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Increasing Female Voices in Mine-action Planning and Prioritization

The Community Strengthening and Gender Mainstreaming in Integrated Mine Action Project focuses on one of the greatest challenges women face in mine-affected areas of Cambodia: to be actively and meaningfully involved in the decision-making process in mine action. Three international organizations have collaborated to develop a complex plan addressing the issues facing the residents of many Cambodian villages. Its implementation demonstrates the sweeping changes necessary for participation by all villagers and the promise of truly integrated mine-action strategies.

by Catherine Cecil and Kristen Rasmussen | International Women’s Development Agency, Inc.

A woman explaining the location of landmines around her village as shown on a map prepared by the community. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF KRISTEN RASMUSSEN)

The project’s goals are in line with the government of Cambodia’s policy guidelines on demining, which state that “the ultimate objective of demining is to reduce poverty.” The project works to ensure that a full range of voices are included in clearance planning, and prioritization supports the guidelines’ requirement for “fair and transparent prioritization.”

The project has provided training on gender awareness and effective facilitation to the Mine Action Planning Unit staff. This training prepared them to encourage both men’s and women’s active participation in the planning and prioritization process, in coordination with other capacity-building efforts conducted by Australian Volunteers International.

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The first step was to enlist input from both MAPU and project staff to design a pilot project focused on inclusive facilitation techniques. The project targeted four villages in the Battambang province of Cambodia, where women were predominantly female village chiefs. Although invitation lists allowed for more participants, these meetings required travel, which is expensive and in historically conflict-affected areas.

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many exceptions in Cambodia, villagers with higher incomes are frequently considered ap- propriate community leaders because they are generally better educated. Villagers need support to build their capacity in mapmaking. This activity was new for many villagers who participated in the minefield identification meetings. The Inter- national Women’s Development Agency has observed many times that it seems awkward for women to participate in such meetings or even to hold a pen, which may be due to higher levels of illiteracy in the village. In the pilot project, this limited experience affected the quality of maps. The absence of specific facili- tation of the activities map making raised con- cerns that the maps would be discredited at the beginning of the project.

Volunteer facilitators need support to build their capacity and confidence. Some were daunted by filling out forms and wanted more time to complete them. Not all the volunteers succeeded in handing off forms to their village chiefs. Chisang village had only two volunteer facilitators, and facilitation was more difficult for them than for peers. One of the volunteers was an amputee, the other a widow. They may have been marginalized within their communities, which in turn af- fected their confidence.7

Lessons Learned

The village chiefs were better prepared and more confident at commune planning meetings as a result of local input, maps and documentation on contaminated sites and beneficiaries of cleared land provided through the pilot project. Village chiefs would benefit from increased training in completing MAPU minefield-prioritization forms. Both men and women participate more fully with active facilitation and encourage- ment. A strong training focus on encouraging women to speak helped volunteer facilitators to target their efforts. Participation also in- creased in small-group discussions. Local participants succeeded in bolstering their skills with opportunities to prac- tice making maps. One effective technique is to hand participants a pen to encourage them to draw on the map. Although several people were nervous about this activity, they were very pleased after they made their maps, and they reported that the meetings made them more willing and confident to participate in similar activities in the future. Groups with more facilitators were better able to manage their meetings. Some facilita- tors reported that it might have been easier for them to have a series of smaller meetings in their villages rather than one large meeting as smaller meetings would be easier to manage.

Conclusion

Nongovernmental organizations or oth- er external partners can support the clearance planning and prioritization process by ensuring that all voices are heard in local meetings and by linking participants to decision-makers. Local meetings help fill the gap shown by village chiefs who report little or no local consultation before they begin the planning and prioritization process. Providing a forum for broad participation is not enough. Particip- ants at all levels—from villagers to volunteer facilitators to village chiefs—showed anxiety about their skills and their need for more in- formation and capacity.

See Endnotes, page 109

Gender in Community Consultations

Cambodia has one of the most developed mine-action sectors in the world. A number of actors operate here, and mine clearance has been carried out since 1992. While being limited by political factors as well as resources, the Cambodian mine-action sector has a high level of integration among various national bodies and nongovernmental organizations operating in the country. Logically, a well-established sector in which multiple organizations with differing mandates, perspectives and priorities are used to side cooperation is more ready and able to absorb new trends and ideas and to establish frameworks for implementation.

Gender Awareness among Mine-action Actors

Several mine-action organizations in Cambodia have implemented gender strategies in their work, some more comprehensively than others. These include the Mines Advisory Group, Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority and Cambodian Mine Action Centres. There are also organizations working on aspects other than mine clearance such as the International Women’s Development Agency and Australian Volunteers International.

These organizations all carry out or assist in carrying out com- munity consultations in anticipation of a clearance project. These strategies are particularly interesting because they go to the core of why gender mainstreaming is important. Community consultations are a vital part of the prioritization done before a given area is selected for clearance. Usually consultations involve one or two people from, or hired by, the clearance organization. The consultants hold one or more open meet- ings in the affected village, encouraging locals to speak up about the areas they perceive may be contaminated and which areas they perceive as being more urgent to clear. The locals will draw these areas on maps that are then used as a foundation for the planning of the clearance operation. The gender aspects of these consultations are particularly important for several reasons and touch upon the key aspects of the importance of gender mainstreaming more in general.

Rural, Mine-affected Communities

Labor and livelihood responsibilities in rural Cambodian societies are generally divided across gender lines, as is common in many rural societies. The men are more likely to be involved in activities taking place far from the house, such as cultivating the land and tending to larger animals. This latter responsibility is usually shared with young boys who tend the cattle, a very risky occupation in a mine-contaminated area. Women traditionally work in and around the house, especially after they have children. The work includes responsibilities related to the household such as fetching water and firewood. According to Heng Rettana, the Deputy Director at CMAC, “These are the people most at risk because they have a duty to bring income to their families. And they live in mine-affected areas—they have to walk into the minefields to collect firewood, water, food.”

Men are also more likely than women to be involved in wage employ- ment. They are thus more likely to travel to and from work, an activity that entails significant risks in a mine-contaminated area. As in many other conflict and post-conflict situations, there is a disproportionate number of female-headed households due to the death or injury of the male head of the household. These households tend to be the poorest in rural Cambodian communities and may be involved in risk- prone behavior because of their limited livelihood options.

The impact of mine contamination in most cases depends on the structure of agricultural work and the presence of alternative livelihood options in the green area. The gender implication is thus obvious once...