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Rupert Leighton
Mines Advisory Group Cambodia

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Developing Alternatives: The Locality Demining Model in Cambodia

Mines Advisory Group has developed a new demining model that trains local citizens to clear mines in their own villages. After using the model for almost 12 months, MAG shows this method is as thorough as Mine Action Team units and requires fewer resources.

by Rupert Leighton | Mines Advisory Group Cambodia | Focus 9.2

Background

Mines Advisory Group provides conflict-affected people a chance to rebuild their lives and communities through targeted clearance activities on the ground. In Cambodia last year, where MAG has been operating since 1992, we piloted a new initiative to address our donors’ desire to get more productivity for their money and also to further engage local people in demining activities closest to their homes. The concept is called “locality demining” and at its centre is the employment of local residents where mine action or clearance is most necessary.

Following a period of monitoring and evaluation, MAG Cambodia has continued with the programme as an integral part of the “toolbox” approach to our mine action operations. It has not replaced MAG’s traditional Mine Action Team concept—our pioneering alternative to a regimented “platoon” clearance—but aims to complement the range of tools available in-country. It also results in more manual clearance per dollar and aims to get more deminers on the ground, providing greater clearance whilst working with the neediest individuals in-country.

After more than a decade of mine action by international operators in Cambodia, there was an increasing realisation of the need for more efficient ways to undertake manual clearance. More appropriate solutions for clearance needed to be explored, and growing awareness that mines in Cambodia were being cleared by communities instead of waiting for demining experts meant MAG needed to develop a village-based model. At the same time, MAG continues to use the highly mobile Mine Action Team units comprised of 15 multi-skilled individuals, ready to respond to the various demands of mine action. Consequently, a number of diverse tasks can be dealt with at any time with the MAT. Whilst the MAT plays a vital role in manual clearance, there was a need to develop a more efficient, cost-effective demining model to keep salaries in the local community and, as an added home, eliminate the problems of long commutes for demining staff.

**Locality Model Characteristics**

It was recognised that much of the routine drills associated with manual clearance in Cambodia (notably sweeping and prodding) do not require a highly skilled (or highly paid) team to undertake what is widely seen as a repetitive, dull task. Following this rational, a model was piloted where recruitment for MAG’s traditional Mine Action Team (MAT) was undertaken from within the communities at risk. Local people would be trained to the same level as MAG deminers and, in some instances, complement the more experienced and mobile MAG staff. The aim was to employ individual members of the neediest families with support in the selection process coming from development agencies working in the area. This also coincided with the increasing trend in Cambodia of donors funding mine action through development agencies.

In conjunction with the Lutheran World Federation in Battambang province, MAG initiated a programme in six areas where MAG was working as well as those areas from the nationwide Level One Survey (a study on the impact of landmines in particular areas). Funding, brokered by LWF, was targeted at villages where agencies’ development work was being hampered due to mine threat, promoting positive links between conflict clearance and development activities. In terms of recruitment, vulnerable families were identified by LWF and proposed as candidates. MAG then carried out a selection process, ensuring that all members of the family were able to participate. The project aimed to test the hypothesis that there were people — traditionally the poorest in the community — to get involved.

Basic demining training equal to the normal MAG standards was given to the newly recruited teams. Appropriate pay scales were researched prior to using the model. In many rural areas, the poor have little or no land of their own and rely on work as daily labourers. This work is generally paid, often as low as $1 U.S. per day, and sporadic, depending on the season. During periods when no daily jobs are available, families are reliant on other income-generating activities as direct livelihoods are not always available and fruit from the forest or collecting scrap metal, all of which incur degrees of risk regarding contact with remnants of conflict.1

It was necessary to decide on a salary level that would ensure jobs were not sought after by more influential (and well-off) villagers and would employ rural villagers without distorting the labour market significantly. After discussions with partners, MAG set a rate of $3 (U.S.) per day. MAG also took on villagers as full-time employees, rather than daily labourers, to comply with insurance coverage and ensure they received other benefits such as paid leave, sick leave, maternity benefits, etc.

**The Positives of Locality Demining**

The positive outcome of a locality-demining model can be summarised as follows:

- Stimulating the local economy by hiring employe es at the village level
- Engaging local communities in issues affecting their lives (employment)
- Potentially integrating development activities directly as a result of clearance activities
- Maintaining or increasing quality, productivity, and attendance and reducing problems in management and coordination found with traditional teams
- Engaging formal clearance agencies to address the phenomenon of “village demining”
- Reducing cost for manual clearance operations
- Reducing time for mobile operations
- Reducing overall cost
- Reducing cost per metre
- Keeping the safety of their family unit; it may seem extreme, but it can include exposure to the risk of landmine/ordnance, or other hazards in the area.

**Real benefits.** The locality model’s main benefit is it employs local people at a higher wage than they can normally earn. Informal interviews confirmed that working as a deminer is both a respected and a real benefit to landless and vulnerable households in the area. Wages are used to pay off debt, buy essential household items (such as housing construction materials), provide money for healthcare, etc.

There are also incidental benefits regarding the domestic situation of staff. A mobile MAG works in an environment without the normal discipline and routine of family life, far from home, and they can often find themselves exposed to the risk of daily life outside the safety of their family unit; it may seem extreme, but it can include exposure to the risk of HIV infection or gambling (common amongst male deminers). The locality model reduces the number of staff working away from home and supports the positive unity of a sound family environment.

**Empowerment.** Working with local communities is a means to empower local people, getting them involved in the problem as well as being part of the solution. Traditionally, the mine action community, not the local community, has decided who should benefit from clearance activities. Involving communities to a greater degree ensures local people and allows them to address their problems in an appropriate way.

**Better management, better attendance.** Although the program is still in its infancy, it has been found that the quality of the type of work a locality deminer does has been on a par with the clearance quality of a traditional MAT deminer. Additionally, attendance of locality deminers has proved better than those of the MATs. There are less absenteeism with locality deminers, possibly due to a closer attachment with the land being cleared. MAG did introduce an attendance bonus (as it did with all deminers around the same period), and unwarranted lost workdays meant the loss of the attendance bonus. It is the supervisor’s responsibility to ensure staff are not working when ill.

This is in stark contrast to mobile MATs whose attendance rates prior to the introduction of the attendance bonus did not meet expected standards. Even with both types of teams following the attendance bonus plan, there is still better attendance from locality teams and, in turn, higher productivity rates. Field supervisors report fewer problems managing the unit because the locality deminers return home to their houses at the end of the working day, whereas MAT deminers live in the same building as the supervisor.

**Heightened understanding of risks.** Initial reports from supervisors and mine action officers show the sign of a heightened understanding of the risks and potential dangers of the job for the staff. Although people, or those who have not received MAG’s vital mine risk education, can often put their families and their own lives at risk by doing what they believe may be right when faced with a dangerous item, though it might, in fact, be deadly. MAG’s strategy of increasing awareness has given deminers a heightened understanding of the dangers that can stay with them (and their families and close friends should they share their knowledge of what not to do) all their lives.

**Better productivity for the donor.** The locality model reduces operational costs; salaries are in line with local employment rates despite being higher than casual-labour wages. Also, with a traditional mobile MAT, if a per diem and accommodation costs have to be paid.

The locality model eliminates these associated costs. This, in turn, means more metres are cleared for the same investment.

**The Challenges of Locality Demining**

There are many challenges to locality demining:

• The inter-relationship of development activities, priorities and planning.
• Inappropriate adoption where other tools would be the better solution (i.e., donor interest in the model leading to implementation without consideration for its practicality).
• Relative inflexibility through lack of skills and lack of mobility.
• Concerns about unofficial “village demining” taking place after contract is over.

It is apparent that there must be clear and precise dialogue with development partners when undertaking the planning process for ground operations. Whilst there is an established provincial-planning process, MAG knows the importance of liaising with development partners from the outset to ensure resources are being allocated to priority areas. The danger is to concentrate on areas where partners are working, such as in the expense of areas with greater contamination where the partner agency does not work. MAG recognises it has an important role to play in working closely with development agencies with experience and prior work on the ground.
Donors' needs versus community's needs. The locality model has proven popular among partners, and it has become an overriding objective of partners and donors in control of funds. However, MAG has experts on the ground to ensure the most appropriate method of clearing is being applied to a suspect area: MAG also knows the locality model will not always be the best solution. Immediately targeting funds on the locality model rather than seeking the solution best suited to the clearance task can certainly be detrimental to the community. In a situation in which the presence of suspect areas is hampering development activities, much speedier "area reduction" techniques could be applied to get the job done. This is preferable to starting a lengthy process in setting up a locality demining programme, especially when MAG's technical experts know manual demining is not necessarily what the community needs. These issues are being addressed as more donors are increasingly aware that it is not about what looks good on paper and much more about what the community's needs are on the ground.

Limitations of skills. One major constraint is the comparative inflexibility of the locality deminers. Under normal circumstances, a MAT might be asked to take on different tasks at request and deminers are sometimes required to work for long periods of time. Whereas a village demining team is very mobile, the MAT can be deployed to different areas for as long as the MAT is needed. In addition, the deminer is capable of performing the complete range of tasks within a MAT, from initial detection to the safe disposal of ordnance. It is therefore harder for MATs to break into smaller units to undertake multiple tasks. Also, unlike MATs, it is harder to break a locality team into smaller units to undertake multiple tasks as clearing sites are often very close to each other. For example, a development agency might be clearing sites for construction of water pumps, and this might make unexpected use of a locality team difficult to clear. While MATs can be deployed to new areas, locality teams are generally deployed to the same area for an extended period of time. The MAT can be deployed to new areas, but when the employment finishes, there are concerns that migrant workers may be tempted to offer their services for sale elsewhere. In other industries, this might not be an issue, but when the work involves demining, the concern is valid. Also, MATs can operate under the tightest safety operating procedures and the employees come under close scrutiny and care. MAG also provides insurance and the safety measures employed enable the team to carry out their work in confidence. Informal clearing does not provide this. At any small scale, all of land cleared is estimated to have been made up through information or "informal clearance," so this model addresses the phenomenon face on, with a view to ensuring quality of work as well as maintaining levels of safety.

Villagers understand the benefits of working with a reputable organisation. Also, by having a team located in a particular area undertaking clearance, it is predicted that the overall need for clearance by informal village demining will be decreased. This aside, much informal village demining today takes place in areas of low threat, and this might prove difficult in communities deprived of access to educational facilities for long periods.

Pre-conditions for Success

It is apparent that the locality model will not replace the MAT model. From programme experience over the last eight months or so, MAG recognises the need to complement the locality teams with mobile MATS, Technical Survey Teams and other elements of more traditional clearance activities.

It is also clear that management plays an important part in the success of the model, as in most operations. Training must be rigorous and graded to lower levels of education, if appropriate. Indeed, a requirement for recruiting is a minimum standard of education, and this may prove difficult in communities deprived of access to educational facilities for long periods.

Also, unlike MATs, it is harder to break a locality team into smaller units to undertake multiple tasks such as clearing sites for well-digging. The tasks must be appropriate; the site must be able to accommodate the whole group without splitting it into smaller groups (which may require further experience supervision and medical coverage).

In the past, it was agreed that, due to the intensive training new deminers, a period of around two years was seen as appropriate for the life of a team. A period as short as four months, for example, would make most operations infeasible in terms of initial investment in training. Bearing this in mind, the deployment of a locality team must be in an area where clearance is not easily accomplished, and may be required to undertake training beyond the standard "local clearance," so this model addresses the phenomenon face on, with a view to ensuring quality of work as well as maintaining levels of safety.

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Donors’ needs versus community’s needs. The locality model has proven popular among partners, and it has become an overriding objective of partners and donors in control of funds. However, MAG has experts on the ground to ensure the most appropriate method of clearance is being applied to a suspect area; MAG also knows the locality model will not always be the best solution. Immediately targeting funds on the locality model rather than seeking the solution best suited to the clearance task can certainly be detrimental to the community. In a situation in which the presence of suspect areas is hampering development activities, much speedier “area reduction” techniques could be applied to get the job done. This is preferable to starting a lengthy process in setting up a locality demining programme, especially when MAG’s technical experts know manual demining is not necessarily what the community needs. These issues are being addressed as donors are increasingly aware that it is not about what looks good on paper and much more about what the community’s needs are on the ground.

Limitations of skills. One major constraint is the comparative inflexibility of the locality deminers. Under normal circumstances, MAG might undertake different tasks at a relatively short distance from each other. For example, a development agency might be clearing sites for construction of water pumps, and this might require demining as well as some surface area tasks. It is difficult for the locality deminers to split from the group and undertake other tasks due to the lack of additional skills that can be found in a more experienced multi-skilled deminer.

Unofficial “village demining.” Development of skills for local personnel is generally seen as a positive step, but when the employment finishes, there are concerns villagers may be tempted to offer their services for sale elsewhere. In other industries, this may not be an issue, but when the work involves demining, the concern is valid. According to MAG, the ideal operator under the tightest operating procedures and the employee comes on paper and much more about what the community’s needs are on the ground.

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In refining the model, it was agreed that, due to the investment in training new deminers, a period of around two years was seen as appropriate for the life of a team. As a period as short as four months, for example, would mean that an additional investment would have to be made during the next ten years or so. This additional investment may be too high for donors to contemplate. In training. Bearing this in mind, the deployment of a locality team must be in an area with multiple tasks to support a team over an estimated two years or more. Moreover, the area of operations must be within easy reach by local transport; for example, in Cambodia, the trip to work for villagers is often a 10-minute bicycle ride.

Opportunities
One of the main opportunities for expansion is the value of employment for the households engaged in the locality model. With a certainty of employment over the forthcoming four months, for example, would make the operation inefficient in terms of initial investment and provide a good basis for medium-term development projects. With a certain locality model will not always be the best solution. Immediately targeting funds on the locality model rather than seeking the solution best suited to the clearance task can certainly be detrimental to the community. In a situation in which the presence of suspect areas is hampering development activities, much speedier “area reduction” techniques could be applied to get the job done. This is preferable to starting a lengthy process in setting up a locality demining programme, especially when MAG’s technical experts know manual demining is not necessarily what the community needs. These issues are being addressed as donors are increasingly aware that it is not about what looks good on paper and much more about what the community’s needs are on the ground.

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Endnotes and References

Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]

Endnotes

The War Goes On, Yosubang [from page 29]

Endnotes
4. 1 square kilometre is equal to about 0.386 square mile.
6. It has error approximately 2.5 acres.

Developing Alternatives: The Locality Demining Model in Cambodia, Leighton [from page 35]

Endnotes

A Regional Approach: Mine and UXO Risk Reduction in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Wells-Dang [from page 41]

Further Reading

An Operator’s Perspective on Ottawa’s Article 5, Nergaard [from page 35]

Endnotes
3. “ISOB is a yardstick of quality management systems that is accepted around the world. For more information about the various quality certifications, visit International Organization for Standardization at http://www.iso.org/ or Simply Qualify’s Frequently Asked Questions About ISO 9000 at http://www.simplequalify.com.htm.

Demining in India, Banks [from page 88]

Endnotes
1. World Service is the services arm of ERI International MAL is the ERI mine action company presently operating with several other ERI companies in the Republic of India.
2. More work is in India to repair a national data. International clusters demand ISOB standards and international quality assurance/quality control companies to impact work.
4. Embassies to arrange local food waste. Bins are generally used to describe definitive positions, banks of earth and embankments.
5. Banks and embankments on the board are used to mark the limits of hazardous material that may be dug up.

Assisting Landmine Accident Survivors in the Thai-Burma Border Region, Matthee [from page 111]

Endnotes
2. While only governments can sign the convention, non-state actors can sign the Dhad of Commitment for Advocacy to a Total Ban on Anti-personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action through an organization called Geneva Call. Geneva Call engage NGOs to respect and adhere to humanitarian norms, starting with the anti-personnel mine ban.
4. Simple plant makes a simple line which is a reference line guided by a string or cord weighted at the end with a large weight known as a plumb bob. It is used to create a reference line for creating vertical lines.

Endnotes and References

Endnotes
1. A Landmine Impact Survey is on the UN, a community-based national survey that measures the extent of the impact of the landmine problem in a country, based on the number of victims, socio-economic blockages and type of tsunami.
2. USAID’s Perspective: The Importance of Social and Economic Developing Strategies for Humanitarian Mine Action, Feiring [from page 43]

Endnotes
3. Landmine Action and Development, Turcotte [from page 27]

Endnotes
1. Information on the Guinness World Record is http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com.

Endnotes
4. Afghanistan LIS, Fruchet [from page 38]

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1. A Landmine Impact Survey is on the UN, a community-based national survey that measures the extent of the impact of the landmine problem in a country, based on the number of victims, socio-economic blockages and type of tsunami.

Integrated Mine Action: A Rights-Based Approach in Cambodia, Campbell [from page 45]

Endnotes

How Can Economics Contribute to Mine Action, Marsh [from page 51]

References