

Statement by Stan Brabant ([Handicap International Belgium](http://www.handicapinternational.be)) at the Standing Committee on Mine Clearance, MRE and related technologies, Geneva, 5/2/03

This presentation is mostly based on a book about village demining that has been written by Ruth Bottomley while she worked for my organization in Cambodia. The book should be available in a few weeks time. In the meanwhile, I encourage you to read the report on “Spontaneous Demining Initiatives” (SDI) that is available on our website (www.handicapinternational.be/minepolicy).

The aim of this presentation is to look at the lessons that we can draw from village demining in Cambodia in relation to mine risk education, (and also, indirectly, in relation to the implementation of article 5 of the MBT).

From a *humanitarian* perspective, we have an obligation to ask ourselves whether we are *really* responding to the needs of the people affected by landmines, or whether we are trapped by the organizations we created.

I am going to try to respond to this question by looking at the issue of village deminers in Cambodia. In fact, village deminers (sometimes called “SDI”) tell us a lot about what we are trying to do, here in Geneva, but also within mine action programs in the field.

What do we see in Cambodia?

- The majority of village deminers (VD) are adult males with knowledge of clearance techniques gained through previous military experience.
- They generally have a family to support.
- The tools they use are basic (bamboo stick, knife). Occasionally they use Vietnamese mine detectors.
- In general, they are very cautious: see technique for prodding, disarming & disposal.
- VD rarely claim that the land they clear is 100% safe.
- Most VD clear on an occasional/seasonal (dry season generally) basis, according to their needs.
- Generally they work without any salary.

So...why do they do this dangerous work if they don't get any salary? The wife of a village deminer of Samlot district, Battambang province responds to this question:

"Today my family earns a living by doing farming. As far as risk is concerned, I think it is very dangerous for a man to work as a deminer. But if my husband does not clear mines, my family will have no rice fields and we will have no way to make money to support the family."

This quote highlights 2 important elements:

- Village demining aims at ensuring the survival of individuals & families.
- Once survival is guaranteed, clearance stops “naturally” (which suggest that village demining is only a partial solution to the challenges raised in article 5 of the MBT¹).

¹ Article 5 Mine Ban Treaty :

Most of the time, village demining is an individual activity: in the 2001 survey, we found that 67% of VD cleared for individual purposes only, 6% for other people, 27% for themselves & others.

What about the scope of their activity?

- LM 1999 and 2000 listed village deminers as major providers of mine clearance in Cambodia.
- To illustrate this, a VD in Rattanak Mondul said “I don’t know how many mines I have cleared – maybe thousands of mines in this village. I cleared one hectare of public land and found one hundred *Min Snoul Pout* (POMZ-2M). I collected them into a pile and the pile reached as high as my thigh.”

What does this tell us about MRE?

For many years, MRE practitioners have often been working on the assumption that mine-affected villagers had a limited knowledge about landmines, and that villagers deliberately entering mine-affected areas (such as VD) were either ignorant or

Destruction of anti-personnel mines in mined areas

1. Each State Party undertakes to destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than ten years after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party.
2. Each State Party shall make every effort to identify all areas under its jurisdiction or control in which anti-personnel mines are known or suspected to be emplaced and shall ensure as soon as possible that all anti-personnel mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction or control are perimeter-marked, monitored and protected by fencing or other means, to ensure the effective exclusion of civilians, until all anti-personnel mines contained therein have been destroyed. The marking shall at least be to the standards set out in the Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices, as amended on 3 May 1996, annexed to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects.
3. If a State Party believes that it will be unable to destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines referred to in paragraph 1 within that time period, it may submit a request to a Meeting of the States Parties or a Review Conference for an extension of the deadline for completing the destruction of such anti-personnel mines, for a period of up to ten years.
4. Each request shall contain:
 - a) The duration of the proposed extension;
 - b) A detailed explanation of the reasons for the proposed extension, including:
 - i. The preparation and status of work conducted under national demining programs;
 - ii. The financial and technical means available to the State Party for the destruction of all the anti-personnel mines; and
 - iii. Circumstances which impede the ability of the State Party to destroy all the anti-personnel mines in mined areas;
 - c) The humanitarian, social, economic, and environmental implications of the extension; and
 - d) Any other information relevant to the request for the proposed extension.
5. The Meeting of the States Parties or the Review Conference shall, taking into consideration the factors contained in paragraph 4, assess the request and decide by a majority of votes of States Parties present and voting whether to grant the request for an extension period.
6. Such an extension may be renewed upon the submission of a new request in accordance with paragraphs 3, 4 and 5 of this Article. In requesting a further extension period a State Party shall submit relevant additional information on what has been undertaken in the previous extension period pursuant to this Article.

irresponsible. In addition, VD have long been considered as a “problem” by the mine action community.

In fact, if we look at casualty figures, one of the major weaknesses of MRE in Cambodia has been the limited impact it had on the population that is the most at risk: the male adults (among which we find most of VD), while these represented 64% of casualties in 2001 (only 10% had received MRE).

In addition, the fact that, after 10 years of MRE in Cambodia, villagers in 50% of the villages surveyed continue to clear mines by themselves raises at least 2 questions:

- Do we – mine action organizations – respond to the needs of mine-affected people?
- How can we improve the link between people affected by landmines and mine action?

To respond to these questions, a number of initiatives have been developed, in Cambodia and elsewhere. Overall, they go in two directions:

- Better involving communities.
- Focusing on the *risk* and on ways to reduce it (rather than on the description of the mine problem and on its *elimination*).

A practical way to do that is to “involve VD as key resource people in villages, and to tap their local knowledge and experience of [landmines] for the benefit of the wider community. (...) Once mine action begins to acknowledge and understand these issues, and to work towards addressing them, it is likely that village demining, and other high-risk activities will gradually decrease as a result.” (Bottomley, 93)

Thank you for your attention.