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Gender Issue: An Example from Lao PDR

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Gender Issue: An Example from Lao PDR

This article begins with a brief overview of the literature that helped frame a gender assessment MAG undertook and put gender into perspective within the broader development discourse, helping to identify where there are important linkages between gender and mine action. Following this summary, which highlights the centrality of gender in poverty-eradication efforts, an overview of the assessment (including methods and key findings) is provided.

by Jo Durham [MAG-Lao]

Increasingly, gender is being incorporated into the discourse of mine action, but is it really relevant? Does understanding gender add value to mine action practice? Does it increase the impact of our work? Can we mine action practitioners really influence post-conflict benefit? What does gender mainstreaming really mean for mine-action practice?

These are some of the questions that MAG-Lao was grappling with in early 2007 when the United Nations Development Programme-Lao was also trying to understand more thoroughly the gender perspectives in unexploded ordnance/landmine action as a part of its gender mainstreaming strategy. With funding from Irish Aid (through UNDP) and MAG, and with support from Lao Women’s Union, MAG-Lao undertook a gender assessment in five UXO-contaminated provinces to answer some of these questions.

Literature Review

According to the United Nations, the objective of mine action is to reduce the impact of landmines and explosive remnants of war to a level at which “people can live safely; in which economic, social and health development can occur free from the constraints imposed by landmine and ERW contamination.”

In order to fulfill this objective and contribute to post-conflict recovery in a meaningful way, mine action must be integral into other rehabilitation and development processes. Increasingly, post-conflict landmine/ERW contamination is being viewed as a cross-cutting development issue with linkages among mine action, development, achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and poverty-reduction strategies. In Lao PDR, for example, UNDP and the government of Lao PDR are committed to reducing UXO pollution as a key issue in poverty reduction.

The non-profit mine-action sector operators, including MAG and the Lao national unexploded ordnance program, explicitly list the work to the government’s National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy and broader development goals. The increasing focus on post-conflict impact assessments to establish the worth of mine-action interventions also shows an understanding that mine action and socioeconomic development are intrinsically linked.

If it is accepted that mine action has a role in poverty alleviation and promoting socioeconomic development, then a critical examination of poverty—including how it is caused, manifested and reduced—and how these different factors affect mine action processes—is needed. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide such an in-depth analysis, which is a review of the literature on poverty reduction and development in order to understand the importance of gender. More specifically, the literature demonstrates the need for greater gender equity in order to achieve reasonable economic growth, sustainable peace, human rights and the MDGs.

It is perhaps possible to argue that the degree to which equitable benefits are derived from post-conflict activities relies on the gender balance maintained in the reaction and recovery process. As one of the main purposes of the assessment was to have more insight on the levels of access recipients had to information as well as participation in mine action services and the extent to which these services promote equitable participation and transfer of knowledge. The purpose was also to provide practical recommendations for MAG, Lao and other operators who were the key players and focus of this assessment. It is also crucial that the National Development Authority set the agenda for the UXO sector in Lao PDR through national strategy and standards to provide the necessary plan to move forward.

In this work in mind, the assessment mainly looked at the impact of UXO contamination, participation, access to clearance, task-identification processes, community awareness, survivor assistance and employment.

Methodology.

For example of such assessments within the mine-action sector were found in the literature; therefore, the assessment was exploratory in nature, taking on a diverse approach and thus capitalizing on the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Given the previous limited amount of work in gender equity more broadly in the mine-action sector in the Lao PDR, the qualitative data collection was undertaken first.

Qualitative data was collected using focus groups, along with semi-structured interviews and activity profiles and key informant interviews. For the qualitative phase, a qualitative data collection was performed when no new information was emerging, in other words when “data saturation” had been achieved. The qualitative data was also more likely than formalized that they were used to inform the development of a structured quantitative questionnaire. Information gathered from the structured questionnaire helped to confirm the themes identified in the qualitative phase.

Respondents for the assessment of Lao PDR, through a qualitative phase and key informant interviews were given to program beneficiaries were randomly selected in each village included in the assessment. Using different methods, it has been found that qualitative and a range of respond-ents helped to strengthen the data.

All data collection tools were pre- and post-tested, translated back and forth, and did not require participants to be able to read or write. Training was provided to the supervisors and enumerators prior to commencing the study and ongoing support was provided. Supervisors and enumerators were attached to each data-gathering team to make sure the data was collected as instructed. All data was cleaned before analysis. Prior to each interview or questionnaire, participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the program at any time they chose.

Findings and discussion.

The assessment looked at the impact from both the perspective of the prevalence of UXO-related mortality and morbidity and the perspective of land use. Data from Lao PDR and elsewhere revealed that men were more likely to suffer from UXO injury and death. Activity profiles also suggested that male-reported behaviors tended to increase the possibility of exposure to UXO compared to activities reported by women. For example, UXO and UXO collectors, and following discussions with the National Regulatory Authority for the UXO sector in Lao PDR and other stakeholders—was widened to include other nonprofit service providers.

Gender Assessment in Lao PDR

One of the main purposes of the assessment was to have more insight on the levels of access recipients had to information as well as participation in mine action services and the extent to which these services promote equitable participation and transfer of knowledge. The purpose was also to provide practical recommendations for MAG, Lao and other operators who were the key players and focus of this assessment. It is also crucial that the National Development Authority set the agenda for the UXO sector in Lao PDR through national strategy and standards to provide the necessary plan to move forward. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide such an in-depth analysis, which is a review of the literature on poverty reduction and development in order to understand the importance of gender. More specifically, the literature demonstrates the need for greater gender equity in order to achieve reasonable economic growth, sustainable peace, human rights and the MDGs.

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MRE was reported as frequently being delivered to mixed-gender groups, this practice is a concern because a large percentage of women reported not feeling comfortable or confident talking in meetings where men are also present. Children were seen as being particularly vulnerable to both intentional and non-intentional exposure to UXO, especially boys and male adolescents, and were identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE activities. Within the household, passing on MRE messages to children was seen as a joint responsibility. For example, one respondent said, “Both husband and wife tell children about the dangers of UXO. It is important for everyone to warn the children.”

Within Lao PDR, a total of only 20 percent of the staff included in the survey were women employed within the sector. In MAG-Lao, for example, 30 percent of the staff is female and they are mostly employed in operations rather than support or administrative roles. While no specific barriers to female employment were identified, the assessment only interviewed many roles, with three key issues emerging:

1. Few women are employed in middle- or senior-management roles, with three key issues emerging:

2. A significantly lower percentage of female staff was likely to have completed primary school education as compared to men.

3. Female staff have generally been employed in the sector for a considerably shorter time than men.

These points are likely to affect women’s ability to progress to management levels within the sector and, perhaps not surprisingly, there are significantly more men than women in management roles.

The assessment suggested that if we are serious about fulfilling the objectives of mine action as articulated in the International Mine Action Standards, an understanding of gender and how it interacts with UXO/mine-action processes in Lao PDR is crucial. Further, the assessment showed that, to a large degree, female voices are absent from the UXO/mine-action process in Lao PDR and rarely do current approaches actively support and create an enabling environment for equitable participation or transfer of knowledge. An exception to this was observed in villages where MAG had worked, and this was attributed mainly to MAG’s community-liason approach.

Conclusion

MAG began by asking if gender is really relevant for mine action and how it can add value to our work. Given our core business is landmine and UXO removal, as the literature review illustrated, mine action has developed from being an intervention implemented largely in isolation from other relief efforts to one that is increasingly linked to national post-conflict poverty eradication and long-term development goals. Reframing mine action within the broader development discourse necessitates an understanding of poverty and its different dimensions (including gender) if mine action is going to make any meaningful contribution. This assessment has shown that in Lao PDR, while there is a degree of male and female participation, to a large extent, women’s voices are absent from the UXO/mine-action process. Furthermore, current practices do not ensure that women are adequately informed about their rights to participate in decisions that affect them and their development.

To answer the question about what gender mainstreaming means for mine action, the assessment here suggests that, in Lao PDR at least, it means operators have an obligation to ensure program recipients are empowered.

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