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## CHA Improves Mine Survivors' Quality of Life

**The Cambodian Handicraft Association (CHA) for the Landmine and Polio Disabled is a safe-haven for Cambodia's in-need mine victims. The organization works with the survivors and their communities to give the disabled a chance to rebuild their lives.**

by Kristina Davis, MAIC

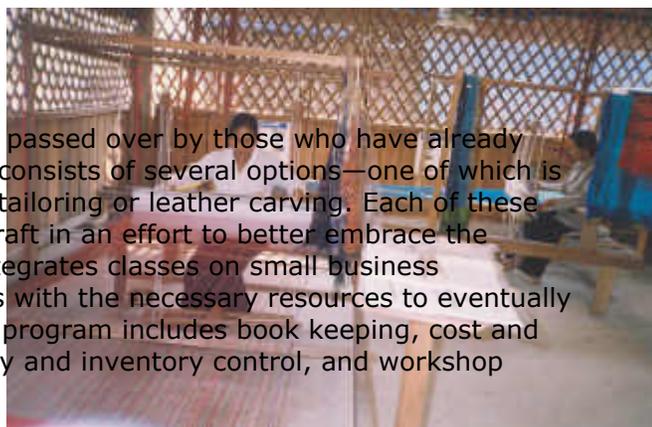
### Introduction

Three decades of conflict have burdened Cambodia with millions of pieces of UXO scattered throughout its villages. As a result, an estimated 40,000 Cambodians are disabled landmine victims, often unable to find work due their handicaps and the difficulties associated with them.<sup>1</sup> In response to this situation, CHA was created. Since the organization's establishment in January of 2000, CHA has been admitting disabled persons into its unique program. CHA teaches its students several traditional Cambodian trades and reintroduces them into society with the knowledge necessary to run their own successful businesses.

### The CHA Program

CHA's main objective is to make life better for the handicapped. Besides providing its students with the skills necessary for financial stability, CHA also helps its graduates to overcome the chronic shyness that regularly plagues mine victims after serious injury. As CHA's disabled students begin to earn money to support their families and gain friendships along the way, confidence gradually begins to replace the feelings of worthlessness and shame they had experienced as unemployed amputees. This increased sociability and self-assurance a student gains is priceless.

Each CHA training program typically runs from six months to a full year and is made up of several different levels to ensure each member's success. The first level primarily involves full-time literacy training and can be passed over by those who have already learned how to read and write. The next level consists of several options—one of which is chosen by the student—that include weaving, tailoring or leather carving. Each of these trades focuses on traditional Cambodian silk craft in an effort to better embrace the country's culture. Finally, the CHA program integrates classes on small business management. This focus provides the students with the necessary resources to eventually operate their own businesses. This part of the program includes book keeping, cost and pricing techniques, calculation methods, quality and inventory control, and workshop leadership.



Throughout the program, CHA students are encouraged to gain experience by selling their products through the CHA workshop. The students are given exposure to the export industry, as approximately one-third of their products are shipped abroad. Close cooperation with customers in the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, France, Canada and Thailand also facilitates an open flow of valuable information, especially concerning fashion trends.

During the learning period, profits are shared evenly among the program participants. Once students have graduated from the program, CHA gives each of them between \$50 and \$100 (U.S.) to help offset their initial start-up costs as they return to their home

villages. As the students practice their skills in the “real world,” CHA field workers pay them follow-up visits to check each graduate’s progress and volunteer further advice.

### **Future Progress**

CHA is continuing to evolve as the needs of its students evolve. Thus far, its strive for range and quality in its products has placed CHA as the leading producer of handicrafts in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.<sup>2</sup> Over the past year, CHA representatives have been discussing the possibility of merging with similar organizations to form an Association of Cambodian Handicraft Producers. By doing so, CHA hopes to encourage access to the export market and develop standards for fair practices and policies as Cambodian producers are further exposed to the global market. CHA is also working on legislation to promote fair treatment and hiring practices for disabled citizens. As long as Cambodian employers continue to discriminate against the handicapped, the majority of Cambodia’s mine victims will continue to be forced to beg on the streets.

### **Conclusion**

The success of the CHA program is demonstrated daily by the success of its graduates. By providing employment and income-earning opportunities for Cambodia’s disabled citizens, CHA has and will continue to save lives and fortify the country’s economic stability in the process. An appreciation of traditional Cambodian handicrafts will help to maintain the country’s cultural heritage, while introducing variety into the world market. CHA’s eagerness to help all of Cambodia’s disabled has established a valuable resource in a country desperately in need of assistance.

*\*All pictures courtesy of Hay Kim Tha, CHA Director.*

### **Endnotes**

1. See “MAG in Cambodia” at [www.magchallenge.org](http://www.magchallenge.org) for more information.
2. Hay Kim Tha, “Cambodian Handicraft Association for Landmine and Polio Disabled.”

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