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Vocational Training and Wheelchairs

This article talks about two associations that work together to improve the lives of mine survivors and other persons with disabilities in Cambodia by providing skills training, counseling and wheelchairs.

by Huoy Socheat [Association for Aid and Relief Vocational Training for the Disabled] and
Chin Yok [Association for Aid and Relief Wheel Chair for Development]

The Association for Aid and Relief Vocational Training for the Disabled (AAR-VTD) and the Association for Aid and Relief Wheel Chair for Development (AAR-WCD) were established by the Association for Aid and Relief-Japan (AAR-Japan), a Japanese nongovernmental organization, to empower persons with disabilities so they can fully participate in society. Located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, AAR-VTD is a vocational training center and AAR-WCD is a wheelchair production and service center. Both organizations were established in October 2006 to replace previously existing programs. The board of management of AAR-VTD consists of five members, including two members with disabilities; AAR-WCD has eight board members, including five members with disabilities.

Both organizations work closely with Cambodia's Ministry of Social Affairs Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, a governmental office responsible for disability issues. Other partners include the Cambodian Disabled People's Organization—a national self-help organization for persons with disabilities—and the Disability Action Council, a national semiautonomous coordinating organization.

Under AAR-Japan's management, by the end of 2007, the vocational training center had trained 596 landmine survivors and persons with disabilities, and the wheelchair workshop had produced and distributed more than 4,000 wheelchairs. During 2007 alone, AAR-WCD, with financing from AAR-Japan, produced and distributed 320 folding wheelchairs for persons with disabilities. Eight engineers, who themselves are landmine survivors, and other disabled persons, produce the wheelchairs by using local materials.

AAR Vocational Training for the Disabled works to promote the socioeconomic reintegration and participation of landmine survivors and persons with disabilities in society, and it assists this population in acquiring lifelong skills to improve their economic independence. AAR-VTD also advocates for the employment rights of young landmine survivors and persons with disabilities and supports them in overcoming trauma and emotional disturbances.

On the other hand, AAR-Wheel Chair for Development focuses on mobility. It works to improve the mobility of



Cutting pipe for a wheelchair frame.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

landmine survivors and persons with disabilities, eases their daily difficulties and those of their families, and supports them in overcoming trauma and participating in social activities.

Vocational Training for Mine Survivors

The Association for Aid and Relief Vocational Training for the Disabled integrates landmine and unexploded ordnance survivors and other persons with disabilities into society by providing them with vocational training skills so they can support themselves. The center offers four skills courses to PWDs. These skills include electronic-device repair, and maintenance, motorcycle maintenance, sewing and computer skills. The duration of each course is one year. The project also teaches literacy through life skills. Participants learn not only how to read, write and calculate, but also how to analyze and solve their daily problems, such as financial and health issues.

Counseling program. Before they start skills training the trainees receive counseling to encourage self-confidence and independence. AAR-VTD created several developmental activities because it found the PWDs had difficulties in the business world due to a lack of self-confidence, communication skills and social knowledge, not because of a lack of vocational skills. The program includes group discussions and lectures on human rights, gender, HIV/AIDS and the environment. Activities include entertainment, sports, singing contests, moral education and field trips; moreover, the center invites speakers from self-help organizations to



Electronic Devices Repair Training located within the center. The trainer is teaching a class about amplifiers.

lecture about the benefits of membership. The trainees for electronics maintenance also work in private shops for one month to gain practical experience. This on-the-job training serves to aid trainees in obtaining employment and opening businesses in the future.

School life. To make their school lives easier, all of the trainees are required to live in a dormitory located next to the center. Necessities for daily life are provided, including three meals per day, school supplies, and daily commodities such as mosquito nets, pillows, scarves, detergent and toiletries. In addition, AAR-VTD donates tools to graduates to assist them in running their own community-based workshops. An on-site medical clinic takes care of trainees' health issues.

Post-graduation follow-ups. After graduation, AAR-VTD takes three follow-up steps with graduates. The first step involves a research team visiting graduates to learn whether they have benefited from the courses. If they have established a workshop, AAR-VTD donates the needed tools to facilitate their business. In the second step, a research team visits to see whether their abilities and skills can satisfy customers' demands. If they have technical problems, AAR-VTD sends a skills teacher to teach them again, or invites them to participate in a refresher course at the center. The last step in the process is to compare the differences in their lifestyles before and after the training in order to evaluate how much they have changed and, if needed, to offer proper guidance. Generally, these follow-ups continue for one year or more as needed. To assist them further in their business management, AAR-VTD teaches micro-business skills five days before the courses finish.

Although the staff tries hard to educate and coach the trainees to be successful, AAR-VTD still faces some problems. Most of the mine survivors have little education, which makes instruction difficult. The staff tries, however, to use different methods of instruction until the trainees

understand well. Some graduates have financial problems—they cannot afford, for example, to buy spare parts and supplies that they need and, therefore, cannot compete with established businesses that have greater resources. AAR-VTD tries to solve this problem by introducing graduates to credit agencies because AAR-VTD itself does not have the ability to grant loans. According to data gathered in November 2006, an estimated 81 percent of all graduates get jobs. Most of them open their own shops to run a business; some work for nongovernmental organizations, companies or factories.

Wheelchair Production

The Association for Aid and Relief Wheel Chair for Development program produces at least 300 wheelchairs per year at a workshop in Phnom Penh. These wheelchairs are distributed to persons with disabilities in Phnom Penh, as well as in the provinces of Kandal, Kampot, Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, Kampong Speu and Takeo. AAR-WCD's work focuses on research and assessment, production, distribution, follow-up, repair, counseling and referrals.

AAR-WCD locates beneficiaries by asking local governments, villagers, schools and other community-based organizations to help identify them. Then, in the research and assessment phase, factors such as the PWD's physical abilities, living conditions and social environment help determine the association's target population.

Production. Technicians use the collected information to design and produce various kinds of wheelchairs. There are three sizes of basic wheelchairs. The first is three-wheeled, suited for rough roads in rural areas. The second is a tricycle that enables users to travel long distances with less power. Finally, there is a special type with assistive devices. These assistive devices help support the mobility of PWDs, and include things like trolleys, walking frames, walking rolls, crutches, and so on. Because some disabilities are not suited to the standard four-wheel wheelchair,



An adapted tricycle-style wheelchair.

AAR-WCD also produces other types of assistive devices to suit their disabilities. All types of wheelchairs are produced in accordance with the purposes of their daily use and physical conditions in mind.

Distribution. After production, an outreach team visits beneficiaries' houses. When supplying a wheelchair, the team instructs the user and his or her family on how to use the device. They then provide a wheelchair handbook, and a well-illustrated maintenance manual. Staff members trained in physiotherapy teach basic rehabilitation exercises so that PWDs can improve their mobility. Wheelchairs are provided free of charge.

Follow-up visits. Within one year of wheelchair distribution, an AAR-WCD outreach team of technicians pays a follow-up visit. The teams not only readjust wheelchairs, but also interview users and their families to learn more about the lives of

the users, their disabilities, and any difficulties and needs that they may have. When the wheelchair's condition degrades, AAR-WCD repairs it free. Staff members also counsel users or their families at the time of the follow-up. If the user needs additional education, vocational training or significant medical services, the team refers him or her to other service providers using AAR-WCD's wide network of contacts and organizations.

The joint efforts of the Association for Aid and Relief Vocational Training for the Disabled and the Association for Aid and Relief Wheel Chair for Development have aided landmine victims throughout Cambodia. AAR-VTD has given victims the skills they need to provide for themselves. Its counseling services and follow-up programs continue to help victims long after their graduation. Meanwhile, AAR-WCD continues to create and distribute wheelchairs that are well-suited to their owners. Its follow-up and maintenance provision make the organization very effective. In 2008, AAR-WCD will place an emphasis on assisting women with disabilities. The organization is hopeful that this program will be effective and aid mine victims that have in the past been overlooked. ❖



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News Brief

Former Khmer Rouge Soldier Arrested in Killing of Deminer

Authorities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, have arrested and charged former Khmer Rouge soldier Sin Dorn in connection with the kidnapping and premeditated murder of British deminer Christopher Howes and Huon Huot, Howes's Cambodian translator, in 1996.

Howes, 37 at the time, was given the opportunity to leave his captive team of 20 deminers from the Mines Advisory Group to retrieve a ransom. Howes refused and, although the team was eventually released, Howes and Huon Huot were taken farther into KR-held territory and killed. Howes's remains were found in 1998.

Sin Dorn, the fourth former KR soldier to be arrested in connection with the murders, was captured in a KR stronghold in northern Cambodia. Three other former rebels were arrested in November 2007 on the same charges. Authorities allege that the men captured Howes and Huon Huot near the Angkor Wat temples in northwest Cambodia, detained them, and then shot them several days later.