Gender in Community Consultations

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Vandekeg Wallacher: Gender in Community Consultations

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.

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.

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, Inc. is working on the Community Strengthening and Gender Mainstreaming (CSG) project. The project is 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 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 into the core why the 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 where they can speak about the priorities. They use maps to show how 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 aspects of the importance of gender mainstreaming in mine action 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 societies. The 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 are the people most at risk because they 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.”

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 deaths 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.

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likely to be made on insufficient and unbalanced evidence, leaving important areas still dangerously contaminated. Knowledge of the whereabouts of the mines is often based on word of mouth and experiences of injury. Most people in a village are likely to be aware of any severe accidents having taken place in the recent past, and these areas are likely to be high on the list of areas prioritized for clearance.

A Development Perspective

Keeping in mind these differences in perspective based on gender, we can identify two key conceptualizations of the gender implications of a mine-affected community that correspond to the general outline of gender-divided labor. First, there is what can be called the contribution factor in which the local population’s rights to influence the mine-action 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 acknowledgment of the fact that effective problem-solving requires that the people closest to the problem be involved. In this context, there is a need for urgent risk-reducing measures to be instated. The need to include locals is also at the core of the community-based participatory approach to mine action discussed by Ruth Bottome in her International Peace Research Institute, Oslo report from 2003. One of her key contentions is that there is a tendency for the mine-action sector to approach the clearance task from the point of view of the local community. The mine-action sector’s technical approach is often based on quantified goals with little regard for the social implications of its presence. By taking a purely technical approach to mine action, planners operate in a way that is not necessarily to the advantage of the informal, local knowledge about the mine situation including previous accidents and so on. Also, by only consulting with one homogeneous strata of the population—i.e., the men—they risk developing a skewed and insufficient perspective of the problem.

The benefit 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 mine action being carried out. While this perspective is an interesting one, this article is primarily concerned with the contribution factor 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 involve the local communities in their planning processes. In terms of gender mainstreaming in their approach to community consultation for mine clearance, MAG–Cambodia stands as a good example. MAG–Cambodia involves itself in a fashion that does not reflect the core concerns of mainstreaming—namely, the goal of comprehensive, nondiscriminatory mine action with benefits equally accessible to the population—i.e., the men—they risk developing a skewed and insufficient perspective of the problem.

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MAG–Cambodia sees 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 deconstruction of the concept of gender mainstreaming may seem at first to be a radical decision, however, the point 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 multi-dimensional approach to community liaisons. By identifying its role as that of 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...
NPA’s All-female Demining Team in Sudan

Norwegian People’s Aid’s commitment to gender mainstreaming in mine action is reflected by the organization’s present work in Sudan. This article looks at the successes of the country’s first all-female demining team, established in 2007, as well as at the larger cultural and practical considerations of women in demining.

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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 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 be seen in a broader context of reconstruction, development and progress. This fact 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 challenge the existing gender biases and deprivations especially of women in rural Cambodia and also Cambodian society in general. The benefits of removing the obstacles for female participation and contribution to the rebuilding and development of a country should be self-explanatory and a goal of gender mainstreaming in mine action needs to reflect this in all its strategies.

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under the auspices of the CMAA. However, several problems mark 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 ensuring equal gains of women’s benefits 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

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NPA has been involved in mine clearance in Sudan since April 2004, when it established its first program in the nation, a traditional all-male team. Soon after, however, in 2005, training for the first female deminers in Sudan began, leading to the formation of the first all-female demining team in the country, which officially came together in 2007.1 The government of South Sudan is working on gender mainstreaming within its employment ranks, setting a target of having females serve as 25 percent of its agencies’ workforce.2 NPA’s mine-action programs in Sudan aim for this gender-mainstreaming goal and made the 25-percent target a reality, assimilating women into every part of demining operations, including the operational and support departments.3 NPA did not take any special measures to recruit the women it trained. The recruitment of female staff was conducted within Yemeni county, Central Equatoria, where advertisements were posted around the town area. Applicants were interviewed and then screened by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army for security purposes. After that, successful candidates began a four-week basic demining course. Many other organizations followed, opening up all-female demining teams. First, avoiding mixed-gender teams addresses the practical concerns of deminers living together in a small working environment. Second, all-female demining teams ensure a “gender balance” within NPA’s demining programs, providing not only equal employment opportunities to the women, but also bringing female perspectives to the traditionally male-dominated field. All-women teams also create unique positions in local communities for women to be role models for others. NPA has not observed any drawbacks or weaknesses in these teams. Although the female teams may require slight increases in donor funding, to assist with the expenses associated with maternity leave, NPA says that donors “have responded very well.”

The women of South Sudan. The culture of South Sudan is known for its conservative nature. Initially, this emphasis on tradition was seen as a potential cultural hindrance as the first all-female demining team was formed and women began to take on roles traditionally viewed as masculine.2 This traditional culture, however, has not been a deterrent to the process. The majority of the female deminers say that their involvement has not been discouraged, but rather that their friends and families have been very supportive of their involvement in mine clearance.3 Their participation in the program gives them not only an opportunity outside of the home to earn extra money for their families, but it also is “a source of pride for the women” as they help rebuild their nation after the country’s second civil war (1983–2005).1 The only issue that the NPA needed to take into account, the organization says,