



# Removing the Red Tape

**Ending the threat of landmines means more than just removing the mines themselves – it means ensuring that vulnerable people have secure and productive access to the cleared land.**

**Scott Rankin explains why.**

» **I** saw it on my first visit to Cambodia in 1993, and lost count of how many times I've seen it since. A red and white ribbon demarcates a field. Hanging from the ribbon are intermittently-spaced red signs bearing an image of a red skull and the words 'Danger Mines!!' – written in both Khmer and English. The scene leaves you in no doubt that this is a place to avoid. Yet on the wrong side of that red ribbon – the UNIMAGINABLY wrong side – a child, a woman, a man wanders. Chasing a cow, collecting firewood, cutting rattan, clearing a field.

There are few more emotive and disturbing issues in the world than the spectre of landmines. Their capacity to indiscriminately injure, and their propensity to linger for decades after battlefields have fallen silent leaves people unequivocal in their response – "Remove the threat. Immediately. Whatever it takes."

Yet in Cambodia, a country synonymous with the impact of landmines, an important lesson has been learnt. The people

wandering behind that red ribbon are generally aware that they are taking a risk, yet they do so because they regard themselves as having no alternative. Anyone with even barely sufficient resources will stay behind that red line, and find an alternative means to secure a livelihood. Yet people living in the most severe poverty regard the line to be an acceptable risk.

A common misunderstanding of landmines in Cambodia is that they are an invisible threat, innocently stumbled upon by unsuspecting people. While this situation can still occur, it is far more common that those injured are well aware they are in what is euphemistically known as a 'suspect area'. Their poverty leaves them no other choice. And if their economic insecurity has not been resolved when the actual mine threat is removed, they might even venture on to another mine-affected area to pursue a new livelihood opportunity.

In 2004, AusAID funding enabled AVI to develop the 'Capacity Building for Mine Action Planning' project, allowing AVI the

opportunity to work closely with Cambodian provincial mine action planning units (MAPUs). MAPUs are a provincially-based secretariat responsible for coordinating a transparent and holistic mine action planning process that has at its centre the needs of the most vulnerable people.

Over the past four years, a team of AVI community planning advisers have worked with MAPU staff to develop methods for prioritising clearance activities, organise meetings and workshops to ensure that all stakeholders are involved, create data management systems, ensure sound budgeting and accounting practices, and continually review and improve all aspects of the mine action planning process.

The result is a stronger process that better accesses local priorities, better documents the knowledge that exists within affected communities, and ensures the transparency and accountability of government in addressing the ongoing needs of these communities.

Cambodia's annual landmine casualty rate averaged 800-900 victims until 2005. In 2006, the figure dropped to 450 casualties, and dropped further in 2007 to 351 casualties. While many factors have contributed to these encouraging and quite startling statistics, they offer hope that the better-coordinated efforts of the mine action sector in recent years are producing results.

Central to the success of the mine action planning process is that the needs of 'beneficiaries' are considered at the front end. Landless and poor people are identified prior to clearance for resettlement on cleared land, and an administrative process commenced to assure that they have tenure of that land in the longer term. MAPUs help ensure that the intended use of land is agreed upon before it is cleared, thus avoiding it being grabbed by powerful people post-clearance – a situation that was all too common prior to the planning process being commenced.

Solutions are also sought to ensure that newly-cleared areas are viable. It is common for areas affected by landmines to become

ghost towns of sorts. Unused roads deteriorate, schools and health centres might close. The planning process helps identify the holistic needs of the community that will emerge from clearance and, since new residents are selected based upon their 'vulnerability', their needs are complex and often long term.

This process addresses the fact that poverty puts one most at risk of becoming a land mine casualty. By working to build livelihoods for poor people living in mine-affected areas,

*The people wandering behind the red ribbon are aware that they are taking a risk, yet such is their poverty that they have no alternative.*

it is hoped that people will have less need to take the extreme risk of entering these areas in search of income.

MAPUs have been energetic in ensuring that those living in affected areas actively participate in the planning process. Being a bottom-up planning process, villagers are able to contribute to identification and prioritisation of clearance tasks. These include ever-improving efforts to acknowledge the different priorities, as seen through the eyes of women.

The red ribbons are disappearing with time and more importantly, the broad-ranging needs of some of Cambodia's most vulnerable communities are now better understood. As landmines are cleared, communities now not only see a threat removed, but are hopeful that the piece of land they receive will be the stepping stone to a secure future. <

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**Opposite >** A landmine clearance worker uses red tape and a 'Danger!' sign to cordon off an area containing unexploded mines.

**Photo >** AusAID

**Left >** A participatory approach to land use planning enables poor and vulnerable communities to make productive use of cleared land.

**Photo >** Jade Fraser

**Below >** Many communities living in poverty are forced to make use of areas containing landmines.

**Photo >** Jade Fraser

