the position brings to them through the association of working with an outside organization. The training and materials also serve as incentives. CMAC recognizes that this self-interest is important and emphasizes it by helping to promote the status of the volunteers in the community through the provision of signboards placed outside the volunteers’ houses. The work of volunteering in the mine/UXO committees helps to

equip local residents with skills and knowledge they can use in other aspects of their lives, which also serves to motivate the volunteers. CMAC records show that 34 mine/UXO committee volunteers (20 male and 14 female) have been elected to other community leadership positions as a result of the respect they earned through their work with CBMRR.<sup>5</sup> Volunteers have become Commune Council members, village authorities or community-development workers with international and local development organizations. Some have also accepted salaried DFP positions within CMAC, and in Pailin, one volunteer has become the CBMRR Provincial Coordinator, while another volunteer has set up his own community-development association.

A former Khmer Rouge soldier, Ros Sovan was a mine/UXO committee volunteer elected by his community in 2002 during the pilot phase of the CBMRR project. He has since set up a local community association, now known as the Agriculture Producing Association of Bortang Su Village. The association was started by Sovan as a self-help savings group within the village in 2004 with the aim of helping to generate income and livelihood alternatives for the poorest families in the village who were taking risks in landmine-affected areas. The initial membership comprised 35 families, including 22 female-headed households. In 2006 the association was registered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and provided with funds to help support agricultural development with the member families. In 2009 the association had 60 member families, 33 of which were female-headed households.<sup>6</sup> At

a recent mine-action conference in Cambodia, Sovan spoke of how his work with the CBMRR network had helped him to develop the skills and confidence to embark on his own development initiative.

The CBMRR volunteer network has been most successful and sustainable in those villages where the volunteers can see that their work has value and relevance.



CBMRR volunteer, Ros Sovan, is awarded an appreciation certificate for his community-development work from CMAC Director General H.E. Heng Ratana.

In the heavily contaminated areas where there have been adequate mine-action resources to provide a timely response to the local-level requests, the villagers have been able to witness the benefits of their participation as clearance and development resources are brought in to the village through the volunteer network.

The CBMRR approach relies heavily on the interaction between the mine-action agencies and the mine/UXO committees. This method is not just about establishing reporting systems, but also about building trust and effective working relationships between the different parties. Inequalities often exist between villagers and outsiders because of differences in wealth, status and education levels, resulting in hierarchical rather than mutually supportive relationships. The confidence and ability of the local volunteers has to be built so that they can liaise effectively with the mine-action personnel, people they would normally consider their superiors. At the same time, the network has to demonstrate its credibility and worth to the agencies to disprove the negative but often prevalent views that villagers have little to contribute because of their poverty and lack of education.

The CBMRR project was fortunate in that when the committees were first established, they were able to tap

directly into CMAC clearance and ordnance disposal teams. As the CBMRR network has become increasingly well-known, other mine-action and development agencies have begun to work with the committees at the village level and to consult them as part of their data-collection processes.<sup>7</sup> This cooperation has helped to endorse the value of the volunteer network and the quality



Mine-action personnel consult with a mine/UXO committee volunteer in Battambang province.

of data maintained at the village level. A recent evaluation of the mine-risk-education sector in Cambodia noted “the CBMRR network is seen by external stakeholders as a source of good and reliable information regarding mine/UXO-related information.”<sup>8</sup> The mine/UXO committee representatives regularly participate in the annual provincial mine-action planning process, and a large proportion of the clearance requests that are included in the annual work plans are generated through the CBMRR networks.<sup>9</sup> The clearance requests may be dealt with by any of the accredited mine-action organizations working in Cambodia, depending on the location of the task.<sup>10</sup>

Currently the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority and accredited operators are conducting a baseline survey in the 21 most affected districts in Cambodia. The survey aims to better define the remaining contamination problem so that a new national clearance plan can be developed. The Cambodian Mine Action Standards for Baseline Survey require the teams of all the operators working on the survey to consult with the CBMRR network at the local level.<sup>11</sup> These developments have helped to bolster the network and to establish its place as an essential part of the mine-action process at the local level.

**Conclusion**

From relatively humble beginnings as a pilot project under the mine-awareness branch of CMAC, the CBMRR project has developed into a credible mine/UXO risk-reduction network, covering the majority of heavily contaminated districts and villages while maintaining a relatively high degree of community participation and ownership. There is currently an active network of more than 350 volunteers working in more than 100 villages in 18 of the 21 most mine-contaminated districts in the north and northwest regions of Cambodia. Through the CBMRR project, CMAC has demonstrated that it is possible to set up a network of volunteers at the local level at relatively low cost and to engage communities and individuals actively within the mine-action process. This close collaboration has helped to ensure that people are well-informed about the mine situation in their communities, that local clearance priorities are being addressed and that viable risk-free livelihood options are becoming a reality. The CBMRR network has contributed greatly to the process of mobilizing communities to deal with the mine threat and to empower individuals within villages, communes and districts to become proactive advocates for local-level development. The information generated by the committees regarding the mine problem has contributed to more effective prioritization and more efficient use of mine-action resources. These improvements, in turn, have contributed to an overall reduction in mine/UXO risk in many of the communities where the CBMRR network operates. The CMAC Deputy Director General notes, “The value that

CBMRR has brought to Cambodia’s mine-action sector has been enormous and remarkable, not only in terms of risk education and reduction and mine-action planning, but also in terms of improving the social fabric, community structure and basic democracy, whereby individuals can stand up and exercise their right to define their roles in the larger community.”<sup>1</sup>

As Cambodia enters the new decade with the fourth National Mine Action Strategic Plan (2010–19) in place, attention in the mine-action sector is focusing on dealing effectively with the most contaminated areas in the country, while simultaneously preparing for the eventual reduction in donor funding and the withdrawal of international assistance. This eventuality requires mine action to be more fully “mainstreamed” within local government systems and policies, and for the services to be transitioned to existing government and local structures. The CBMRR network may be taking on a more prominent role in community risk education and reduction as mine-action services are increasingly delivered through national and local entities as part of broader country safety strategies.<sup>13</sup> ▶

*See Endnotes, Page 80*

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