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Gender in Community Consultations

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Vandeskog Wallacher: 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 aid cooperation 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 strategy 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 Volunteers International.

These organizations all carry out or assist in carrying out community consultations in anticipation of a clearance project. These strategies are particularly interesting because they go to the core of why the mainstreaming is important. Community consultations are a vital part of the prioritisation 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 village, encouraging locals to speak up about where they perceive mines 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 consultations are particularly important for several reasons and touch upon the key factors of the importance of gender mainstreaming: equal participation and more generally.

Rural, Mine-affected Communities

Labor and livelihood responsibilities in rural Cambodian societies are generally divided across gender lines, as is common in many rural areas. Men are more 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 after they have children. The work includes responsibilities related to the household such as fetching water and firewood. According to Heng Rettana, the Deputy Director at CMAC, "These people not only have a duty to bring income to their families. And they live in mine-affected areas – they have to walk into the minefields to collect firewood, water, food, and also the children."

Men are also more likely than women to be involved in wage employment. "They are thus more likely to travel to and from work, an activity that entails significant risks in a mine-contaminated area." As in many other conflict and post-conflict situations, there is a disproportionate number of female-headed households due to the death or injury of the male head of the household. These households tend to be the poorest in rural Cambodian communities and may be involved in risk-prone behavior because of their limited livelihood options.

The impact of mine contamination in most cases depends on the structure of agricultural work and the presence of alternative livelihood options in the green area. The gender implication is thus obvious once 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 need for more information and capacity. *See Endnotes, page 120*

Gender in Community Consultations

Landmine removal within Cambodia has been an important, unsolved problem for many years. This article focuses on mine-action strategies for gender mainstreaming in the community consultations carried out in rural, mine-affected areas in Cambodia.*

by Hilde Vandeskog Wallacher | International Peace Research Institute, Oslo |

Villagers 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 harder for women to participate in such meetings or even to hold a pen, which may be due to higher levels of illiteracy. For example, in the planning project, this limited experience affected the quality of maps. The absence of specific facilitation and support for women was a source of frustration, which was daunted by filling out forms and wanting the maps to be taken seriously. The absence of specific information on gender issues in integrated mine action for most of the time.

Lessons Learned

The village chiefs were better prepared and more confident at commune planning meetings as a result of local input, 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 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 village 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.
process is acknowledged by the authorities and the mine-action organizations. Second, there is the more commonly emphasized benefit factor in which the importance of the benefit of the mine action being equally distributed among the population is stressed. Under each of these there are, of course, a number of different ways in which mine action relates to gender considerations.

The contribution factor can be understood as a person's right to take part in the process in which he or she is a stakeholder. It relates to the right to influence and be heard in processes relevant to a person's core interests. In the context of mine action, this factor is particularly relevant in the consultation processes. The fact that these consultations exist reflects an acknowledgement of the fact that effective problem-solving requires that the people closest to the problem be the ones defining it. The contribution factor applies to mine action when it comes to the right of individuals to benefit from mine action. Some examples include benefits from employment, the return to land, more widespread medical aid and so forth. It applies to some of the same elements of mine action as the contribution factor; however, it is a different way of conceptualizing the rights and positions of the local communities in relation to the mine action being carried out. While this perspective is an interesting one, this article is primarily concerned with the contribution factor as conceptualizing the role of gender in mine action.

Practice and Experiences

In Cambodia there are three clearance operators currently active: the Cambodian Mine Action Centre, Mines Advisory Group and The HALO Trust. To various extents, all three organizations consult the local communities in their planning processes. In terms of gender mainstreaming in their approach to mine clearance, MAG–Cambodia stands as a good example. MAG–Cambodia approaches the problem in a fairly comprehensive and uses sophisticated efforts toward realizing the potential of this practice. This assertion is based not necessarily on the extent to which gender-mainstreaming efforts have been carried out within the structure of MAG–Cambodia, though that has certainly been done extensively, rather, there is acknowledgement within the strategies of MAG–Cambodia that gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself but an endeavor to be entered into in isolation, with a simple view of improving the position of women within the work carried out by the organization.

MAG–Cambodia saw that gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself but an endeavor to be entered into in isolation, with a simple view of improving the position of women within the work carried out by the organization. MAG–Cambodia, though that has certainly been done extensively, rather, there is acknowledgement within the strategies of MAG–Cambodia that gender mainstreaming as part of a bigger picture. The goal is to serve the population in the areas where they operate with as little bias as possible. In other words, the organization approaches the rationale of gender mainstreaming from the opposite end of the norm. Instead of approaching gender mainstreaming from the perspective of gender politics, MAG approaches it from a perspective of coherence and an intrinsic principle of equality of treatment. This does not mean that the organization ignores gender issues; however, it is whether gender mainstreaming is viewed as important because of gender issues alone or whether it holds relevance in the field of mine action in a broader perspective of acknowledging the need for a multidisciplinary approach to community liaisons. By identifying its role vis-à-vis the communities in which it operates as providing significant impacts beyond the mere removal of mines, it is possible to work toward results that are not only efficient in a purely technical perspective, but also in a development perspective.

MAG–Cambodia has had this approach to its role in Cambodia since it started working there in 1999. It has established a structure of community-liaison teams, each consisting of one man and one woman, that are responsible for establishing and maintaining communication between MAG–Cambodia and local communities. These teams carry out pre-clearance consultations in which the communities share their knowledge about the whereabouts of the mines and their needs in terms of clearance practices. The teams make sure to consult a selection of men, women, boys and girls to cover as many differing perspectives as possible.

Conclusion

Gender mainstreaming in the Cambodian mine-action sector is already fairly advanced. Several strategies are in place and the gender issue is on the national agenda with the establishment of the cross-sector gender working group consisting of one man and one woman, that are responsible for establishing and maintaining communication between MAG–Cambodia and local communities. These teams carry out pre-clearance consultations in which the communities share their knowledge about the whereabouts of the mines and their needs in terms of clearance practices. The teams make sure to consult a selection of men, women, boys and girls to cover as many differing perspectives as possible.
under the auspices of the CMAA. However, several problems mar the effectiveness of these initiatives. First of all, “gender” seems to be synonymous with “women,” an unfortunate misconception often encountered when gender mainstreaming is on the agenda in many sectors. Second, instead of focusing on empowering women to benefit and influence in the sector of mine action, the focus seems to be on finding female-specific aspects in the sector and nurturing these. For example, CMAA wants to target women for employment in the mine-risk education sector based on their perceived skills in teaching and communicating with children. While this stereotype may be true based on traditional divisions of labor in communities, it doesn’t help the broader goals of gender mainstreaming. The approach is too narrow and does not reflect the necessity of ensuring women have equal access to benefits and influence. Instead, it takes a traditionalist view on the role of women and seeks to accommodate women into the mine-action work within the framework of these roles. Clearly, this acknowledgement of the particular skills and resources of the female side of the community is positive in and of itself and may certainly be an important part of the gender-mainstreaming process.

However, if this pigeonholing is what the gender aspects of the mine-action strategies of the CMAA amount to, it does not qualify as mainstreaming in the real meaning of the concept. Some efforts are necessary to mend the gender gap in the efficiency of the community consultations. First, the issue of prejudice against women on the part of the mine-action staff needs to be addressed through gender training tailored to the domestic and local context. In Cambodia, gender experts at community consultations have shown that even if the organization in question

invites women to the meetings and facilities for their presence, women’s voices would still generally not be heard. Second, the fact that many of the women lack the skills and experience needed to get their views across needs to be acknowledged and dismantled. This deficiency is often related to very specific skills needed, such as the ability to understand and draw maps, suggesting a need for creativity in the way consultations are carried out to ensure that women are able to express their views and to share their knowledge and experience without being hindered by their lack of specific skills. In a stable, post-conflict situation such as Cambodia, mine clearance should and can be seen in a broader context of reconstruction, development and progress. This feat cannot be accomplished in a comprehensive manner without including a gendered component that is mainstreamed through all aspects of the work of the sector, including the cooperation with development organizations and private entities.

The community consultations are a good place to start, as they constitute a cross-cutting activity that is relevant to the practical efficiency of the clearance. Consultations also ensure a fairly equal distribution of benefits arising from clearance activities. Also, by acknowledging and asking the advice and knowledge of local women, mine-action organizations help to modify the existing gender biases and depredations especially of women in rural Cambodia and also Cambodian society in general. The benefits of removing the obstacles for female participation and contributions to the rebuilding and development of a country should be self-evident, and successful gender mainstreaming in mine-action needs to reflect this fact in all its strategies.

See Endnotes, page 105