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Increasing Female Voices in Mine-action Planning and Prioritization

The Community Strengthening and Gender Mainstreaming in Integrated Mine Action Project focuses on one of the greatest challenges women face in mine-affected areas of Cambodia: to be actively and meaningfully involved in the decision-making process in mine action. Three international organizations have collaborated to develop a complex plan addressing the issues facing the residents of many Cambodian villages. Its implementation demonstrates the sweeping changes necessary for participation by all villagers and the promise of truly integrated mine-action strategies.

by Catherine Cecil and Kristen Rasmussen | International Women’s Development Agency, Inc.

A as a result of nearly three decades of war and civil conflict, Cambodia is one of the most mine-affected countries in the world. An estimated 65,000 Cambodians have suffered landmine/unexploded-ordnance casualties between 1979 and 2007. Cambodian women have made great strides in clearing landmines and UXO, but challenges remain, as shown by the 347 casualties in 2007.

Due to differential daily lives, Cambodian men and women face different risks from landmines and UXO. Men consistently face greater risks of accidents than women in fields and forests, while women face more risks closer to villages or water sources. Both men and women can offer valuable information on landmine/UXO risks in this clearance planning and prioritization process, but women face barriers to participating actively in this process.

Traditional gender roles often bar women from public life and thus from participating in a decision-making role in development and planning. As explained by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: “Deep-rooted cultural and social patterns, norms and attitudes and the non-participation of women’s voices relate to women’s access to political and public life. Poverty falls particularly heavily on women, especially on female-headed households.”

In Cambodia, village chiefs are predominantly male village leaders. Although invitation lists allowed for women to be included in village meeting discussions, women were most often male; therefore, the organizers decided to undertake a pilot project to enable men and women to fully participate at the local level. In all the meetings, local women reported that they were uncomfortable discussing issues relating to landmines and UXO. Some women reported feeling intimidated by most villagers who attended.

The project’s goals are in line with the government of Cambodia’s policy guidelines on demining, which state that “the ultimate objective of demining is to reduce poverty.” The project works to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning and prioritization and provides women’s groups with the capacity-building efforts necessary to gain the knowledge and skills needed to participate in clearance planning and prioritization and advocate for their community.

The Community Strengthening and Gender Mainstreaming in Integrated Mine Action Project (hereafter called “the project”) seeks to ensure that women are included in the planning and prioritization process. The International Women’s Development Agency, Inc., World Vision, and Mines Advisory Group, have collaborated to define the project goals: “women and men and boys and girls living in landmine/UXO-affected communities are able to resolve landmines/UXO and livelihood issues.” Project objectives include improved understanding of the role of gender and capacity-building efforts to enable women and men to participate in the planning and prioritization process. The project works to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning and prioritization, and provides women’s groups with the capacity-building efforts necessary to gain the knowledge and skills needed to participate in clearance planning and prioritization and advocate for their community.

The project has provided training on gender awareness and effective facilitation to the Mine Action Planning Unit staff. This training prepared all the participants for the planning and prioritization process. Participants included international and local women’s groups who were highly motivated to participate in the exercise, and provided information about where mines are located. The Women’s Group facilitated the process, and helped to ensure that the information provided was accurate and complete.

The project’s objectives are to enable men’s and women’s active participation in the planning and prioritization process, in coordination with other capacity-building efforts conducted by Australian Volunteers International. Attendees were limited to 15 people per meeting, and were invited based on their community’s need for capacity-building efforts. Attendees were limited to 15 people per meeting, and were invited based on their community’s need for capacity-building efforts.

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Village chiefs have many responsibilities in their communities and limited time, and like others in poor communities, they need to earn income. At commune-level meetings, many village chiefs appeared to be challenged by the process of completing the required forms, and most relied on forms they used in the previous year.

The villagers need support in building confidence and skills. Not all villagers participated equally in local meetings. Younger women generally participated more actively than older women, and older men tended to participate more actively than younger men.

Higher participation may be due to higher education levels among younger women compared to older women, or higher economic status among older men. Although there are many exceptions in Cambodia, villagers with higher incomes are frequently considered appropriate community leaders because they are generally better educated.

Villagers need support to build their capacity in mapmaking. This activity was new for many villagers who participated in the minefield identification meetings. The International Women’s Development Agency has observed many times that it seems ordered for women to participate in such meetings or even to hold a pen, which may be due to higher levels of illiteracy. In the pilot project, this limited experience affected the quality of maps. The absence of specific facilitation at the cluster level raised mixed concerns that the maps would be discarded at the commune planning meeting.

Volunteer facilitators need support to build their capacity and confidence. Some were daunted by filling out forms and wanted more time to complete them. Not all the volunteers succeeded in handing off forms to their village chiefs. Chiang village had only two volunteer facilitators, and facilitation was more difficult for them than for peers. One of the volunteers was an amputee, the other a widow. They may have been marginalised within their communities, which in turn affected their confidence.

Lessons Learned
The village chiefs were better prepared and more confident at commune planning meetings as a result of local input, maps and documentation on contaminated sites and beneficiaries of cleared land provided through the pilot project. Village chiefs would benefit from increased training in completing MAPU minefield-prioritization forms.

Both men and women participate more fully with active facilitation and encouragement. A strong training focus on encouraging women to speak helped volunteer facilitators to target their efforts. Participation also increased in small-group discussions.

Local participants succeeded in bolstering their skills with opportunities to practice making maps. One effective technique is to hand participants a pen to encourage them to draw on the map. Although several people were nervous about this activity, they were very pleased after they made their maps, and they reported that the meetings made them more willing and confident to participate in similar activities in the future.

Groups with more facilitators were better able to manage their meetings. Some facilitators reported that it might have been easier for them to have a series of smaller meetings in their villages rather than one large meeting as smaller meetings would be easier to manage.

Conclusion
Nongovernmental organizations or other external partners can support the clearance planning and prioritization process by ensuring that all voices are heard in local meetings and by linking participants to decision-makers.

Local meetings help fill the gap shown by village chiefs who report little or no local consultation before they begin the planning and prioritization process. Providing a forum for broad participation is not enough. Participants at all levels—from villagers to volunteer facilitators to village chiefs—showed anxiety about their skills and their need for more information and capacity.

See Endnotes, page 120