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Social Inclusion of Marginalized Communities: Mine Action in Laos

by Tina Kalamar [Gender and Mine Action Programme]

A complex array of factors including gender, age, disability, ethnicity, geographical location, language, religious affiliation, and economic and educational status are enabling or constraining social inclusion of people in different contexts.¹ This paper presents a case study that illustrates how mine action can both contribute to and benefit from greater social inclusion.

Mine action affects various domains of people's lives, be it economic, cultural, or social. In this study, the link between social inclusion and mine action in Laos was examined using the concept of intersectionality—the critical insight that “class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.”² Intersectionality emphasizes the importance of contemplating what it means to have a marginalized status within a marginalized group and to include those who are most likely to be left behind. Therefore, an intersectional analysis of the different aspects of diversity in a given context can help to identify groups of people who might be excluded from the benefits of mine action. This study addressed the following questions: How do mine action operators in Laos contribute to and benefit from greater social inclusion and how can this be further improved by applying the intersectionality approach?

The approach chosen for the study was a mixed methods approach. The data was gathered with semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with two international mine action NGOs operating in Laos. The information is based on the analysis of 41 responses to a questionnaire given to their local staffs working in office support and operations, out of which 24 were male and 17 female. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a program officer, translator, community liaison coordinator, human resources manager, and two persons working in the area of victim assistance. Out of six

interviews, five were conducted with national staff and one with international staff.

There were certain limitations to the study. Unfortunately, some important mine action operators in Laos were unable to participate. There were also regional limitations, since the data was obtained through the organizations that were operating in the districts of Xiengkhouang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Khammouane provinces. Furthermore, out of 41 survey respondents, 38 identified as Lao Loum, which is the majority group. However, two of the five national staff interviews were conducted with members of ethnic minority groups. Despite these shortcomings, the author believes that the data is representative enough for the study to provide a general insight and guidance on how mine action enables the social inclusion of marginalized groups in Laos.

The following section presents the challenges and best practices related to social inclusion through mine action activities in Laos. It illustrates how the analysis of overlapping dimensions of diversity—age, ethnicity, gender, language, disability status, geographical area—is beneficial for the work in mine action as well as for combating social inequalities.

Looking Through the Lens of Intersectionality

Laos, the country that experienced the heaviest aerial bombardment in history, is also one of the region's most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries.³ Among the different ethnic groups, there are great disparities in their access to resources and opportunities. Most ethnic minority groups in Laos inhabit remote areas and many of them experience high levels of marginalization.⁴ One of the interviewees stated, “based on our experience, [the] Hmong minority faces more discrimination compared to Lao Loum and Khmu minority ... not many Hmong people can work as government staff or even in civil society organisation[s] or even participate in school and economic development.”⁵ The interviewees indicated that

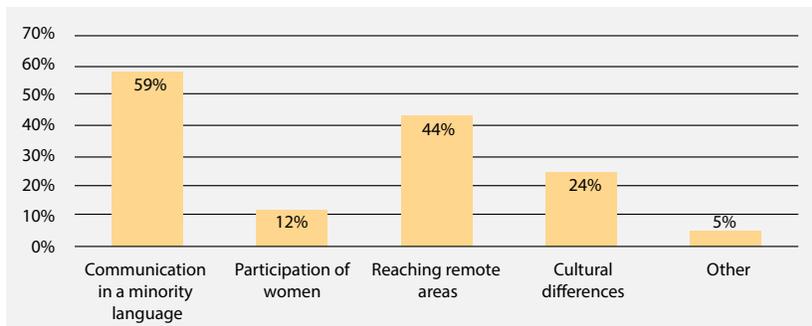


Figure 1. Obstacles encountered at work.
All figures courtesy of the author.

the unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination significantly affects the areas where the ethnic minorities live and expressed their support for recruiting and working with ethnic minorities. Furthermore, they noted that the current national staff is predominantly Lao Loum, Khmu, and Hmong, and that these are also the communities they frequently work with. This is influenced by the fact that in the provinces where they operate, either Khmu or Hmong are the main minorities. However, several interviewees stated that many projects focus only on these three largest ethnic groups and that there is a need for more ethnically diverse staff.

Ethnic diversity is also reflected in a high degree of linguistic diversity.⁶ Only around half of the population in Laos speak the official national language, Lao. The interviewees stated that there is a higher chance of encountering language barriers in remote communities, where Lao is spoken less frequently than in the urban areas. They also indicated that in the remote areas, children can often speak the official language due to their access to education, while women and older generations usually have lower language skills than men and younger generations. Moreover, the likelihood of someone knowing the national language depends on their geographical area and ethnicity. For example, one of the interviewees said that “Khmu people are more easily understood (in Lao) than Hmong people, so mainly when we go to Khmu community we just speak Lao to them and more or less they will understand it.”⁷

As demonstrated through the analysis of the survey, communicating via the minority language, reaching remote areas, settling cultural differences, and ensuring the participation of women are perceived as workplace obstacles by the national employees.

The quantitative and qualitative data indicate that mine action workers value having staff from different ethnic minorities that speak different minority languages. Ninety-three percent of participants responded that it is important to have

people of different ethnicities on the teams, and 80 percent of participants responded that there are situations where minority language skills are especially needed. The reasons stated are that to work in a multi-ethnic environment, language skills, and familiarity with the cultural particularities are required. The interviewees emphasized that ethnic minority staff facilitate the working process and help avoid cultural and linguistic misunderstandings,

especially in rural areas. Additionally, the knowledge of minority languages ensures that groups unable to speak the majority language due to lack of education or a generational gap, such as women and elders, can be reached by the program. For example, one interviewer stated that the government prohibited the translation of mine risk education (MRE) material into the local language, and therefore stressed the importance of having staff who speak more languages and can communicate with the community directly. Regarding community liaison activities, one interviewer said that “if we have one ethnic staff working for us, then we go to [the] ethnic village, to Khmu or Hmong community because it eases communication and the community understands the process better.”⁸ This demonstrates the importance of having members in the non-technical survey, MRE, and community liaison teams who have the necessary language skills and familiarity with local cultural particularities to adequately interact with all members of ethnic minority communities, share messages on safe behavior, and obtain more complete and accurate information, be it on the socioeconomic situation or on the contamination by UXO from all groups.

A majority of the interviewees stressed the important role of the local authority when working in remote areas. For example, a respondent stated that “the [organization] cannot enter the village without the village chief’s permission” and that the ethnic staff can potentially negotiate with the local authority more effectively.⁹ A good relationship with the local authority can be fruitful in that changing mindsets of the larger community leads to greater social inclusion of minority women and persons with disabilities. An interviewee stated that “the population of the community believes in this local authority, so if the authority takes the role strongly that everyone should have equality and the same rights, the change is possible.”¹⁰

The previously presented examples indicate how ethnicity, language, and geographical location intersect. A further

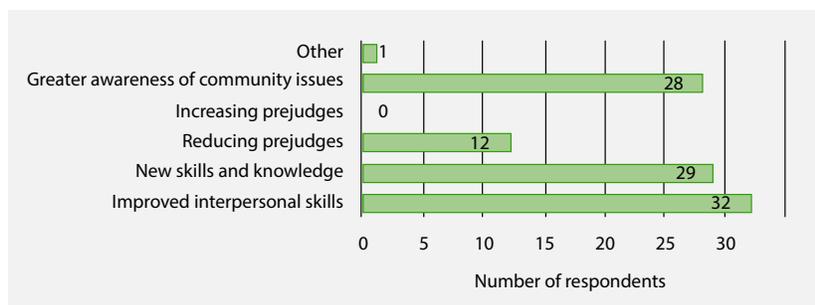


Figure 2. Influences of working with colleagues from different ethnic communities.

important dimension identified was gender. The interviewees stated that the gender aspect is particularly sensitive in remote areas, where the women's status and roles are often highly unequal to those of men, which influences the work of mine action. For example, in community liaison activities, victim assistance, and when recruiting women as deminers, the organizations encountered difficulties in reaching out and transmitting the information directly to women. It was stated that when working with remote communities "the process has to go through the local authority, and then the local authority refers only to the heads of the families, which are mostly men."¹¹ And also "when our community liaison officer sets a meeting in a village the number of males will be higher than the number of females."¹² The interviews and surveys also indicated that the clearance work is often perceived as a male role, and that it is deemed inappropriate for women to be away from the family during the required three-week working cycles.

Interviewees discussed how organizations overcome socio-cultural obstacles and disclosed some of their best practices in promoting women's participation in mine action activities. One of the interviewees suggested that in order to better reach women when doing community liaison activities, women should take the lead in the project. He suggested organizing a small activity like handicraft production where women would feel more comfortable in speaking out. Furthermore, one of the interviewees stated that their organization employs female staff in community liaison teams because "women and children are talking to women much easier, that's why we deploy men and women together to work in different villages."¹³ Another positive example of recruiting women from poor families as deminers was shared, where the organization targeted women with very low education. Some of these recruited women did not speak the official Lao language, therefore a translator facilitated communication. It was added that with time these employees improved their knowledge of the national language, which improved both their language skills and economic status. Moreover, in one of the interviews it

was reported that one of the NGOs has a female provincial operations management staff member, which is one of the highest positions national staff can obtain and includes responsibility for managing mixed teams, female teams, and male teams. The interviewee stated that the female manager originally had "problems with getting the respect she deserved, but with time it improved."¹⁴

This data indicates that the interplay between ethnicity, gender, and disability status is an additional dimension that deserves attention. The government of Laos estimates that there are about 600,000 people with disabilities throughout the country, most of whom are victims of UXO and other explosive remnants of war (ERW).¹⁵ The interviewees working with UXO and ERW survivors observed that women and children with disabilities are faced with additional discrimination in comparison to men. One interviewee noted that, regarding women and children with disabilities, "they are faced with more difficulties and they have no role to play in the family and in the community."¹⁶

On the one hand, an interviewee stated that "people believe that disability is something bad and for instance if one family has children with a disability then it is believed that the family has bad luck and then the community will complain and they will discriminate against them."¹⁷ On the other hand, another interviewee mentioned that, after Laos ratified the U.N. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) in 2010, numerous training courses were conducted, which positively contributed to the reduction of discrimination against persons with disabilities, including victims of UXO and ERW. While the change in people's attitudes toward people with disabilities was, to a large extent, observed more in the urban areas, there was a positive instance of promoting social inclusion of persons with disabilities given by one interviewee who said their organization employed Hmong minority persons with disabilities and tried to give them jobs, for example as camp guards for the teams or in office support.¹⁸

These were the identified challenges and best practices related to social inclusion through mine action in Laos. But could working in mine action also have other benefits for the daily life of individuals and for the society at large?

As demonstrated by the survey analysis in Figure 2, the recruitment of diverse ethnic and female staff has the potential to benefit the staff's interpersonal skills and knowledge, increase awareness of community issues, as well as reduce prejudices of the employees.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Implementation of non-technical surveys in Kayah State and the first formal identification of hazardous areas in Burma represent a significant step forward for mine action in one of the world's most heavily mine-contaminated countries. It also offers an opportunity to replicate a successful approach in other parts of the country. Demining is a sensitive topic, particularly given its link to the peace process at national and local levels. Moreover, sustainable progress can only be achieved through detailed context analysis, accompanied by a sensitive approach when engaging with communities and other actors. With these factors in mind, significant progress in understanding the extent, nature, and location of contamination can be achieved in preparation for future clearance efforts.

This article discusses the usefulness of looking at mine action programs and activities through an intersectional lens. The findings suggest that it is not only important for NGOs working in mine action in Laos to consider the great ethnic diversity of the country, but also dimensions of further disadvantage, such as gender, disability, geographical location, age, and language. Because the non-Lao-Loum women and girls, persons with disabilities, and people living in rural areas are subjected to additional discrimination, an analysis of the interplay of these diversity factors is important to achieve their inclusion as well as to improve mine action work. The findings indicate that mine action operators in Laos benefit from employing and working with the marginalized groups, because the knowledge of minority languages and cultural particularities proved to be of great importance in mine action, especially when conducting survey, MRE, victim assistance, and clearance in rural areas. At the same time, mine action operators can contribute to greater social inclusion through employment opportunities, improving knowledge and skills, increasing cultural sensitivity, and even contributing to the eradication of harmful traditional beliefs, such as misconceptions about disability.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of recommendations on how to increase social inclusion through mine action based on the findings for Laos:

- Apply the intersectionality approach, i.e., look at how different aspects of diversity interact to construct social inequalities by ensuring that recruitment and training grant full access to marginalized individuals or groups within ethnic minorities.
- Increase the number of mine action projects that focus on ethnic minority communities, especially in rural

areas.

- Ensure that the non-technical survey and community liaison teams employ both male and female members who have the necessary language skills and familiarity with cultural particularities to adequately interact with the local communities, share safe behavior messages and obtain more complete and accurate information from all groups.
- Collect and analyze employment data by ethnic group, age, sex, and disability status.
- Increase the employment opportunities for women and ethnic minorities, especially targeting the members of underrepresented ethnic groups, minority women, and people with disabilities.
- Advertise available positions in communities where projects are implemented, especially targeting remote rural areas.
- Apply a human rights-based approach to ensure compliance with relevant international legal treaties such as the *International Convention on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and CRPD, aiming especially at protecting and promoting the rights of women, ethnic minorities, children, and persons with disabilities. ©

See endnotes page 66

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