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Chris Horwood
UNICEF Cambodia

Michel Le Pechoux
UNICEF Cambodia

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The Children's Plight in Cambodia

UNICEF's mine action initiative in Cambodia puts victim assistance, risk education and community awareness at the forefront. Efforts have helped produce a national mine incident database, which aids in planning and evaluating fundraising.

by Chris Horwood, Team Leader of the External Evaluation, and Michel Le Pechoux, Children Affected by Armed Conflict Project Officer, UNICEF Cambodia

A Sobering Context

Mine action agencies in Cambodia continue to face a major challenge. In the past decade they have only been able to partially address the vast mines and UXO problem. This article seeks to show that despite this sobering context there are positive and important lessons to be learned from the Cambodian experience that need to be shared with the global mine action community as models for progress. Specifically, this article represents some lessons learned from UNICEF's mine action involvement in Cambodia, as highlighted in a recent external evaluation conducted for UNICEF.

UNICEF Gets Involved

UNICEF Cambodia first started assisting mine victims as part of its support to disabled persons in 1992. Direct support of mine action activities began in 1994 and has increased over the years toward the present more comprehensive multi-action support. UNICEF is now involved in a range of programs in the field of mine action, victim assistance and provision of basic social services, as well as community development in mine-affected communities.

UNICEF Cambodia is unusual in that it has been closely involved with mine action initiatives beyond its usual role of mine awareness in other countries (1). To assess its progress to date and as a guide for future direction, UNICEF commissioned an external evaluation in mid-2000 to assess activities supported for the prevention of mine/UXO accidents. A selective summary of the external evaluation (2), containing important lessons for other country programs are presented below. However, to put these findings in context, the more sobering overview of mine action in Cambodia should be presented.

Official Mine Action

Cambodia is considered to have one of the longest running and most comprehensive mine action programs in the world. Over 3,750 people are directly involved in the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), along with the two demining NGOs, Mine Advisory Group (MAG) and HALO Trust. Commercial demining groups have had very limited involvement in the last decade. The overall operational profile includes mine clearance, mine field marking, survey, mine awareness, EOD rapid-response, mine detection dogs and mine incident data gathering.

In the eight or nine years of operation only a fraction of the mined areas and an extremely small proportion of the millions of mines and UXO have been successfully addressed (3). There are still very large numbers of landmines and UXO of different types still remaining. In the eight or nine years of operation only a fraction of the mined areas and an extremely small proportion of the millions of mines and UXO have been successfully addressed (3).

In numerous communities of subsistence farms, people have no choice but to live, travel and work in high-risk areas. In many cases people have taken it upon themselves to address the problem independently. Villagers who demine are unprotected, unofficial and work with inappropriate equipment and no safety backup. It will never be known how much land has been cleared by locals, how many villagers have been killed while attempting demining by themselves or by using land only partially cleared by other villagers.

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The number of mine incidents is now dropping significantly. From 1996-98 the average monthly casualty rate was 202 incidents. However, from 1999-2000 there was a dramatic decrease to an average monthly rate of 77 incidents. In October 2000, there were just 36 casualties reported. This is a very hopeful trend. Interestingly, the statistics do not indicate that the declining figures are directly linked to mine action in most areas (6). Other factors seem to be more important: the end of armed conflict and population movements, and possibly the widespread prevalence of “village demining.” Although the trend is very encouraging, it also suggests that planners need to understand the context in more detail to establish why, how and what type of mine action has a direct beneficial impact on levels of injury and death as well as on the socioeconomic development of communities living in mined areas.

Unofficial Mine Action

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One figure of abandoned mines may be much lower (5). Other factors seem to be more important: the end of armed conflict and population movements, and possibly the widespread prevalence of “village demining.” Although the trend is very encouraging, it also suggests that planners need to understand the context in more detail to establish why, how and what type of mine action has a direct beneficial impact on levels of injury and death as well as on the socioeconomic development of communities living in mined areas.
Mine Incident Database (MID)

UNICEF is supporting this important initiative, which it first began in 1994 in partnership with MAG. The Mine Incident Database (now implemented by the CRC/HM) charts, in detail, the changes in monthly accident rates throughout the country. Additional information collected through the victims’ questionnaires provides important keys to understanding the dynamics of how and why certain groups and communities in Cambodia continue to sustain mine accidents. Addressing mine problems in a post-conflict rehabilitation or development context is never straightforward and this database provides an excellent tool for analysis, evaluation and, more importantly, strategic planning through prioritization.

When mine action started in 1992 there was, as in all mine-affected countries, a great information deficiency concerning mine incidents and details of accidents. Initially, UNICEF supported MAG to gather mine incident data in the five most affected provinces in Cambodia, which was used to develop mine awareness messages, monitor the severity of the mine problem and advocate a global ban on their production, sale and use. Only later was it recognized as a strong planning tool for mine clearance.

Looking for a sustainable national partner, UNICEF pushed for CRC to be the main implementing agency instead of international NGOs. Unlike the international NGOs, CRC had a strong national presence with volunteer networks throughout the country, which could be harnessed to assist with data collection.

The current project structure uses 24 CRC staff data gatherers and the CRC communication network to cover the country. The data gatherers are deployed in the most affected provinces. In less affected provinces networks of communication have been created in order to remain cost-effective. Data gatherers all have motorbikes for transport and remain in constant contact with a range of local authorities and community centers (schools and health posts/hospitals) in order to ensure that every incident is reported. They individually collect every reported mine and UXO victim and complete a mine victim report form, which is sent to Phnom Penh for processing every month.

The village level incidents are collected nationally, compiled and processed in a database able to generate reports for dissemination or respond to specific queries. The total incident figures are processed with a breakdown of information that assists analysts to understand sociological details of mine victims, location of accidents, the activity and sex of victim, whether the victim knew they were in mined areas or not, whether it was a mine or UXO, etc. The detailed breakdown proves to be important information for mine awareness and clearance teams.

Monthly reports are distributed in both Khmer and English to government ministries and provincial departments, mine action agencies, disability organizations, embassies, donors and advocacy groups inside Cambodia, as well as internationally (9). Over 600 copies per month are printed and distributed. A bi-annual report for the 1998-1999 period was recently released. By July 2000, the whole country was covered in the most comprehensive and only national mine incident database in the world.

External Evaluation Central Findings

1. The MID is performing a vital and unique function within the mine action context in Cambodia and provides valuable information that actively assists different agencies and government bodies in multiple areas of their activities: program planning, evaluation, monitoring and fund-raising.

2. Considering the MID’s contribution to the mine action community in Cambodia, the evaluation judged the MID to be cost-effective and insensitive and giving great added value to the national mine action effort.

3. It is important that certain information be broken down beyond the province, district and commune level, right down to the village level as well as provide a service to end users for customized and targeted data breakdown. For certain agencies only the most detailed and specific breakdown will assist their targeting.

4. If the currently occurring incident reduction continues, there may be reduced need for an MID in coming years. Such a situation should be welcomed by all stakeholders in the mine action sector. The role of an MID should be finite.

Lessons Learned Of Use to the Global Landmine Community

1. An information vacuum in an affected country can lead to a simplistic understanding of the mine situation. Such a situation should be welcomed by all stakeholders in the mine action sector. The role of an MID should be finite.

Central Findings From the External Evaluation

1. In the absence of mobile teams within CMAC, CRC fulfills a critical function of response to requests in high-risk mined areas.

2. CMM is flexible, highly responsive and efficient when deployed for appropriate tasks. It is also housed and based close to its area of operation to minimize daily transportation etc.

3. The impact of CMM’s work benefits a disproportionately high number of people when considering the relatively small areas where CMM has cleared/marked. The impact in terms of facilitation of NGO/IO intervention, community access to essential needs and access for larger CMAC demining platoons is evaluated as highly positive.

4. CMM can be very effective in
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1. The key lesson learned for UNICEF is that its close involvement with the MoE in the MRE should have happened some years earlier and that it is problematic developing a national and child-based program without the MoE having a strong involvement and in the initiative.

2. The MRE program is no longer being implemented by a mine action agency, but instead by an educational NGO. The evaluation found this to be an appropriate switch for UNICEF to make in terms of working towards a sustainable educational impact and should be noted by other donors who have previously only considered mine action NGOs for such a role.

3. Clearly mine awareness education does not require mine-related technical expertise, but instead education-related expertise.

Lessons Learned for the Global Mine Action Community

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Endnote

Cambodia and Afghanistan were the first countries to alert the world to the critical need for humanitarian mine action. The learning curve for these and many other national mine action programs has been steep and sudden. Mine action is still a new sector in humanitarian intervention and the challenges it faces are still immense. Although it has not been possible so far to show any direct correlation between any type of mine action and accident reduction due to the multiplicity of factors involved, various approaches to mine action should continue to be developed. It is very important to establish mechanisms to allow the most promising elements such as those in this article to be considered for potential implementation in other affected countries.

Contact Information

Michael Le Pechoux
Tel: 855-23-424-214 Ext. 146
Mobile: 855-12-840-20
Fax: 855-23-426-248
E-mail: mlep echoux@UNICEF.org

1. UNICEF is the designated focal point responsibility for mine awareness education within the United Nations system.
2. "External Evaluation of UNICEF-Supported Activities on Percent Mine Incidents' report (by Chris Horwood and Andrea Constandi) can be obtained from Michel Le Pechoux, Children Affected by Landmines (Acting Deputy Paquex Officer, UNICEF Cambodia).
3. Approximately 2.5 percent of "registered mined land."
6. The evaluation analyzed data in detail concerning accident location with specific mine field characteristic location as well as mine awareness education. Almost no direct correlations could be made between mine action and accident reduction.
7. Handicap International is currently completing a study of “village” or “government” demining in Cambodia. The report should be available in early 2001.
8. This section will not be included in this article due to limitations of space.
9. Reports can be obtained from the IRC office at cnf@cameron.com.kh and through the Handicap International mines coordinator at hrnes@bigpond.com.kh.
10. A group of schools around a main school equipped with a resource center.

The opinions reflected in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of UNICEF.