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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 and facing residents of the 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.

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 6,000 Cambodians have suffered landmine- and unexploded-ordnance-caused casualties between 1979 and 2007. Cambodia has made great strides in clearing landmines and UXO, but challenges remain, as shown by the 347 casualties in 2007.

Due to differing reasons, Cambodian men and women face different risks from landmines and UXO: Men consistently face greater risks as accidents occur in fields and forests, while women face more risks close to villages or water sources. Both men and women can offer valuable information on landmine/UXO risks in the 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 playing 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 stereotyped roles limit women’s access to political and public life. Poverty falls particularly heavily on women, especially on female heads of households.”

Cambodian women do not have enough time to focus on political affairs in the face of heavy economic and family burdens. Lack of adequate education, family support and control from playing a decision-making role in development and planning. Against Women: “Deep-rooted cultural and social patterns, norms and attitudes and stereotyped roles limit women’s access to political and public life. Poverty falls particularly heavily on women, especially on female heads of households.”

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Villages preparing a map showing areas around their village that are contaminated by landmines.

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 supports the guidelines’ requirement for “fair and transparent prioritization.” The project seeks to encourage both 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.

The project has provided training on gender awareness and effective facilitation to the Mine Action Planning Unit staff. This training prepared these facilitators to encourage both 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.

The village level meetings described above were followed by clearance planning meetings organized by the MAUPs and held at the commune level. In the large community meetings, the commune chief and the MAUP facilitator invited residents who were not part of the focus groups to participate in the meetings. It is intended to hold at least one meeting at every level, and local facilitators will ensure that the maximum number of people participate.

Three of the four village chiefs in the pilot projects stated that they benefited from input provided by villagers at the earlier village meetings. Village chiefs from the target villages in Sdau commune brought documentation to them to the commune meetings. The guidelines require village and commune authorities to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning and prioritization. The village level meetings provided by villagers at the earlier village meetings. Village chiefs from the target villages in Sdau commune brought documentation to them to the commune meetings. The guidelines require village and commune authorities to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning and prioritization.

Participants were asked to name the beneficiaries of cleared land. In O Daikla, some villagers said that poor people and widows should be given priority consideration, but most villagers in all the meetings agreed that all beneficiaries of cleared land should be given priority consideration. The guidelines require village and commune authorities to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning and prioritization.
Village chiefs have many responsibilities in their communities and limited time, and like others in poor communities, they need extra 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 village chiefs need support in building their 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 watershed for women to participate in such meetings or even to hold a pen, which may be due to higher levels of illiteracy at these meetings. In the pilot project, this limited experience affected the quality of maps. The absence of specific instructions or technical instruction for women in the 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 village chiefs to volunteer facilitators in village chiefs—showed anxiety about their skills and their need for more information and capacity.

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Gender in Community Consultations

Cambodia has one of the most developed mine-action sectors in the world. A number of actors operate here, and mine clearance has been carried out since 1992. While being limited by political factors as well as resources, the Cambodian mine-action sector has a high level of integration among various national bodies and nongovernmental organizations operating in the country. Logically, a well-established sector in which multiple organizations with differing mandates, perspectives and priorities are used to work together is more ready and able to absorb new trends and ideas and to establish frameworks for implementation.

Gender Awareness among Mine-action Actors

Several mine-action organizations in Cambodia have implemented gender strategies in their work, some more comprehensively than others. These include the Mines Advisory Group, Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority, and Cambodian Mine Action Centre. There are also organizations working on aspects other than mine clearance such as the International Women’s Development Agency and Australian Voluntary International.

These organizations all carry out and assist in carrying out community consultations in anticipation of a clearance project. These strategies are particularly interesting because they go in the heart of the为何 mainstreaming is important. Community consultations are a vital part of the prioritization done before a given area is selected for clearance. Usually consultations involve one or two people from, or hired by, the clearance organization. The consultants hold one or more open meetings in the affected villages, encouraging locals to speak up about areas that they perceive minutes to be located and which areas they perceive as being more urgent to clear. The locals will draw these areas on maps that are then used as a foundation for the planning of the clearance operation. The gender aspects of these considerations are particularly important for several reasons and touch upon the key aspects of the importance of gender mainstreaming both in mine action and more generally.

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Rural, Mine-affected Communities

Labor and livelihood responsibilities in rural Cambodian communities are generally divided across gender lines, as is common in many rural societies. The men are most likely to be involved in activities taking place far from the house, such as cultivating the land and tending to larger animals. This latter responsibility is usually shared with young boys who herd the cattle, a very risky occupation in a mine-contaminated area. Women traditionally work in and around the house, especially in the kitchen area. Women are generally divided across gendered lines, as is common in many rural communities and more generally.

The division of labor and responsibilities is recognized. Both men and women need to be heard in questions of mine-clearance prioritizations, not just because it is right, but because it is necessary for the clearance priorities to be made on a solid foundation and reflect actual needs. If in a village only the perspectives of the men are heard, the prioritization is

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