



# RESEARCH REPORT

## Community Perspectives of Humanitarian Mine (Explosive Ordnance) Action in Lao PDR

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## ACRONYMS

<b>CAMA</b>	Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action
<b>CHA</b>	Confirmed Hazardous Area
<b>CCM</b>	Convention on Cluster Munitions
<b>EOD</b>	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
<b>ERW</b>	Explosive Remnant of War
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization
<b>JMAS</b>	Japan Mine Action Service
<b>HI</b>	Humanity and Inclusion
<b>HMA</b>	Humanitarian Mine Action
<b>Lao PDR</b>	Lao People's Democratic Republic
<b>MAG</b>	Mines Advisory Group
<b>MOES</b>	Ministry of Education and Sports
<b>NMAS</b>	National Mine Action Standard
<b>NPA</b>	Norwegian People's Aid
<b>NRA</b>	National Regulatory Authority
<b>NTS</b>	Non-Technical Survey
<b>UXO Lao</b>	Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme
<b>UXO/MRE</b>	Unexploded Ordnance/Mine Risk Education
<b>PRA</b>	Provincial Regulatory Authority
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>TS</b>	Technical Survey
<b>VA</b>	Victim Assistance

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The People's Democratic Republic of Lao (Lao PDR) was the target of bombing campaigns carried out by the United States (US) during the 1964–1973 Second Indochina War. Over two million tonnes of explosive ordnance, mainly cluster munitions, were dropped on Lao PDR from 580,000 bombing missions. About 30% of the bombs failed to detonate and continue to cause a danger to people using the land. The total extent of land that was contaminated by unexploded ordnance (UXO) has been estimated at 8,470km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>1</sup> Lao PDR also has some areas contaminated by landmines.

Humanitarian demining operators began clearance work in the mid-1990s and undertake clearance of cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war together with providing education on the risks of UXO and mines and victim assistance. These efforts have contributed to reducing the number of civilian casualties caused by UXO. The ICBL-CMC Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor has recorded a total of 50,919 casualties of mines and explosive remnants of war between 1964 and 2022, although it is likely that many accidents have gone unrecorded. In 2022, a total of 20 casualties was recorded, a decrease from the 63 casualties reported in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Although, UXO continue to constitute a major obstacle for the socioeconomic development of Lao PDR, the problem has received minimal attention from the academic community within the country. Previous studies exist in the form of unpublished master's theses and project evaluation reports, but there remains a need for more engagement by the academic community in Lao PDR to understand the problem and its impacts on the country and the people. A large research gap still exists when considering humanitarian mine action and its impacts on the local livelihoods, particularly from the local people's perspectives. This study, conducted by Lao researchers from the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Community Education and Development, looks at the participation of UXO affected communities in humanitarian mine action and explores the perspectives of local people towards mine action activities.

## Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. To investigate how local UXO-affected communities have been involved in humanitarian mine action activities in their communities, including mine risk education, survey, clearance, and victim assistance;
2. To examine the perspectives of the local communities on the implementation of the mine action activities and its impacts on their livelihoods; and
3. To understand the barriers that prevent the local communities from effective participation in the humanitarian mine action activities in their communities.

## Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent local communities have been involved in planning and implementation of humanitarian mine action in their communities?
2. How have UXO clearance organisations and local government departments facilitated local communities to participate in the humanitarian mine action activities?
3. What are the different perceptions and experiences of local people regarding their participation in the implementation of humanitarian mine action in their communities?
4. To what extent has humanitarian mine action contributed to improve the livelihoods of the local people?
5. To what extent has humanitarian mine action met the needs of the local communities including women, ethnic minorities, people with disability, and other disadvantaged groups?

## Research Methods

A mixed method approach was applied for this study. The mixed method approach allows researchers to cross check the data, which contributes to improving the reliability and validity of the results. The study examines the community understanding of and involvement in humanitarian mine action, focusing particularly on the last five years (2018–2023). The research was conducted in two provinces: Huaphan in the northeast and Savannakhet in the south. The two provinces are highly contaminated because the Ho Chi Minh Trail crossed these provinces and was the site of some of the heaviest bombardments carried out during the War.

The two provinces were selected for several reasons. Different demining operators are working in these two provinces: UXO Lao and the HALO Trust are working in Savannakhet while UXO Lao and Humanity and Inclusion (HI) are working in Huaphan.

Approaches for involving communities in mine action often differ between different operators, and so looking at areas where different operators worked would provide a broader picture of community participation in mine action and allow for comparison.

The HALO Trust employs a conventional approach to mine action including survey, clearance, and UXO/MRE, whereas HI has employed a "Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action (CAMA)," which seeks to provide survey, clearance and UXO/MRE and to develop local livelihood activities in partnership with other international NGOs and local civil society organizations. HI ceased its operations in Huaphan in 2021, and so the study hoped to be able to study the impacts of its operation there. UXO Lao is the national operator and works in nine provinces, including Huaphan and Savannakhet.

In total, 44 key informant interviews, 29 focus group discussions, and 532 household questionnaires were conducted during December 2023.

# Key Findings

## **UXO Clearance**

Local communities are often able to provide information on the location of UXO contamination to UXO clearance operators, which can significantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of clearance activities. The study found that local people are frequently involved in providing information on contaminated areas to non-technical survey and technical survey teams, but that they have little involvement in the planning and prioritisation of survey and clearance activities. Village authorities often serve as the bridge between villages and UXO clearance operators, passing information between the two. Villagers reported that they rarely communicated directly with UXO clearance operators or government agencies when they required UXO clearance, but rather communicated via their village authorities.

Different UXO clearance operators applied different approaches to involve local communities in the UXO clearance activities, which generated different economic impacts to the local communities, for example, paid employment or livelihood opportunities post-clearance. The application of different approaches could at times be a source of friction between the clearance operators and the local communities. Local UXO affected communities could benefit from having greater understanding of the clearance process, the impacts on their livelihoods, and how they can engage with the clearance operators.

Farmland is considered the first priority for UXO clearance, while "development land", land for building infrastructure and public utilities, is the second priority. In some cases, UXO clearance operators faced difficulties in implementing workplans of prioritized clearance tasks due to "urgent requests" for UXO clearance from government agencies. This suggests the need for better coordination between government agencies and UXO clearance operators in the planning and prioritization of clearance.

It was found that when UXO operators were working in villages or neighbouring villages, they responded quickly to the community requests for clearance of UXO, mainly by clearing items as spot tasks. However, when operators were not present in the area, the villagers reported that their requests for UXO clearance often went unanswered. In some cases, this was reported to be because operators no longer had a Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) to work in a certain area, or there had been a decrease in donor support.

As poor communities, the local people often had limited capability to contribute to the programme. In most cases, the community provided a contribution in terms of information on hazardous areas, which helped to improve the efficiency of the UXO survey and clearance teams. In some cases, the local communities provided food and hospitality for the UXO clearance teams, which significantly contributed to developing good relations between the local people and the clearance teams and helped facilitate close collaboration in terms of the UXO clearance activities.

The local communities were very positive about the presence of UXO clearance teams in the communities. Apart from removing threats from the communities, the UXO clearance activities could also generate a significant economic impact in the community through employment and other economic opportunities, such as renting accommodation or supplying food for UXO clearance teams.

Nevertheless, a number of concerns were raised among community members related to the environmental impacts of UXO clearance teams and respect for local beliefs. Environmental management and cultural diversity should be included in the training programme of the UXO clearance operators.

## **UXO/Mine Risk Education**

UXO clearance operators apply various approaches in delivering UXO/MRE messages to the local communities. The survey found that UXO clearance operators have achieved significant success in delivering UXO/MRE to the local communities. Over 70% of the survey respondents reported they had received UXO/MRE messages in the last five years.

Generally, operators find the most effective way to deliver UXO/MRE messages is through meetings at village level. Online methods for delivery of risk education are not yet widely adopted in Lao PDR due to poor internet infrastructure and the associated costs of developing online material. However, as an increasing number of young people are online, online media may be a useful means for information dissemination in the near future.

UXO/MRE messages have been integrated into the school curriculum, which enables school children at primary level to be educated on safe behaviour. Work to develop the curriculum at secondary level is ongoing. However, continued capacity development is needed for schoolteachers to ensure that the messages remain relevant and the methods engaging.

Local community members participating in the study were very satisfied with UXO/MRE delivery in their communities, believing the activities to be informative, entertaining, and rewarding for them.

## **Victim Assistance**

Victim assistance is the least prioritized and funded subsector within the Lao UXO sector. Victim assistance is complicated and requires long-term commitment, which is often difficult to attract donor funding. While the Lao PDR government supports some medication and rehabilitation, psycho-social and livelihood support for victims and their families is limited. The problem is compounded by a lack of systematic and ongoing data collection on victims and their situation.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a significant number of the victims live in communities with little or no support. Due to poverty, the contribution of local communities to support victims is very limited. Nevertheless, the strong social bond within rural Lao PDR communities does mean that UXO victims can rely to some extent on local communities supporting their basic needs.

1. The estimate is based on extrapolation from US bombing data. Lao PDR Convention on Cluster Munitions Article 7 Report, 2022, p.7.

2. ICBL-CMC, "Country Profile: Lao PDR," 5 September 2023.

3. The last country-wide victim assistance survey was conducted in 2008.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background And Rationale

The People's Democratic Republic of Lao (Lao PDR) was the target of bombing campaigns carried out by the United States (US) during the 1964–1973 Second Indochina War. Over two million tons of explosive ordnance, mainly cluster munitions, were dropped on Lao PDR from 580,000 bombing missions. The total extent of land that was contaminated by unexploded ordnance (UXO) has been estimated at 8,470km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>4</sup> Lao PDR also has some areas contaminated by landmines.

An estimated 30% of the bombs dropped on Lao PDR failed to detonate and UXO continue to cause a danger to people using the land.<sup>5</sup> Humanitarian demining operators began clearance, risk education and victim assistance work in the mid-1990s. These efforts have contributed to reducing the number of civilian casualties caused by UXO. The ICBL-CMC Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor has recorded a total of 50,919 casualties of mines and explosive remnants of war between 1964 and 2022, although it is likely that many accidents have gone unrecorded. While casualties have reduced in recent years, accidents are still recorded each year. In 2022, a total of 20 casualties was recorded, a decrease from the 63 casualties reported in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

There is a significant correlation between poverty and UXO contamination in Lao PDR. UXO constitute an obstacle to the ability of local people to earn a living. Farmers must work carefully on land that may have contamination, and a UXO accident can impact significantly on household finances. UXO contamination also impacts on construction and infrastructure development. Arguably, poverty reduction in rural areas is strongly associated with UXO clearance. In recognition of this, the government of Lao PDR included UXO clearance as a priority within its national socioeconomic development agenda and the Five-Year Socioeconomic Development Plans, the most recent of which spans 2021–2025. UXO clearance is included within the Lao PDR Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an additional Goal 18 to "Ensure a safe environment through clearing the land from UXO and education the population about risks."<sup>7</sup> The strategic plan for the UXO Sector, "The National Strategic Plan for the UXO Sector in Lao PDR, 2021 to 2030" (The Safe Path Forward III), also highlights the link between UXO contamination and

livelihoods, with the aim to "Ensure safer lives and better livelihoods for people by effectively addressing UXO as a barrier to national development by 2030."<sup>8</sup>

Although, UXO continue to constitute a major obstacle for the socioeconomic development of Lao PDR, the problem has received minimal attention from the academic community within the country. Previous studies exist in the form of unpublished master's theses and project evaluation reports, and several academic articles provide a historical analysis of the war and its impacts on the local population and livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> However, there remains a need for more engagement by the academic community in Lao PDR to understand the problem and its impacts on the country and the people. This study, conducted by Lao researchers from the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Community Education and Development, looks at the participation of UXO affected communities in humanitarian mine action and explores the perspectives of local people towards mine action activities.

As the contribution of mine action to social and economic development has become increasingly important, this has required the greater involvement of affected communities in mine action interventions. Operators can draw on local knowledge regarding contamination, ensure that prioritisation for clearance and risk education reflects the priorities and needs of the populations, and provide greater assurance that released land will be returned to productive use. This study investigates how communities have been involved in humanitarian mine action processes in Lao PDR, looking at the approaches employed by the national authorities and humanitarian operators. It also examines the perspectives and experiences of the local authorities and UXO impacted communities regarding the mine action activities.

4. The estimate is based on extrapolation from US bombing data. Lao PDR Convention on Cluster Munitions Article 7 Report, 2022, p.7.
5. Website of the National Regulatory Authority: <http://www.nra.gov.la>
6. ICBL-CMC, "Country Profile: Lao PDR," 5 September 2023; and NRA Operations dashboard, <http://www.nra.gov.la/resources.php>.
7. Laos Open SDG Data Platform, "SDG 18: Lives Safe from Unexploded Ordnance (UXO)," no date.
8. NRA, The National Strategic Plan for the UXO Sector in Lao PDR 2021–2030: "Safe Path Forward III". Vientiane, Lao PDR, 2020.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

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1. To investigate how local UXO-affected communities have been involved in humanitarian mine action activities in their communities, including mine risk education, survey, clearance, and victim assistance,
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2. How have UXO clearance organizations and local government departments facilitated community participation in humanitarian mine action activities?
3. What are the local perceptions and experiences of local people regarding participation in humanitarian mine action activities?
4. To what extent has greater involvement in mine action contributed to the improvement of the livelihoods of the local people?
5. To what extent have gender and diversity influenced who is involved in mine action activities and who benefits?



9. For example, Khamvongsa, C and Russell, E, "Legacies of War: Cluster bombs in Laos", *Critical Asian Studies*, 41 (2) pp281-306, 2009; Russell, E, "Laos- Living with Unexploded Ordnance: Past Memories and Present Realities", In V. Pholensa and O. Tappe (eds), "Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post-Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam", pp.96-134, 2013. NUS Press; Ounmany, K, "Impacts of Unexploded Ordnance Clearance on Wet Rice Farming in Xieng Khouang Province, Northern Laos", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 2021; and Ounmany K, and Andriesse, E, "The Legacy of the Vietnam War: Making a Living amid Unexploded Ordnance in Xieng Khouang Province, Northern Laos", *Asian Studies Review*, 42(3), pp439-458, 2018.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Lao PDR in Brief

Lao PDR is a small landlocked country with a total land area of 236,800 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of approximately 7.5 million in 2022.<sup>10</sup> Lao PDR shares borders with five neighbouring countries: China to the north, Myanmar and Thailand to the northwest, Cambodia to the south, and Vietnam to the east. The country is rich in cultural and natural resources. Forest covers approximately 71% of the land area, and 80% of the landmass is covered by high mountains, particularly in the north of the country.

The population of Lao PDR is diverse, with over 40 ethnic groups and at least 200 dialects. The population is commonly categorised into four groups: Lao-Tai (66.2%), Mon-Khmer (22.8%), Hmong-Mien (7.4%), and Chine-Tibet (2.9%).<sup>11</sup> The lowland people are mainly Theravada Buddhists who cultivate paddy rice, while the people settled in the upland areas traditionally farm swidden fields on a rotational basis. The highland areas are characterised by small population density and are remote from towns and services.

## 2.2 The Legacy Of War

During the second Indochina war, the United States dropped about 2 million tons of ordnance on Lao PDR, of which about 30% failed to detonate.<sup>12</sup> Based on estimations from US bombing data, the Lao government has reported that UXO contamination covered 8,470km<sup>2</sup>. Today, the exact extent of UXO contamination is unknown. At the end of 2022, Lao PDR had identified 1,745km<sup>2</sup> of confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) in six of the fifteen provinces known to be contaminated with cluster munition contamination.<sup>13</sup> The type of ordnance found in Lao PDR are diverse, and demining agencies have reported finding 186 types of munitions. The size of the ordnance ranges from 20 lb. to 2,000 lb. bombs in addition to shells, grenades, mortars, rockets, and cluster munitions.<sup>14</sup> Lao PDR also has landmine contamination, although this contamination is believed to be small.<sup>15</sup> Nine provinces are heavily contaminated by cluster munition remnants and other UXO: Attapeu, Champasak, Huaphanh, Khammouane, Luang Prabang, Salavan, Savannakhet, Sekong and Xieng Khuang.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.3 Humanitarian Mine Action In Lao PDR

### 2.3.1 Clearance

The clearance of mines and UXO in Southeast Asia began for military purposes during the Second Indochina Wars.<sup>17</sup>

Following the conflict, there was no large-scale demining operations, and humanitarian mine action did not start until the 1990s, when two international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) implemented programmes to support war victims and to provide risk education. In mid-1990s, the MCC started a UXO clearance programme, which in 1996 became UXO Lao, the national humanitarian UXO clearance organisation. The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) began its demining programmes in Lao PDR in 1994.<sup>18</sup>

Today, both humanitarian organisations and commercial companies work to clear UXO in Lao PDR. The humanitarian demining organisations include UXO Lao, MAG, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), and Humanity and Inclusion (formerly Handicap International, HI). The Lao People's Army also has a humanitarian demining section known as Unit 58. UXO Lao is the largest humanitarian demining operator and works in nine provinces. MAG works in Xieng Khuang and Savannakhet, the HALO Trust in Savannakhet, and NPA in Salavan, Champasack, Sekong and Attapeu. HI worked in Huaphanh until 2022 when it moved its operations to Phongsaly. Unit 58 conducts clearance in Bolikhamxay province.

10. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>
11. Chamberlain, James R, Alton, Charles and Crisfield, Arthur G, "Indigenous people profile: Lao People's Democratic Republic". CARE International, Vientiane, 1995.
12. Bolton, M. "Foreign Aid and Landmine Clearance: Governance, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sudan". I.B. Tauris. co.Ltd.
13. Lao PDR Convention on Cluster Munitions Article 7 report for calendar year 2022, Form f, pp.7 and 14-15. See <https://disarmament.unoda.org/convention-on-cluster-munitions/transparency-measures/ccm-article-7-database/>
14. Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants, NPA, 2023.
15. ICBL-CMC, Lao PDR Impact Country Profile, 5 September 2023.
16. Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants, NPA, 2023.
17. Bolton, M. "Foreign Aid and Landmine Clearance: Governance, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sudan", 2010.
18. Bolton, M. "Foreign Aid and Landmine Clearance: Governance, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sudan", 2010.

The National Regulatory Authority for the UXO Sector in Lao PDR (the NRA) is responsible for the coordination of the UXO Sector, working with both the national and international UXO operators and other relevant agencies and ministries. It also has responsibility for developing relevant policies and strategies, including the national UXO strategy and the implementation and updating of the national standards. The NRA previously worked under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, although in early September 2023 it was transferred to be under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>19</sup> At the provincial and district levels, the responsibilities were transferred to Provincial Department of Foreign Affairs (DoFA) and District Mayor Office respectively.

Humanitarian demining agencies are funded to support clearance for communities affected by UXO contamination, focusing on agricultural land and public investment projects such as roads, schools, health centres, and water systems. The programmes also include education programmes to minimize risk in affected communities.

UXO clearance is a costly business, and the demining operators in Lao PDR rely on international funding, which can be affected by the changing international economic and political environment. The United States is currently the largest donor to Lao PDR. In 2022, Lao PDR received the second largest amount of international donor support (USD 53.8 million, second only to Iraq which received USD 95.5 million).<sup>20</sup> However, clearance progress is slow. The dangerous nature of UXO clearance requires demining agencies to adhere to agreed international standards for clearance, and the process of clearance is largely manual using deminers and metal detectors. Between 50 – 60 km<sup>2</sup> (5,000-6,000 hectares) of cluster munition contaminated land has been released annually through survey and clearance over the last five years, less than the required 100 km<sup>2</sup> per year required to achieve Lao PDR's target to clear 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> (10,000 hectares) by 2030.<sup>21</sup> UXO clearance is occurring in 12 provinces and there has been an expansion of activities in Luang Prabang, Phongsaly and Huaphan. Clearance has also started in Bolikhambay and Vientiane provinces, and to some extent in Xayombok province.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3.2 Mine/UXO Risk Education

Mine/UXO risk education in Lao PDR also began in the 1990s, when the MCC, AFSC and HI discovered that a major cause of UXO accidents was the use of traditional farming tools, particularly hoes for tilling

the soil. This led to the introduction of risk education messages encouraging farmers to use shovels rather than hoes for preparing their land.<sup>23</sup>

In Lao PDR today, high risk groups include men due to their participation in livelihood activities such as farming, the collection of forest products, hunting and fishing. Familiarity with contamination means that men in Lao PDR often move UXO when they find it. Boys are also a high-risk group and are more likely to handle and play with UXO.<sup>24</sup>

Risk education in Lao PDR is delivered in the formal setting of schools, with UXO/MRE messages included within the school curriculum at primary level. World Education supported the government of Lao PDR and the Ministry of Education and Sports to create a curriculum for primary education and secondary education. A non-formal education curriculum and community outreach programme is currently being finalized. The EORE project covers 10 provinces. The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for the integration of risk education into the school curriculum and for teacher training. Non-formal risk education is also delivered to adults and children (including out-of-school children) in informal and community settings, such as the village halls, pagodas, and other local settings. Operators providing risk education include HI, MAG, the HALO Trust, Terra Renaissance and UXO Lao. Unit 58 of the Lao Army also provides some risk education. The Lao Youth Union trains village volunteers, and the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism runs a radio programme that disseminates risk education messages. Risk education is conducted as an integrated part of survey, clearance and EOD operations, but is also delivered as a standalone activity. UXO Lao has a network of community volunteers that provide risk education.<sup>25</sup> As with clearance, the NRA is responsible for coordinating risk education activities in Lao PDR.

19. Interview with Director of the National Regulatory Authority, 8 November 2023.

20. International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Landmine Monitor 2022, ICBL-CMC, November 2022.

21. ICBL-CMC, Lao PDR Impact Country Profile, 5 September 2023. The 1,000km<sup>2</sup> per year is outlined in the 2021-2030 Safe Path Forward III; the Multi-Year Workplan 2022-2026, and the National Social-Economic Development Plan for 2021-2025.

22. Interview with the NRA Director, 8 November 2023.

23. Bolton, M. "Foreign Aid and Landmine Clearance: Governance, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sudan", 2010. Bolton, M. "Foreign Aid and Landmine Clearance: Governance, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sudan". I.B. Taurus.co.Ltd.

24. ICBL-CMC, Lao PDR Impact Country Profile, 5 September 2023.

25. ICBL-CMC, Lao PDR Impact Country Profile, 5 September 2023.

### 2.3.3 Victim Assistance

Assistance to victims of UXO accidents has evolved alongside humanitarian demining in Lao PDR, with the MCC, AFSC, and HI providing victim assistance programmes in the early 1990s. Programmes focused on the provision of prosthetics and expanded to orthopaedic operations. In 1997, HI conducted a study to identify UXO casualties with the aim of providing information for victim assistance services.<sup>26</sup>

Following the establishment of the NRA in 2004, a comprehensive study, covering 9,538 villages and 139 districts in 17 provinces was conducted in 2008. The study reported 50,136 casualties who had been injured or killed between 1964 and 2008. Xieng Khouang and Savannakhet, the provinces that were most heavily bombed during the war, were found to have the highest number of casualties with a total number of 6,000 and 12,500 casualties respectively.<sup>27</sup> However, it is likely that many casualties have gone unrecorded.

The strategic objective related to victim assistance in the "Safe Path Forward III 2021–2030," aims to ensure support for UXO victims so that they can be better integrated into society. Priorities include emergency support in the event of a UXO accident; the provision of medical care, physical and psycho-social rehabilitation; education, vocational training and employment opportunities; improving regulations and policies; and strengthening coordination mechanisms with related sectors.

Several international organisations provide victim assistance services. World Education Lao PDR (WEL), which started working in Lao PDR in 1992, has worked to reduce the impact of UXO "by improving the quality and accessibility of health care services, increasing access to education, and promoting sustainable livelihoods for accident survivors and poor communities living in UXO contaminated areas".<sup>28</sup> World Education Laos operates the War Victims' Medical Fund (WVMF), which aims to prevent medical debt by covering costs for emergency medical assistance, transportation, accommodation and other associated costs, including funerals. The fund supports UXO victims country-wide, with a Victim Assistance Support Team (VAST), facilitating assessment of psychological and social needs and access to physical and mental health care. WEL also manages the USAID funded Okard project, which covers policy, healthcare, economic empowerment, and stakeholder engagement in Savannakhet, Vientiane and Xieng Khouang provinces, and which will soon expand to Sekong province.<sup>29</sup>

Between 2021 – 2023, the NRA has led the implementation of a UXO Victim Assistance project funded by the Republic of Korea.<sup>30</sup> Project activities include vocational training and livelihood improvement activities for UXO survivors and their family members in Xieng Khouang and Huaphan Provinces in northern Lao PDR, with a total budget of US\$ 2.5 million. This amount is relatively small compared to the large number of UXO victims, who need a wide range of short-term and long-term support.

### 2.4. Community Involvement In Mine Action

The involvement of local UXO affected communities in humanitarian mine action is recognised as an important aspect of mine action operations to ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness. The involvement of communities within mine action processes has often achieved through a "community liaison" approach, which is described in the International Mine Action Standards:

*"Community liaison is an important process intended to ensure the involvement of men, women, boys and girls in the mine action decision-making process, with the aim to be inclusive, community-focused, and to ensure the maximum involvement of all sections of the community."*<sup>31</sup>

The Lao National UXO/mine action standards, developed in line with the international standards, also outline aspects of community involvement.

#### 2.4.1 Survey And Clearance

Several chapters of the national standards cover aspects of the survey and clearance process. Chapter 4, states that clearance organizations must ensure that the local communities are well informed about the location and meaning of marking systems, and that landowners are responsible for maintaining the marking on their own land.

26. Handicap International, "National Survey on Socio-Economic Impact of UXO in Lao PDR", Handicap International, 1997

27. NRA, "National Survey of UXO Victims and Accidents". Vientiane, Lao PDR, 2010.

28. <http://laos.worlded.org> ICBL-CMC

29. ICBL-CMC, Lao PDR Impact Country Profile, 5 September 2023; and interview with World Education, 5 November 2023.

30. UNDP, "Republic of Korea continues its support to UXO Sector," 15 May 2019; Vientiane Times, 19 October 2020

31. IMAS 04.10, Glossary of mine action terms, definitions and abbreviations, Addition 2, Amendment 11, 17 January 2023. See <https://www.mineactionstandards.org/>

Chapter 5 on work site preparation states that operators should use community liaison to provide information to the local communities prior to clearance activities taking place so that they know about the location, routines, and expected duration of work, any impacts there may be on the community, and are familiar with the marking systems and warning signs. Familiarity with marking and warning signs is also mentioned in Chapter 7 on UXO Clearance Operations.

Chapter 7 on UXO Clearance Operations points to the responsibility of UXO clearance organisations to work with communities to identify their clearance needs and priorities, and to assist in providing information on the location of UXO. Operators also have the responsibility to ensure that communities are familiar with systems and procedures for reporting UXO, and strategies to minimise risk.

During UXO clearance operations, operators are expected to inform the community at least once a month on the progress, changes in the operations and discussions on possible problems, especially when working in an area for an extended time.

Chapter 20 on Post Clearance Assessment and Chapter 21 on environmental management also mention community participation. Information for post-clearance assessments should be obtained by a visual inspection of the land to see how it is being used, and in discussion with the local communities, landowners and users, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders. The environmental management standard aims to minimise the environmental impacts to the local communities in terms of waste disposal, water supply and air pollution resulting from UXO clearance activities, to ensure that local communities are consulted and not negatively impacted.

## 2.4.2 UXO/Mine Risk Education

Chapter 13 of the Lao National Standards is dedicated to risk education, defined as “activities which seek to reduce the risk of injury and death from UXO by raising awareness and promoting behavioural change among at risk group”. UXO/MRE components include data gathering, public information dissemination, education and training, and community initiative. Some of these components require extensive community participation. Education and training, for example, “is a two-way process, which involves the imparting and acquiring of knowledge, attitude and practices through teaching, learning and practicing.” Organisations providing risk education are responsible for working with communities to identify risk taking behaviour and the possible consequences and the provision of

alternatives or strategies to minimise risk.

Community-based UXO/MRE activities are also outlined in the Lao national standards as initiatives developed to promote safety in communities when the responsibility lies with the local community with support from outside organisations or government departments.

### 2.4.3. Victim Assistance

Chapter 14 on UXO Victim Assistance directs clearance and risk education teams to advise UXO victims on available assistance and to report new victims to the NRA and relevant stakeholders.



# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

## 2.1 Research Approach

A mixed method approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, was applied for this study. A quantitative approach enables the collection of a relatively large amount of data across a broad sample. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to interview a smaller sample in depth to understand people's perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours. Using a mixed method approach therefore allows the data to be cross-checked, contributing to the overall reliability and validity of results.<sup>32</sup>

In this study, a qualitative approach, using key informant interviews and focus group discussions, was applied to explore the perspectives of the communities and other stakeholders regarding mine action and the participation of local people in the activities. This was complemented by a survey that provided a broad understanding of how impacted communities have been involved in mine action, and how mine action activities have enhanced or constrained livelihood opportunities.

## 2.2 Scope Of The Study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. To investigate how local UXO-affected communities have been involved in humanitarian mine action activities in their communities, including mine risk education, survey, clearance, and victim assistance,
2. To examine the perspectives of the local communities on the implementation of the mine action activities and its impacts on their livelihoods, and
3. To understand the barriers that prevent the local communities from effective participation in the humanitarian mine action activities in their communities.

The study aimed to examine the community understanding of and involvement in humanitarian mine action, focusing particularly on the last five years (2018–2023). The research was conducted in two provinces, Huaphan in the northeast and Savannakhet in the south. These provinces are among the nine most heavily contaminated provinces in Lao PDR and are particularly contaminated along the former route of the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was the site of some of the heaviest bombardments during the war.

The two provinces were selected for several reasons. Firstly, the study wanted to consider how different humanitarian mine action operators involve communities in their activities. The HALO Trust and UXO Lao work in Savannakhet province. HI worked in Huaphan from 2018 – August 2023 and introduced their Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action (CAMI) in Huaphanh, Huameung and Hiem districts.<sup>33</sup> UXO Lao also works in Huaphan, although its operations were suspended between 2021 and 2022 due to lack of funding. At the time of the study in December 2023, operations were re-starting.

In each province, two districts (Haumeuang and Viengxay in Huaphan and Sepone and Nong in Savannakhet) were selected for the study. Huameuang district was selected as it was the area of operation of HI's Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action, while Viengxay was selected with the aim to study the UXO Lao approach. In Savannakhet, the HALO Trust is working in the districts of Sepone and Nong. While UXO Lao also works in Nong, it was not working in the villages visited by the team. The research team also consulted the National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action Sector in Lao PDR (NRA) and UXO Laos in the selection of the target villages.

32. Cresswell, J. Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009.

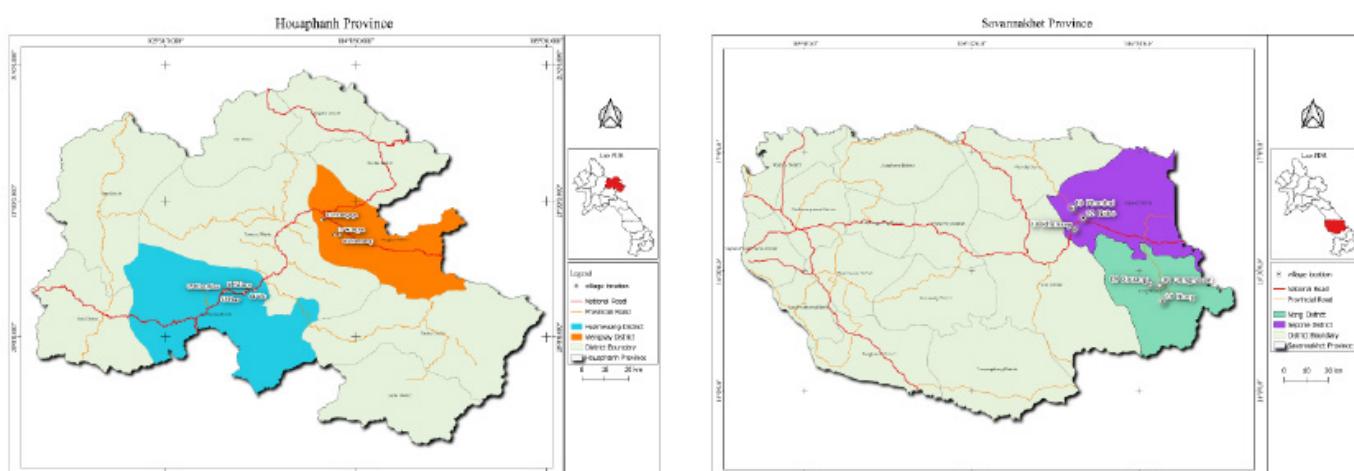
33. Interview with Chief Technical Advisor, HI, 21 November 2023. HI received an MoU to begin operations in Phongsaly in 2022. HI still maintain some staff in Samnuea in Huaphan and intend to re-start work in Huameung district with funding from Germany. IMAS 04.10, Glossary of mine action terms, definitions and abbreviations, Addition 2, Amendment 11, 17 January 2023. See <https://www.mineactionstandards.org/>

A total of thirteen villages were selected for the study (seven in Huaphan province and six in Savannakhet province). In the selection of the villages, criteria such as ethnic diversity, the level of socioeconomic development, and the implementation of mine action activities in the last five years were considered. In Huameuang, the studied villages include Khmu and Hmong communities, where people mainly practice upland agriculture, while the villages in Viengxay are ethnic Lao who subsist on lowland agriculture and animal breeding. The districts of Nong and Sepon are largely dominated by plain where people earn their living from lowland agriculture and small trading. Many villages, such as Xuang and Dongnasan, reported that they did not have rice sufficiency due to a lack of irrigation system for agriculture during the dry season.

The study included in-depth interviews with key informants, such as the Provincial Regulatory Authority (PRA), district mine action coordinators, representatives of mine action organisations, UXO victims/survivors, and village authorities. A purposive sampling approach was applied to select respondents for qualitative interviews, ensuring that people with relevant knowledge and information were interviewed. When required, recommendations for knowledgeable people to interview was requested from other interviewees (snowballing).

Focus group discussions were held with four different groups – deminers, UXO/MRE Educators, and village residents (one group of men, one group of women). The research team requested the operators to assign deminers and UXO/MRE Educators to participate in the FGDs. For the village residents, the research team tried to include people from diverse backgrounds in terms of age groups, occupation, and ethnic group. As villages in rural Lao are relatively small (in many cases between 20 and 40 households) and the target sample for the survey was relatively large, the research team interviewed as many households as possible in each village. This helped to ensure better representation of different groups in the village, including wealth groups, ethnicities, men and women, and persons with disability.

### 3.3 Study Area



The data collection was conducted in two provinces, four districts and thirteen villages (see Table 2: Study Area). Most of the villages are rural communities, earning their living from subsistence agriculture. However, some villages (e.g., Khangkham, Ban Vek, Phonxay and Nabo) are located near major roads, where people have a better access to public services and markets. Many of the villages were composed of ethnic groups, including Khmu, Hmong, Phuthai, Mangkong.

**Table 2: Study Area**

Province	District	Village	Ethnic group	UXO Clearance Operator
<b>Huaphan</b>	Huamuang	Nakeng	Khmu	HI
		Khangkham	Hmong	HI
		Ban Phao	Lao, Khmu	HI
		Ban Vek	Lao, Khmu	HI
	Viengxay	Nameuang	Lao	UXO Lao
		Xiengsue	Lao	UXO Lao
		Meuang-gna	Lao	UXO Lao
<b>Savannakhet</b>	Sepon	Phonxay	Phuthai, Mangkong	HALO Trust
		Nabo	Phuthai, Mangkong	HALO Trust
		Phonhai	Phuthai	HALO Trust
	Nong	Dongnasan	Mangkong	HALO Trust
		Ban Xuang	Mangkong	HALO Trust
		Nongvilay	Phuthai	HALO Trust

### 3.4 Qualitative Data Collection

In Vientiane, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants from the National Regulatory Authority (NRA), the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao), Humanity and Inclusion (HI), and World Education. Representatives from the HALO Trust were interviewed at the HALO Trust office in Sepon, Savannakhet. See annex I for list of people interviewed.

Interviews took place in the districts of Huameuang and Viengxay in Huaphan province between the 2nd–12th December 2023. In Savannakhet the research was conducted between the 17th–26th December. In addition, two team members travelled to Phongsaly province between the 15th–17th January 2024 to interview the HI provincial manager and to conduct focus group discussions with the HI deminers and UXO/mine risk education teams.

Before embarking on the field work in the districts and villages, meetings were held with the Provincial Departments of Labour and Social Welfare (PDSLW) in each province to introduce the research. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the Provincial Regulatory Authorities (PRA) of Huaphan and Savannakhet. In Huaphan, the Director of the PRA joined the team on its fieldwork, and in Savannakhet the Deputy Director of the PRA joined.

At district level, four in-depth interviews were conducted with the District Offices of Labour and Social Welfare in Huameuang, Viengxay, Nong and Sepon.

Interviews were conducted with the Director of UXO Lao in Huaphan province, and the Programme Manager of the HALO Trust in Savannakhet. UXO Lao had just re-started operations in Huaphan in December 2023 after a two-year break due to a funding shortfall.

In-depth interviews were conducted with village leaders and/or deputy leaders in the twelve villages. Nineteen interviews were conducted with UXO victims or their families from 12 villages. The village authorities assisted the research team by suggesting people to participate in the research.

Twenty-three Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with community members. In most cases the FGD was held with between five and six participants, although in smaller villages only three or four participants attended.

In Nakeng village, a FGD was not conducted with a men's group due to the small population size, and many of the men had already participated in the household survey.

**Table 3: Focus Group Discussion Participants**

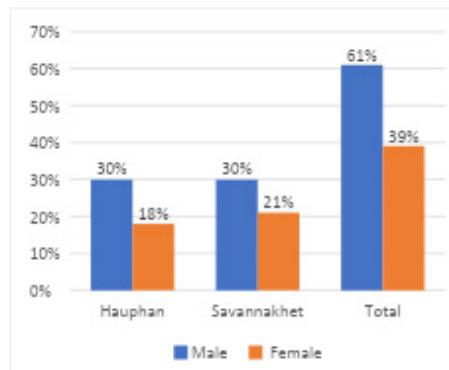
Village	Number of FGDs	Number of participants	
		Men	Women
<b>Nakeng</b>	1	0	5
<b>Khangkha</b>	2	5	5
<b>Ban Phao</b>	2	6	5
<b>Meuangnga</b>	2	5	3
<b>Nameuang</b>	2	3	3
<b>Xiengseu</b>	2	4	4
<b>Dongnasan</b>	2	4	6
<b>Ban Xuang</b>	2	4	4
<b>Nongvilay</b>	2	7	5
<b>Phonxay</b>	2	3	3
<b>Nabo</b>	2	6	5
<b>Phonhai</b>	2	7	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>52</b>

### 3.6 Quantitative Data Collection

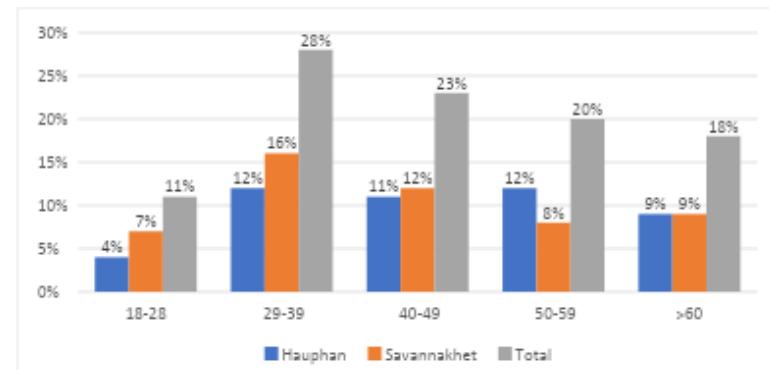
In total, respondents from 532 households participated in the questionnaire survey. In setting up the survey, the researchers were supported by the district coordinators and the village authorities who were able to ask villagers in advance to participate in the survey. Each survey took less than thirty minutes to administer. The interviews took place both in public meeting spaces and in homes. Following the interviews, the enumerators checked the filled questionnaires before submitting them to the online system (KoboCollect).

A greater number of men (61%) participated in the survey compared to women (39%). Slightly more women (21%) participated in the survey in Huaphanh compared to 18% in Savannakhet. While efforts were made by the team to reach as many women as possible, often it was male heads of households who took part in the survey. Adults between the ages of 19-39 and 40-49 constituted the largest respondent groups representing 28% and 23% respectively. Twenty percent of overall respondents were aged between 50-59, and 18% were over 60 years of age.

**Figure 1: Sex Of Respondents**



**Figure 2: Respondents Age Groups**





### 3.7 Study Challenges

The study was implemented within the expected time frame and reached the expected numbers of participants for the qualitative and quantitative data collection. However, there were a few constraints encountered during the research that may have influenced the data collected.

In most cases the respondents at provincial and district level had a good knowledge of the UXO sector and had worked together with the UXO clearance operators for several years. However, one respondent in Viengxay was new to the job and had limited knowledge and experience of the UXO sector. The team requested to meet the former district coordinator, but he was unavailable for personal reasons.

During the FGD, it was often the case that one or two participants dominated the discussions. Often these were people with more authority, seniority and education. During the conversation, the moderators often encouraged the quieter participants to share their ideas, but often with limited success. In some villages, the village authorities also requested to attend interviews, which may also have influenced the answers provided by the respondents.

Language was a major challenge for the research team in the non-Lao speaking communities. In some villages it was challenging to get more detailed responses, highlighting the difficulty of some of the ethnic groups in speaking and understanding Lao language. Dialects were also challenging for the research team to understand. In some villages, the village authorities assisted with interpretation.

Villagers often had very limited understanding of the UXO clearance activities in their communities and were only able to provide limited information during the interviews. The research team found that this lack of knowledge about activities was more pronounced in the non-Lao speaking communities.

# CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 4.1 Study Context

### 4.1.1 Ethnicity

The study was conducted in the province of Huaphan in the northeast of Lao PDR and in Savannakhet in the south. In each province, the research team visited two districts, and within each district, three villages. The villages visited were of varying ethnicity. In Huameuang district in Huaphan, the villages included a village of Khmu ethnicity, one of Hmong and one of Lao and Khmu. In Viengxay district in Huaphan, the villages were all Lao. There was a greater range of ethnicity in Savannakhet province. In Sepon and Nong districts in Savannakhet, the villages visited were of Phuthai and Mangkong ethnicity.

### 4.1.2 Livelihoods

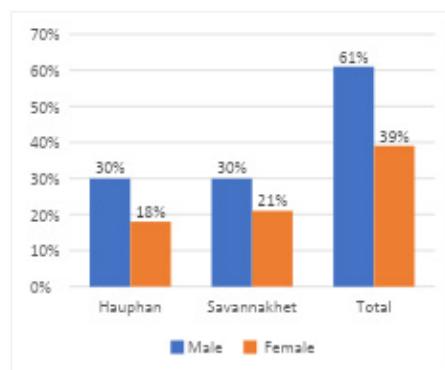
The majority of villagers in the study area pursued multiple livelihood options, including upland and lowland rice farming, cash crops, small animal raising and trading. Most survey respondents reported rice farming as their main occupation.

In Huameuang District in Huaphan, in addition to rice farming and animal breeding, villagers grow cash crops including corn, *Sacha Inchi* seed<sup>35</sup> and pearl barley which is processed locally and exported to China. Villagers are also employed as labourers in the processing factory, earning between LAK 80,000 and 100,000 (about USD 2-5) per day. In Khangkha village, a Hmong village in Huamuang district, over 60 households (about 30% of the total) owned trucks and provided transport services locally and to other provinces.

In Savannakhet province, most villagers in the study area are subsistence farmers who grow lowland rice as the main occupation and raise animals to supplement their income. Food insecurity was a major concern for many of the villages visited due to poor soil quality and a lack of irrigation. In the villages of Dongnasan and Xuang, villagers said they had rice sufficiency for only four to six months a year and had to borrow money from neighbours or to work as wage labourers to offset this insufficiency. However, in the last two to three years farmers have begun to grow cash crops such as cassava, rubber, and sugar cane for export to China, Thailand, and Vietnam, which generates more cash income for households. An increasing number of people are clearing land for planting cash crops, which is potentially exposing them to UXO risk. In the district town of Sepon, the Sun Paper Holding paper pulp mill was established in 2008 and a eucalyptus plantation had been set up to supply raw materials to the factory where villagers also work as wage labourers.

The survey revealed that 45% of the respondents (17% in Huaphan and 28% in Savannakhet), had a monthly household income of less than 1,000,000 Kip (approximately USD45) per month, much lower than the minimum monthly wage of 1,600,000 Kip (approximately USD 70).<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 3: Monthly Household Income**



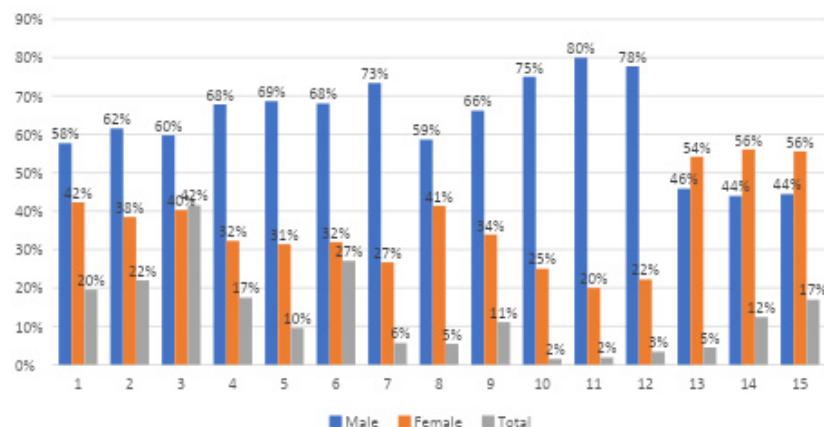
34. A perennial plant native to parts of South America and the Caribbean which produces large edible seeds. It is sometimes referred to as the mountain peanut.

35. <https://laotiantimes.com/2023/08/18/laos-to-increase-minimum-wage-for-workers-in-october/>

### 4.1.3 Education

The education levels within many of the communities visited was relatively low. Of the survey respondents, only 42% had primary education, and a significant percentage (5% in Huaphan and 12% in Savannakhet) had not attended school. Despite the remoteness of Huaphan, the respondents generally had better access to education than the communities in Savannakhet, many of which were ethnic and non-Lao speaking communities. In addition, lower monthly household income may be a contributing factor to lower education attainment in Savannakhet. Overall, men had a higher level of education attainment than women, and more women were illiterate.

**Figure 4: Respondents' Education Background**



## 4.2. Community Participation In Survey And Clearance

### 4.2.1 Information Provision

The NRA, the provincial and district authorities, and UXO clearance operators all agreed that the participation of local UXO affected communities is essential for the implementation of UXO/mine clearance activities. This is largely related to local communities providing information regarding the location of UXO, or reporting UXO when they find it. The NRA noted, "If the community did not report [UXO], the survey and clearance teams would find it difficult to locate the UXO and clearance would take much longer."<sup>36</sup> All operators interviewed noted the significance of community participation in terms of information provision and reporting. As the HALO Trust Programme Manager in Savannakhet noted, "The best contribution that we can receive from [the local communities] is information because they know the communities, they know where the UXO is, they know where accidents have been."<sup>37</sup>

Local villagers interviewed in Savannakhet and Huaphan had been involved in providing information to non-technical survey teams. In Nakeng village in Huaphan province, the village chief explained that when the UXO clearance teams came to survey, the village authorities were responsible for organising a meeting with the village residents, during which the survey team would present the objectives of the survey and the work schedule for the team. The meeting participants were then asked to identify the hazardous areas they were aware of in and around the communities. Village authorities used various approaches in inviting villagers to attend in the meetings including the use of loudspeakers (e.g., in Khangkham and Dongnasan), online chat Apps (e.g., in Phonxay and Nabo), or ringing a bell and calling people verbally (Nakeng). According to the FGDs, most villagers attended the meetings, except for those with mobility issues such as elderly and persons with disability. According to the FGDs, most villagers attended the meetings, except for those with mobility issues such as elderly and persons with disability.

36. Interview with the NRA Director, Vientiane, 8 November 2023

#### 4.2.2 Reporting And Clearance Requests

In all the villages visited during the study, the village authorities served as the main focal point for community members to report any UXO found and to request clearance (usually spot tasks). This is in line with village authorities being the traditional focal points in Lao villages for working with outsiders. In the focus group discussions, villagers were unanimous in saying that they would report to the village authorities when they found a suspicious item or wanted to request UXO clearance. Many could also recall the risk education message to “don’t touch, don’t move it, report it to the village authority,” when a UXO is found. Of 123 survey respondents who had requested clearance in the last 5 years, 73% (41% in Huaphan and 32% in Savannakhet) said that they talked verbally to village authority to request UXO clearance. Written requests for clearance were much less common, with only 21% of the survey respondents saying that they wrote a request for clearance.

*“Most villagers will report the UXO information to unit head. Then the unit head will forward the details to village chief. The village chief will inform relevant parties. Usually, it takes about a week, the soonest.”*<sup>38</sup>

When operators are working in a community, villagers said they would often try to report any UXO found directly to the UXO clearance staff. A total of 35% of survey respondents reported requesting clearance directly to an operator. This figure was higher in Savannakhet (20% of respondents, compared to 15% in Huaphan).

Emergency phone lines (NRA hotline 1603) have been set up at national and provincial level and by some operators to enable local people to report UXO, although the survey indicated that these were not used by the villagers. Only 2% of survey respondents said they would use the phone line to request clearance. In many of the more remote villages, there are no telephone signals, and the cost of making a telephone call may also discourage villagers from using this method. Village authorities were also more likely only to contact operators when they were present in the village, rather than calling through the hotlines.

UXO/Mine Risk Education teams also facilitate passing on reports of UXO to the clearance teams. The HALO Trust reported that they provided contact cards with the numbers of team leaders and supervisors during risk education sessions or when meeting with the village authorities.

When operators are not working in villages, there appeared to be less communication between villagers and operators. The operators acknowledged that there was a need to maintain a regular presence in communities to build trust and enable reporting.

**Figure 3: Hi Contact Number In Village Office For Reporting Accidents And UXO**



37. Interview with the HALO Trust Manager, Savannakhet, 25 December 2024.

38. Interview with Village Chief, Khangkham, 05 December 2023

**Table 1: Process For Requesting For UXO Clearance**

	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Talk verbally to the village authority	50	41	39	32	89	73
Writing a request letter to UXO operators through village authority	17	14	9	7	26	21
Talking to UXO operator when they work in the village	19	15.4	24	19.5	43	35.0
Show evidence of UXO to operator when they work in the village	0	0	1	1	1	1
Call emergency phone line	1	1	1	1	2	2
Others	2	2	0	0	2	2
Total	71	58	52	42	123	100

In response to the survey, 123 villagers (out of a total of 532 responses, 23%), reported that they had requested UXO clearance within the last five years. Villagers who had requested UXO clearance, mainly requested clearance of UXO from their rice fields of garden land. In Huaphan province, the priority was for both lowland and upland farmland, while in Savannakhet, most requests were for clearance of lowland farms. A smaller number of respondents (15%) had requested clearance of household land. Grazing land was not cited as a priority for clearance in these two provinces, as animals generally grazed in communal or forest land.

**Table 2: Types Of Land Requested For UXO Clearance**

Types of land	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Household land	6	4.9	13	10.6	19	15.4
Farmland (lowland)	30	24.4	38	30.9	68	55.3
Farmland (upland)	23	18.7	2	1.6	25	20.3
Grazing land	4	3.3	0	0	4	3.3
Garden	24	19.5	18	14.6	42	34.1
Forest land	4	3.3	2	1.6	6	4.9
Pond, well or other water source	2	1.6	0	0	2	1.6
Other	7	5.7	2	1.6	9	7.3
Total	71	57.7	52	42.3	123	100

#### 4.2.3 Prioritisation And Area Clearance Processes

UXO clearance operators have limited resources compared to the need for clearance and deciding what land to clear first requires a system of prioritisation. The current prioritisation guidance in Lao PDR is quite general. Agricultural land is the first priority for clearance, with development land, including land for infrastructure development, the second priority. Following comprehensive cluster munition remnants survey in eleven of the contaminated provinces, including Huaphan and Savannakhet, the clearance priorities of the humanitarian demining operators are focused on the areas where there is evidence of contamination. The survey process included community consultations to enable people to report areas known or believed to be contaminated. However, beyond this initial involvement, the study found that there was limited knowledge and involvement at village level as to how land was then prioritised for clearance.

UXO clearance operators working at provincial level often decide on the priorities for clearance with the provincial and district authorities, and annual plans are developed. Once prioritisation is agreed at district level, it is signed off at provincial and central level. District and village authorities may provide additional information identifying poor and disadvantaged households, agricultural land that needs clearance, and information on the known UXO contamination. Annual plans may also be adjusted to respond to urgent requests from government departments for land clearance for provincial infrastructure. For example, the HALO Trust explained that it meets with village

and district officials to discuss where clearance is most needed and how the land will be used after clearance. For the clearance of agricultural land, local communities may be consulted to understand their priorities for land use. UXO Lao follows a similar process, with local people identifying areas known or suspected to have UXO. Any requests from the community are judged on whether there is evidence that the land is contaminated.

Communities are informed about clearance activities when the operators are working in the villages. Following the UXO clearance, the village head is responsible for signing the relevant documents to certify the work has been done. Owners of land that has been cleared are provided with documentation about the clearance on their land, and the ordnance that has been cleared. The NRA stressed that this is important “because it will give them confidence to know which areas have been cleared and which areas have not been cleared.”<sup>39</sup> However, operators have mixed views as to whether local people should be more involved in prioritisation, often citing difficulties such as demand for clearance being greater than available resources, and people wanting land cleared regardless of the level of contamination.<sup>40</sup>

The majority of people interviewed had little understanding of why some land is prioritised for clearance and other land remains lower on the priority list. Some stated that they did not know the reason, while others speculated it might be due to a lack of time or budget. A UNDP report also found that a lack of information and understanding about survey and clearance processes and how clearance is prioritised created some degree of frustration at the village level and potentially hampered better land use planning and more proactive participation in clearance processes by villagers.<sup>41</sup>

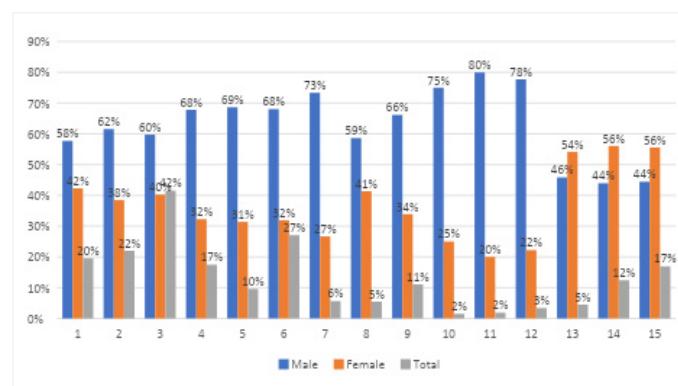
It is possible, that if communities were more involved in the planning and prioritisation of clearance, they may feel more content with how the priorities are established.

*“I think it is very important for the villagers and the UXO project as well, because the more villagers involved in the mine action activities, the greater the efficiency of the UXO teams implementing these activities in this village. This project also makes the villagers safer from UXO when they practice agricultural activities.”<sup>42</sup>*

#### 4.2.4 Clearance Response

Among the 113 survey respondents who had requested clearance, 60% said that UXO had been cleared as spot tasks and 20% of respondents reported that their land had been cleared. However, 20% of respondents didn't know if the UXO had been removed via spot task or area clearance.

**Figure 4: Response Of UXO Clearance Operator**



39. Interview with NRA Director, 8 November 2023.

40. Interview with HALO Trust Manager, Savannakhet 25 December 2023.

41. UNDP, “Final Report: Post-Clearance Impact Assessment for UNDP’s UXO Clearance Support,” January 2023.

42. Interview with Village Chief, Dongnasan, 19 December 2023.

The survey results revealed a positive trend in the clearance of UXO as spot tasks, with 63% of spot tasks reported cleared and 8% reporting that they had not yet been cleared but there was a plan for clearance. 28% of survey respondents reported that their request for clearance of UXO had not been responded to. It appears that the response to calls for roving clearance depends on the proximity of operators, with a good response rate when operators are working in the neighbourhood, but a lower response rate when operators are outside of the locality. In Mueang-gna, Viengxay district, Huaphan, for example, a villager reported finding a bomble in a vegetable patch near her house. She had reported the item to the village authorities in November 2023, but there had been no response from a clearance organisation. UXO Lao had stopped working in the village two years previously and it appears there were no other operators able to pick up the task.

While generally the study found that villagers living in affected areas were happy to provide information to the clearance operators about the location of UXO, in one case it was reported that people did not provide information unless they received compensation for reporting items. This suggests that the local communities were not always well informed on the implementation of the programme and the benefits for them.

The HALO Trust noted that while their teams constantly engage with the community, there is sometimes a need for more understanding from the locals about what HALO is doing. Much of this is down to a lack of understanding about the clearance process, about the fact that it is a free service for the villagers, and the purposes behind the clearance. This sometimes effects the communication and the willingness of villagers to discuss where they have found UXO.

## 4.3 Community Participation In UXO/Mine Risk Education

### 4.3.1 Methods For Engaging Communities

UXO/mine risk education is delivered by most of the UXO operators in Lao PDR. Common approaches include presentations at village level, house-to-house delivery, sessions in schools, and the delivery of emergency risk education in the case of a UXO accident or in other emergency contexts.<sup>43</sup> Risk education is integrated within the school curriculum at primary and secondary levels, implemented by the Ministry of Education and supported by World Education Laos.

Affected communities largely participate in UXO/mine risk education activities as beneficiaries, attending presentations and awareness sessions. The NRA noted that more women tend to attend risk education activities than men, often because of the time of day when activities are conducted, and because of the traditional role of women in caring for children. As men and boys form the largest casualty groups in Lao PDR,<sup>44</sup> operators have made efforts to try to reach more men. In 2021, for example, among 63 casualties, men constitute 15 injuries and 6 deaths, while boys 15 injuries and 8 deaths.<sup>45</sup> The HALO Trust teams have a flexible schedule which allows them to work at night and to reach more villagers who are out of the village during the day. HI conducts house-to-house risk education with the intention to reach families and people who are unable to attend village-level events, for example, people with disabilities or mobility problems.<sup>46</sup>

Risk education teams help to facilitate communication between villagers and the UXO clearance teams and can verify and pass on UXO reports to the clearance teams. The fact that communities report UXO to the UXO/mine risk education teams also demonstrates that the key messages are being followed. As one risk educator explained,

*"A child told us he had found a UXO, but when we went to see it, we found it was not a UXO. However, we are happy that people are watchful and reporting suspicious items which is what we tell them to do."*

43. For example, risk education was provided during flooding in the south of Laos when it was feared that UXO may have been moved by the flood waters.

44. In 2021, a total of 63 casualties were recorded, with men and boys comprising 70% of the casualties (21 men and 23 boys). In 2022, while casualty figures fell to a total of 20, men and boys comprised 85% of the total (11 men and 6 boys). See [www.nra.gov.la](http://www.nra.gov.la).

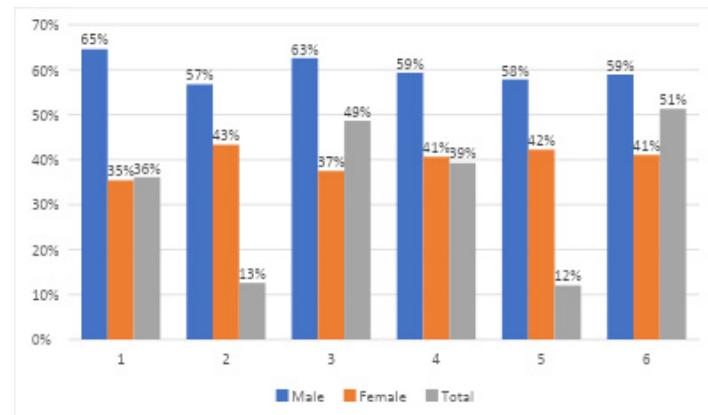
45. National Regulatory Authority, "Unexploded Ordnance Sector Annual Report 2022", 2023, Vientiane, Lao PDR

46. Interview with District Coordinator of Huameuang District, 05 December 2023.

Risk education teams can also play a broader information dissemination role and can help to pass on information to victims about the support available and help them register for assistance from the War Victims Medical Fund. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk education teams were also able to pass on basic hygiene messages to communities, and they continue to pass on messages to help villagers protect themselves from seasonal diseases such as malaria.

Over 75% of the survey respondents reported that they had received risk education messages within the last five years. While the figures indicate more men than women received UXO/MRE, this was due to more male respondents taking part in the survey. The entertainment factor of risk education, including the screening of films, puppetry, singing and games, helps to encourage people to attend sessions, as does the provision of small gifts such as pens and notebooks.

**Figure 5: Have You Ever Received UXO/MRE Messages In The Last Five Years?**



The main way that respondents received UXO/MRE messages was through community meetings (64% of respondents) or through a performance or drama (50%). People had also received messages directly from the UXO clearance team (44%). Risk education posters and leaflets were also seen in the villages visited, in village meeting halls and schools, and 35% of respondents said they had seen risk education messages this way. Fewer respondents (6%) reported receiving risk education from teachers, but this also reflects the demographics of the survey respondents which did not include school-age children.

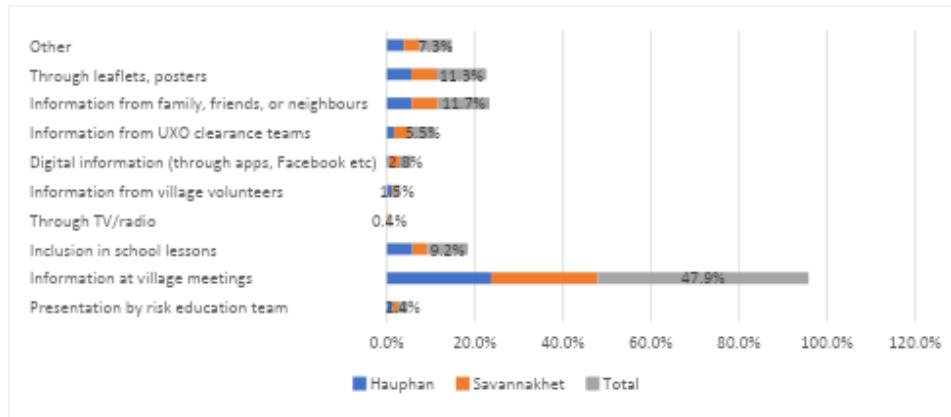
**Table 3: How Local People Received UXO/MRE Messages?**

	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attended a meeting in the village	145	36.2	110	27.4	255	63.6
Watched a performance, exhibition or drama	97	24.2	105	26.2	202	50.4
Heard the messages on radio or TV	32	8.0	20	5.0	52	13.0
Saw a poster or leaflet	71	17.7	69	17.2	140	34.9
Received the messages digitally (on phone app, Facebook)	10	2.5	6	1.5	16	4.0
Received messages from a UXO clearance team	67	16.7	108	26.9	175	43.6
Received messages from friend/neighbour	7	1.7	11	2.7	18	4.5
Other	12	3.0	12	3.0	24	6.0

UXO Lao has a Facebook page and has uploaded UXO/MRE videos on YouTube, but only 4% said they had received messages digitally, on a phone or online. Access to the internet in the communities visited was often limited. However, risk educators noted that they felt their current approaches were not suitable for everyone, and that some people did not participate in the sessions. They felt this was due to people having more access to electronic devices, particularly phones, which meant they could get their information and entertainment online, perhaps indicating a need for risk education teams to also consider the use of digital means for risk education, particularly for adolescents and young adults.

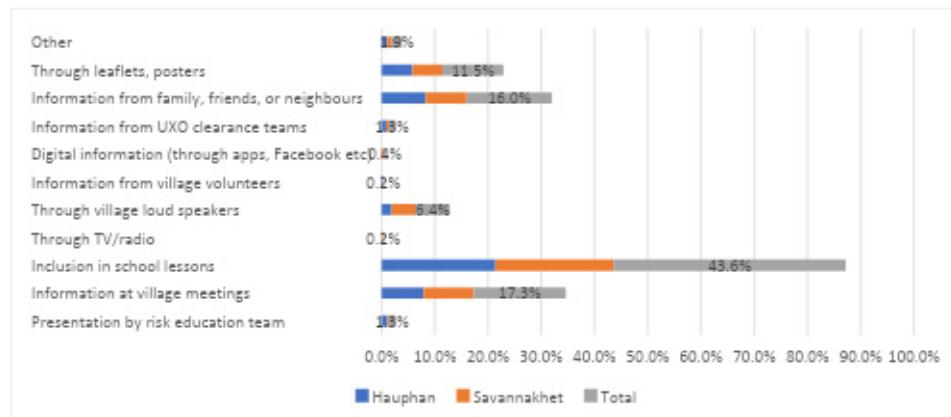
Villagers were asked which they felt was the most effective way for adults to receive UXO/mine risk education. The results show that there is a strong preference for the dissemination of information through village meetings (48% of respondents). Hearing messages from family, friends and neighbours (12%) or through leaflets and posters (11%).

**Figure 6: Ways For Dissemination UXO/MRE Messages To Adults**



Respondents believed that the best way to disseminate UXO/MRE messages to children is through inclusion within the school curriculum.

**Figure 7: Ways To Disseminate UXO/MRE Messages To Children**



**Figure 8: Eore Poster In A Classroom In Primary School In Ban Xuang**

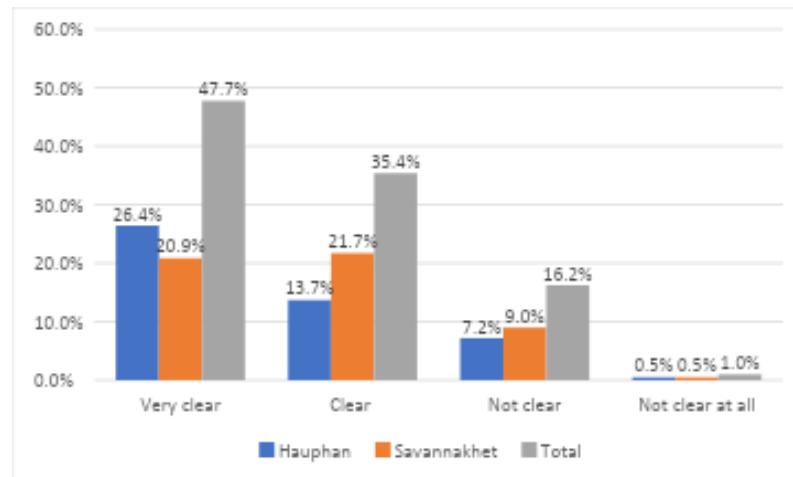


Source: Field Visit 21 December 2023

### 4.3.2 Understanding And Usefulness Of Messages

Villagers who had seen or heard mine/UXO messages generally understood them well. 83% of respondents said that they understood the messages clearly (35%) or very clearly (48%).

**Figure 7: How Well Did The Respondents Understand The Messages?**



There was a slight difference in levels of understanding between respondents in Huaphan and those in Savannakhet, which could be due to education levels or the fact that more respondents in Huaphan were Lao speakers.

The respondents were asked how useful the UXO/MRE messages were for them. Interestingly, in terms of understanding the danger of UXO/mines, recognition of different types of UXO/mines and knowing what to do if a UXO was found, respondents said the messages were useful. However, only 5% of respondents in Huaphan and 15% in Savannakhet said that risk education helped them to know how to farm more safely.

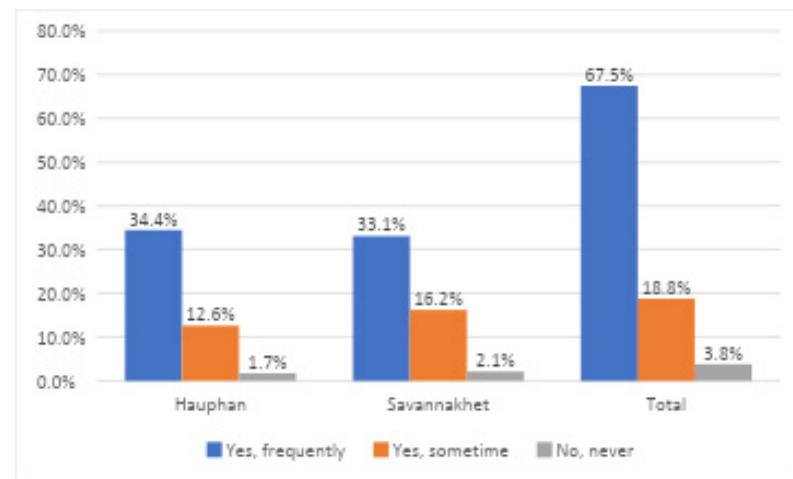
**Table 4: How UXO/MRE Messages Useful To The Respondents?**

	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I can recognize what UXO and mines look like	155	28.7	125	31.2	240	59.9
I understand the danger of the UXO/mines	164	40.9	187	46.6	351	87.5
I know what to do if I find a UXO	142	35.4	148	36.9	290	72.3
I can provide information to my family to keep them safe	99	24.7	102	25.4	201	50.1
I know how to report a UXO I find	87	21.7	103	25.7	190	47.4
I can work more safely in my fields	20	5.0	43	10.7	63	15.7
Other	10	2.5	5	1.2	15	3.7

### 4.3.3 Passing On Messages Within The Community

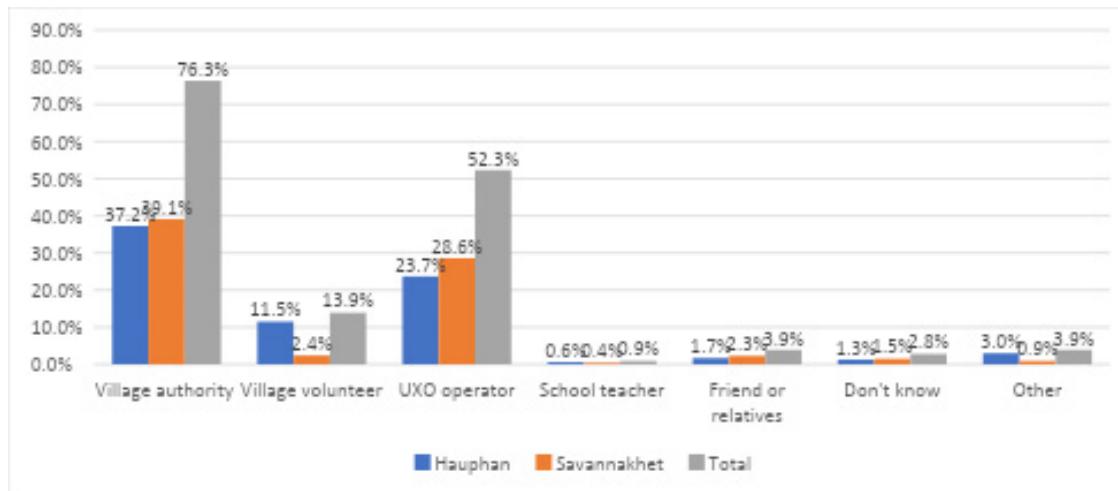
Village people talked to during the study reported that they did help to disseminate UXO/MRE messages to their families, particularly their children. Participants said that they often warned their children not to touch or move a UXO and to tell an adult if they found something. Among the 532 respondents of the survey, 67% said that they frequently passed on risk education messages, and 18% said that they sometimes did. Only 4% reported that they had never passed on risk education messages.

**Figure 8: Dissemination Of UXO/MRE Messages In The Communities**



Villagers said that if they, or someone in their household had any questions about UXO/mine safety, they would go to the village authorities, unless there was an operator working in the village and they could ask them directly. Village authorities are key people when it comes to passing on information within Lao villages, and as such should be equipped with the information, they need to be able to inform villagers of safe actions, or how to report UXO.

**Figure 9: If You Or Someone In Your Household Has Any Question On UXO/Mine Safety, Who Would You Go To?**



Relatively few people reported going to ask a schoolteacher, although this could have been because the survey respondents were above school age. Many teachers have been trained in UXO/MRE by the Ministry of Education and Sports and World Education Laos. In both Huaphan and Savannakhet, teachers also run evening classes on literacy, numeracy and life skills for adults in Community Learning Centres (CLCs) in Nong and Sepon, and this could be an opportunity for teachers to play a role in disseminating information on UXO safety to adults in the future.<sup>47</sup>

47. The community Learning Centres are run by village authorities with technical and financial support from INGOs and the Lao government.

## 4.4 Community Participation In Victim Assistance

Lao PDR ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in September 2009. Article 5 on the Convention of Cluster Munitions is consistent with the CRPD in that it requires States Parties to support UXO survivors through medical care, rehabilitation, psychological support, and socio-economic inclusion. However, victim assistance is often under-funded. In 2020, around LAK 205 million was provided for victim assistance (approximately USD 22 thousand<sup>48</sup>), while over USD 44 million was allocated for survey and clearance.<sup>49</sup>

### 4.4.1 Victim Assistance Approaches

The operators conducting survey, clearance and risk education activities often do not provide services to victims, although they may provide information to victims and families on how to access services and will provide transport in the event of an accident. Reports on UXO victims are also submitted by operators to the NRA.

The organisations working specifically in victim assistance in Lao PDR are World Education, HI, the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) and the Quality-of-Life Association (QLA), a local civil society organisation based in Phonesavan, Xieng Khuang province.

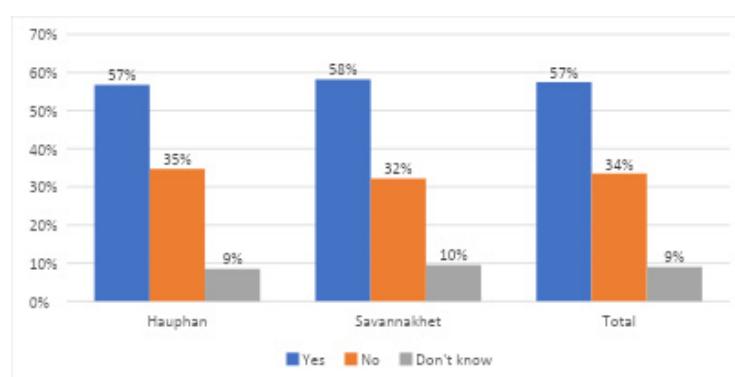
There are number of explanations as to why victim assistance remains underfunded. The NRA note that the number of UXO victims has never been accurately established and there is a lack of updated information since 2008. Others have suggested that donors are less interested in victim assistance because it is complex and takes a long time to see the impacts of the investment.<sup>50</sup> Korea and the United States currently fund victim assistance programmes in Lao PDR.

World Education is the largest provider of victim assistance services and has an MoU to provide services countrywide. World Education administers the War Victims Relief Fund in cooperation with the NRA. This provides funds for victims during their stay in hospital and for other costs related to their treatment, such as travel. World Education also runs the Opportunity for the Future project which integrates livelihood and disability support. According to World Education, this has made a great difference to the communities where they are working. Women are taught to weave and set up their own business, and animal raising has also been successful. World Education stress how important it is for victims to be included within decision-making and project activities as they have the real experience to know what is needed.

### 4.4.2 UXO Victims In The Communities

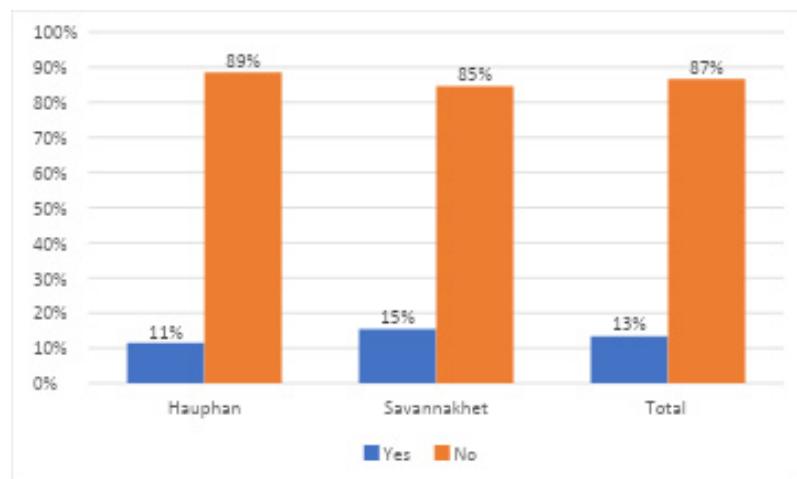
In the villages visited, over 50% of respondents reported that there were victims of UXO/mine accidents in their villages. In the thirteen villages where the study was conducted, about three or four victims were found in each village, of which Ban Xuang had 10 victims.

**Figure 10: Are There Any Victim In This Village?**



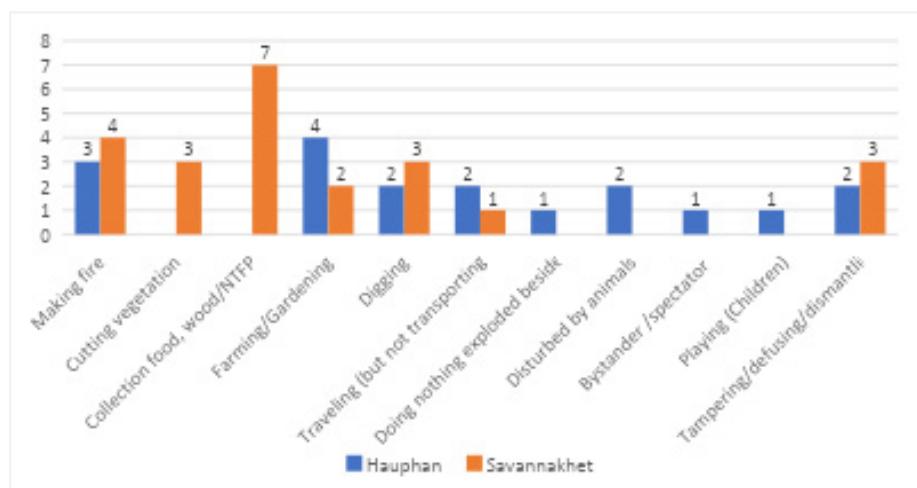
At a household level, of the 306 respondents who answered, 41 respondents (13%) reported having a UXO victim within their household. 18 victims (4 in Huaphan and 14 in Savannakhet) had died from the accidents, while 23 (14 in Huaphanh and 9 in Savannakhet) had suffered injuries. Several victims, particularly those with minor injuries, were reported to have moved out from the villages to find employment elsewhere, although the majority still live within their communities.

**Figure 10: Is Anyone In Your Family A Victim Of UXO/Mine Accident?**



Most of the accidents reported had been caused by livelihood activities such as collecting food and non-timber forest products, cutting vegetation, or making a fire for cooking or heat. A few victims, particularly in Huaphan, were war veterans, who had been injured during military training or fighting, and some were due to handling or tampering with UXO. Two months prior to the research it was reported by a risk education team that an accident had occurred in Nong due to people dismantling a bomb for scrap metal. Two people were killed.

**Figure 11: Causes Of UXO Accidents**



Only one accident was reported to be due to children playing with UXO, although children, particularly boys, still account for the second highest number of casualties after men. In 2022, 16 incidents were recorded in Lao PDR, of which 11 were men, 6 were boys and 3 were women.<sup>51</sup>

48. Currency exchange from 31 December 2021, see Oanda.

49. National Regulatory Authority. "Unexploded Ordnance Sector Annual Report 2021" 2022, Vientiane, Lao PDR.

50. Interview with the NRA Director, Vientiane, 8 November 2023; and interview with World Education, Vientiane, 5 November.

51. ICBL-CMC, "Country Profile: Lao PDR,"

#### 4.4.3 Support To UXO Victims

In cases of recent accidents, the victims/relatives interviewed reported that they received medical assistance following UXO accidents. This included transportation, hospitalisation and daily subsistence allowance for victims and their relatives while staying in the hospital. However, victims who had received their injuries in the past, often reported that they had not received support and the costs of treatment had created financial difficulties for their families.

Among 19 UXO victims interviewed, three had received supports in the form of prosthetic limbs through provincial hospitals. However, the prosthetics were not always deemed comfortable or useful. As a UXO survivor in Nong stated "I don't get used to use it. Since getting the prosthetic arm, I hardly ever use it because it is difficult to ride a motorbike."<sup>52</sup> Some victims refused assistance. In Nakeng village in Huamuang district, Huaphan, a victim who had lost his right eye in a UXO accident said that he was offered an artificial eye, but he decided not to go ahead as he was afraid of the operation and felt he was too old to need it.

World Education reported that the allocation of funds for therapy is quite good, but the provision of prosthetic limbs, psycho-social support and vocational training is not well covered. There is one vocational training centre in Xieng Khuang and one in Huaphan.

**Figure 12: A Basic Hearing Aid Device Used By A UXO Survivor Whose Hearing Was Damaged By The UXO Explosion**



Source: Field Visit 20 December 2023

In Huaphan, the Quality of Life Association (QLA) implements victim assistance activities funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). The project includes training and livelihood support.<sup>53</sup> However, the provision of livelihood support to victims was less visible in the provinces and villages visited as part of this study. No respondents reported livelihood projects for victims in Savannakhet. In Huaphan, a small number of victims had received assistance in the form of skill training and animals (cows and goats), although the results were mixed. Some beneficiaries were still raising the animals and had reared young. However, in some cases, it seems that the support did not match the victims' priorities. In Nakeng village, a woman who had lost the lower half of her leg to a UXO accident had been given a cow to raise. Finding it too difficult to look after the cow, she offered it to her relative. However, the woman knows how to weave and can earn about LAK100,000 a month (approximately USD10) from weaving.

Three war veterans were interviewed. These veterans receive a monthly allowance from the war veterans fund through the provincial department of Labour and Social Welfare.

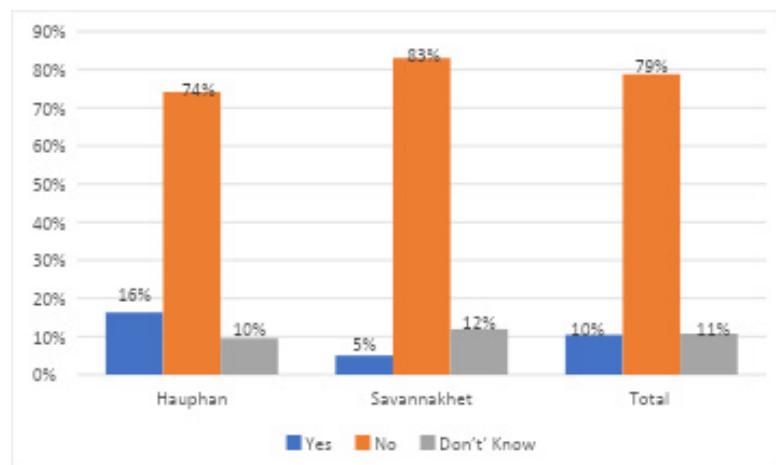
52. Interview with Victim, Nongvilay, 21 December 2023.

53. Interview with staff from Quality of Life Association, Xieng Khouang, 16 July 2024.

#### 4.4.4 Community Support To The Victims

Poor communities have limited capacity to help UXO victims in their communities. In most cases, UXO victims relied on family members and close relatives to meet their needs. However, in rural communities, exchange of labour is often a norm. If UXO victims do not have a proper shelter, village authorities are responsible for mobilising labour and materials to build a house for him/her. Village authorities also help to facilitate coordination between UXO victims and victim assistance organisations.

**Figure 13: Has your Village Setup a Fund for UXO Victims?**

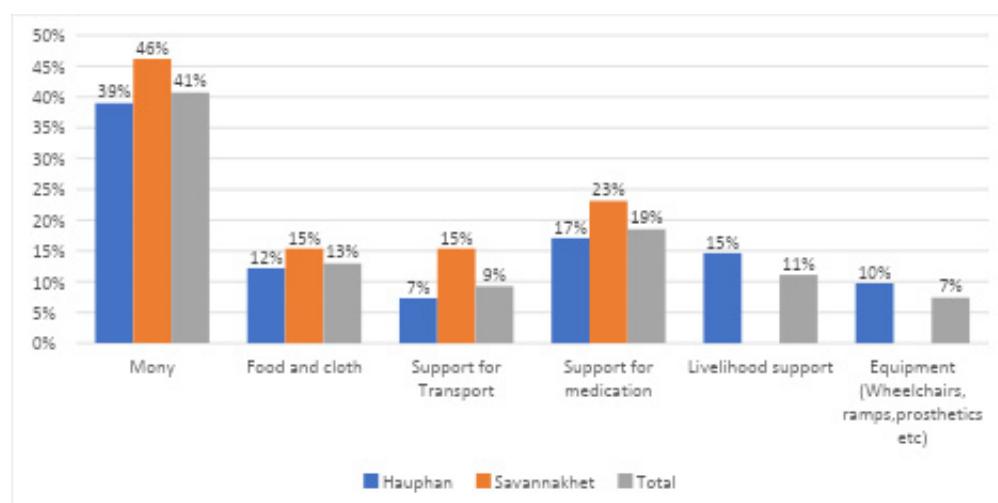


**Table 5: Sources of Fund for Victims from UXO**

	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Local people in this village	2	6	0	0	2	6
Provincial/district office	7	22	0	0	7	22
UXO organizations	20	62	6	19	26	81
Victim assistance organizations	3	9	1	3	4	12
Don't know	0	0	1	3	1	3
Other	2	6	1	3	3	3

In most cases, victims received cash payment, support for medication, food and clothes.

**Figure 14: What Does The Fund Provide For The Victims?**

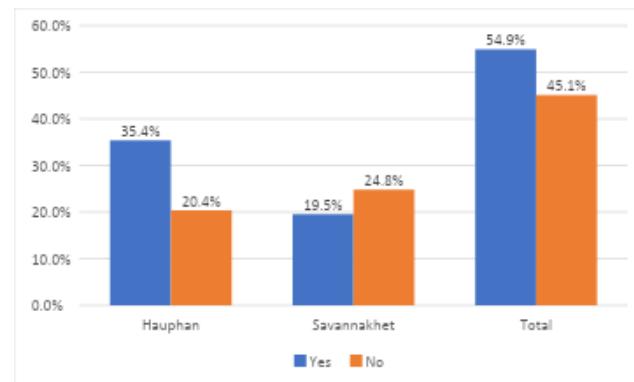


## 4.5 Employment And Volunteering

The study revealed several areas where UXO clearance operators involve local people within mine action activities, either as volunteers or as paid workers.

The survey asked whether respondents had been involved in supporting the clearance operations. 55% (35% in Huaphan and 20% in Savannakhet) reported that they had been involved in some way.

**Figure 15: Were You Involved In Supporting UXO Clearance In Any Way?**



**Table 5: Types Of Support Contributed To The Programme**

	Huaphan		Savannakhet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Cleared vegetation before clearance	25	40.3	5	8.1	30	48.4
Provided information to UXO Operator on where I found UXO	16	25.8	18	29.0	34	54.8
Provided information to family and neighbors about the clearance and marking	4	6.5	1	1.6	5	8.1
Provided food for the clearance team	16	25.8	4	6.5	20	32.3
Other	5	8.1	1	1.6	6	9.7
Total	40	64.5	22	35.5	62	100

### 4.5.1 Vegetation Cutting

Chapter Five of the Lao National UXO/Mine Action Standards states that casual staff may be employed by clearance organisations for the cutting of vegetation, if they are supervised by a qualified clearance technician and provided with safety training. Clearing vegetation can be time consuming and take deminers away from their clearance work, so having non-technical people clear land prior to clearance can increase efficiency. Of the survey respondents who reported contributing to the mine action activities in their community, 48% had been involved in clearing vegetation before clearance, with the majority of these (40%) in Huaphan province for HI and UXO Lao.

In both Huaphan and Savannakhet, UXO Lao has requested local community members to contribute their labour for clearing vegetation, with the aim to minimise costs and to encourage local people to be involved in the clearance process.<sup>54</sup> However, UXO Lao reported that it was sometimes difficult to request villagers to contribute their labour for free. A UXO Lao representative said that when the community did not participate in helping to clear the vegetation, clearance can be delayed.

54. Interview with the Director of UXO Lao in Huaphan 8 December 2023.

*"If they want the mine action clearance to be done more quickly, the people must support us. The district level must encourage the village, and the village must urge the people to participate. It is crucial for people to help us."*

The availability of village people to contribute labour for free takes them away from livelihood activities that generate food or income for their families. During certain times of the year when land is being cultivated, people will have less time to contribute their time. UXO Lao has acknowledged that there is decreasing involvement of villagers in supporting activities such as vegetation cutting, and so they have also established four salaried teams to undertake the vegetation cutting.

In Savannakhet, the HALO Trust employs its own vegetation cutting teams whereas UXO Lao has requested the landowners to clear the land during the UXO clearance. The different approaches of operators, particularly in the same province, may cause some confusion or dissatisfaction among the local communities in that they may compare the potential benefits of their involvement from different operators.

#### **4.5.2 Accommodation And Food**

The presence of clearance teams within a village can provide opportunities for villagers to earn additional income. 32% of respondents said that they supported the clearance teams by providing food. The HALO Trust noted that having teams present in villages meant that people could sell their produce to the clearance teams. While some operators camped near villages, some rented property for storage or accommodation and hired villagers as security guards during their work in the communities. The HALO Trust staff are paid a food allowance so that they can purchase food in the communities where they are working.

#### **4.5.3 Employment As Deminers Or Risk Educators**

Employment of local people as deminers or risk educators is another way that villagers may be involved in mine action activities in Lao PDR. UXO clearance can be a good source of employment for local people, particularly the younger generations.

The HALO Trust has a policy to offer employment to people from the local communities. In 2023, the HALO Trust employed 1,400 people, of whom they estimated around 90% were from the local communities.<sup>55</sup> The organization recruited about five people in each village to work as deminers, risk educators and drivers, earning between 5 to 7 million kip per month (around USD530 to USD740 per month). According to the HALO Trust, this allowed the employees and their families to invest in farm equipment and agricultural activities, significantly contributing to their families' wellbeing.

HI has also made efforts to recruit people from the villages where they work, and in Huaphan tried to increase the number of local people, including women and ethnic minority people within the UXO/MRE teams and VA teams.<sup>56</sup>

Hiring people from UXO affected communities has several benefits, not least by helping to improve the economic situation of households through employment, but also because local people know the area, they know the local authorities, can communicate easily and understand the local customs and beliefs and so help the UXO teams to engage with the communities respectfully.

Villagers who were recruited to work as deminers or UXO/MRE educators, often functioned as a bridge between the local communities and the UXO clearance operators. They were reported to be a good source of advice on UXO clearance, risk education, and even victim assistance for the local communities. In the FGD, participants said that they talked to deminers, who are their fellow villagers, when they had questions on UXO clearance and other issues. The deminers are also seen as good role models for young people in the village.

Ensuring team members in survey, clearance or mine/UXO risk education teams can speak local ethnic languages

55. Interview with the HALO Trust, Savannakhet, 25 December 2023.

56. Telephone conversation with HI Manager, Phonsaly, 30 July 2024

is important for communication purposes, particularly in communicating with women who are less likely to speak Lao. UXO Lao, HI and HALO Trust all mentioned the importance of having personnel who can speak local languages. As a risk educator from the HALO Trust explained, "Many of those women in Nong and Sepon cannot speak Lao and so we work closely with them in their own language so they can understand the messages."

#### 4.5.4 Livelihood Support

Another way in which some operators have tried to support communities in areas where clearance is ongoing is by working with other actors to support livelihood activities during or after clearance, and to support UXO victims.

The HI Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action (CAMA), which was implemented in Huameuang district in Huaphanh, provided livelihood activities and training in partnership with government departments and non-governmental organisations as an integrated part of its UXO/mine action programme. After conducting an assessment, HI supported UXO victims to set up small businesses, such as collecting and selling bamboo, or raising pigs. UXO victims were supported to attend hospital visits and child victims were supported to access school.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.5.5 Village Volunteers

The HI programme in Huaphanh works with village volunteers – two or three people in the village who can help facilitate communication between the communities and the organisation, who can report UXO and identify victims or report accidents. They also have three or four local people helping to deliver UXO risk education within the schools. HI noted that there have been no real challenges to having local volunteers, although sometimes the authorities asked for per diem to attend meetings.

World Education is implementing a risk education project of which a major component is community outreach. However, the project has found it challenging to engage the community because of a lack of incentive for community members to take part unless they are paid. People are busy in their agricultural fields and so don't make the time to volunteer unless they can see they have a direct benefit from it.<sup>58</sup> World Education had also planned for youth to be involved in the project, but faced challenges in this regard as younger people command less respect and older people are seen to have more authority.

### 4.6 Perceptions Of Mine/UXO Activities

#### 4.6.1. Perspectives On UXO Clearance

Generally, the local communities interviewed were very positive about the presence of UXO clearance operators in their villages.

The major benefit for communities with regards to UXO clearance was that it provided safety and peace of mind. In interviews and discussions with the communities, participants repeatedly said that they felt they had more confidence to work on the land after UXO clearance.

*"UXO clearance activities help villagers reduce the risk or accident from UXO, make it convenient for villager to practice their agricultural activities, collect the products from the forest, and expand their agricultural areas, which increase their productivity, increase their household income, and help them reduce poverty."* <sup>59</sup>

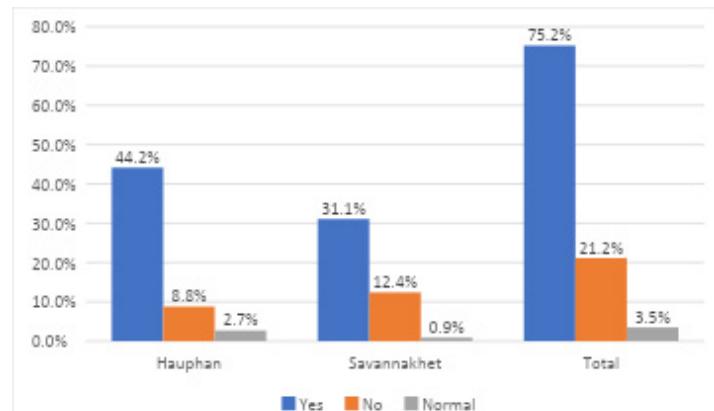
In the survey, 75% of respondents said that they felt safer using the land after clearance by UXO operators. 4% said that it was "normal" or no different, as they would be working the land anyway.

57. Telephone Conversation with HI Manager, Phongsaly, 30 July 2024.

58. World Education will be publishing the results of the pilot project towards the end of 2024.

59. Interview with village chief, Nabo village, December 2023.

**Figure 16: Do You Feel Safer After UXO Clearance?**



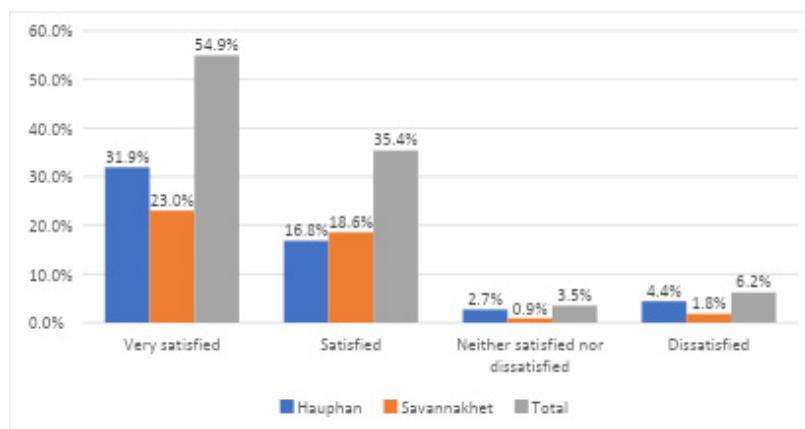
Although UXO have been removed from the land, many respondents reported that they did not feel safer using the land after clearance. Interviewees noted that in areas where UXO had been cleared, other UXO items were sometimes found. It is very likely that this is mainly due to most of the clearance tasks being roving/spot tasks, but it does indicate that perhaps more communication between clearance teams and landowners would enable them to understand more clearly the difference between roving/spot tasks and area clearance. It also points to the need for more participation in post-clearance assessment among community members.

Overall, people reported being satisfied with the UXO clearance on their land, with 90% of the 113 respondents who had had their land cleared reporting being satisfied or very satisfied.

*"The UXO clearance activities help villagers to reduce the risk or accident from UXO, and makes it more convenient for villagers to practice their agricultural activities, collect the products from the village forest, and extend their agricultural areas, which increased their productivity and household income, and helps them reduce poverty."*<sup>60</sup>

**Figure 17: Respondents' Satisfaction On UXO Clearance**

#### 4.6.2 Environmental Management



60. Interview with Village Chief, Ponekay, 24 December 2023.

In Nabo and Phonxay some dissatisfaction was expressed by people about damage and waste created by clearance teams. The large, heavy-duty trucks used to transport equipment and personnel were reported to cause damage to paths and rice fields during the rainy season.

*"A few villagers don't want the team to clear their land during the rainy season because the UXO clearance team used large vehicles to go to their field, which destroyed the road to their field and also destroyed their grazing land. But in the dry season, all villagers allow them to conduct mine action activities." <sup>61</sup>*

Villagers reported that they had to spend some funds to repair the paths.

Another concern raised in Nabo and Phonxay village was waste disposal by clearance teams while working in the villages. With large teams of deminers working in villages, environmental management is important, as stipulated in the National Mine Action Standard (Chapter 20), which states that "All domestic rubbish is to be removed from the site, buried or burned on a daily basis. Rubbish from the site is to be disposed of at approved rubbish dumping sites." However, in some villages it appears that the waste disposal had not been adequate, with plastic waste disposed of carelessly. While acknowledging that UXO operators are improving and updating their environmental management policies, it is important that these are also developed in line with community expectations.

#### 4.6.3 Perspectives On UXO/Mine Risk Education

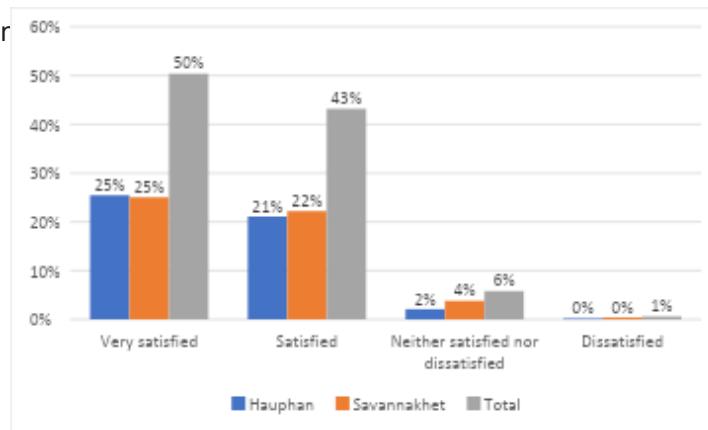
Villagers reported that they were either satisfied (50%) or very satisfied (43%) with UXO/mine risk education activities. 6% of villagers reported that they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied. People found the UXO/MRE sessions both informative and entertaining. In some cases, participants also received gifts, such as T-shirts, pens and books, from the UXO/MRE teams.

**Figure 9: Respondents' Satisfaction On UXO/MRE**

#### 4.6.4 Local Perspectives On Victim Assistance

Villagers, families and victim

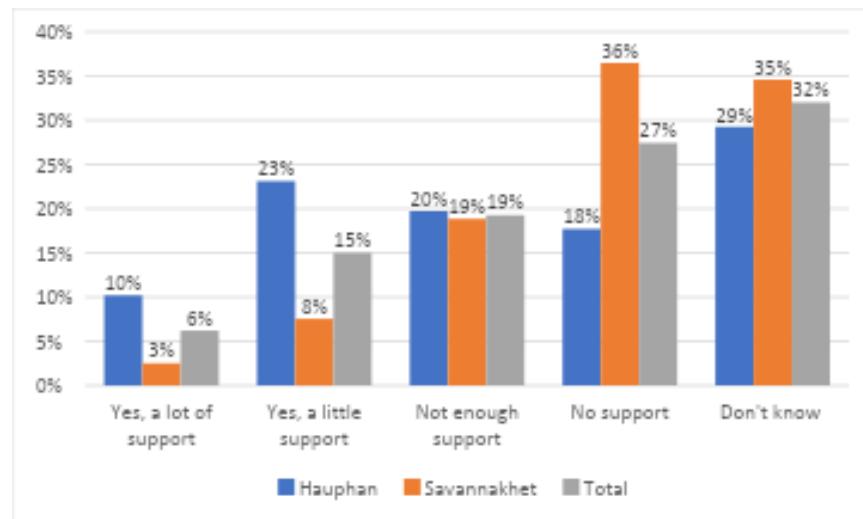
gers said that they did not



61. Interview with Village Chief, Nabo, 25 December 2023.

know who to contact or how to get support from outside their community. 84 survey respondents said that victims got no support, and 59 said that they did not get enough support.

**Figure 18: Do You Think that the UXO Victims in this Village Get the Support that They Need?**



#### 4.6.7 Respecting Livelihoods And Cultural Taboos

Operators make allowances for the clearance of rice fields during cultivation periods so that villagers can harvest their crops before clearance takes place. Often local authorities are engaged by the operators to enable discussions to happen as to the best times for clearance to begin. This requires flexibility on the part of the operator who may need to shift to a new area and then return back to a previous location, but it helps to maintain good relationships with local communities and to ensure that livelihoods are not negatively impacted by clearance processes.

Working in areas populated by ethnic people also requires respect of cultural beliefs and taboos. In many of these villages there are sacred areas, including cemeteries, spirit forests and areas for storing rice. Respecting the customs and beliefs of villages are also important and operators said that they may re-schedule visits if the village chief informs them the village will be having a funeral or ceremony. However, there were some indications of conflicts between villagers and mine action operators. In Mangkong village, for example, there are some restricted areas such as cemetery, rice field, and rice hut. It is strictly prohibited to disturb these places even though a bomble UXO was found there. It took a lot of effort by the UXO clearance operator to negotiate with the village authorities to allow the clearance team to dispose of the bombs. In another example, a UXO clearance team found some bombs near an empty rice field. When the bombs were destroyed, the explosion caused a fire in the rice field, for which the organisation had to pay compensation to cover the cost of a ceremony to appease the spirits.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS



This research aims to examine the participation of local communities in the implementation of humanitarian mine action (HMA) including UXO clearance, UXO/Mine Risk Education, and Victim Assistance in Lao PDR. The research examines local perspective on the implementation of the programme. The research was conducted in two districts namely Huameung and Viengxay in Huaphan Province and two districts of Nong and Sepon in Savannakhet Province. The study examines key pillars of HMA including clearance, risk education and victim assistance.

## 5.1 UXO Clearance

The involvement of the local communities in UXO clearance significantly contributes to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the UXO clearance activities. However, the local involvement is largely confined to activities such as providing information on the location of UXO to non-technical survey and technical survey teams. Local involvement in planning and prioritization was very limited. At the community level, village authorities serve as the bridge between villagers and UXO clearance operators. The villagers rarely communicate directly with UXO clearance operators or government agencies when they require assistance related to UXO clearance. Providing villagers with a clearer information of UXO clearance processes, particularly the differences between survey, spot clearance and area clearance, would help villagers to understand the level of UXO risk that may remain on their land following these activities.

Different UXO clearance operators sometimes applied different approaches in involving local communities in the UXO clearance activities, which generate different economic impacts to the local communities. The application of different approaches by operators working in the same area could be a source of friction between the clearance operators and the local communities.

Farmland is considered the first priority for UXO clearance, while development land for building infrastructure and public utilities is the second priority. In some cases, UXO clearance operators faced difficulties in prioritizing the clearance due to the “urgent requests” for UXO clearance from government agencies. This suggests that there does need to be stronger coordination among government agencies and with the UXO clearance operators in the planning and prioritization of the clearance.

When UXO clearance operators are working in the vicinity of a village, requests for clearance of UXO through spot tasks are often conducted relatively quickly. However, when operators are not present in the locality, it is much more challenging for local communities to request clearance, and the response is much slower.

As poor communities, the local communities have limited capability to contribute to the programme. In most cases, the community contribution was limited to providing information on hazardous areas, which is helpful to improve the efficiency of the UXO clearance teams. In some cases, the local communities provide food and hospitality for UXO clearance teams, which can help to build trust between the local people and clearance teams.

The local communities were generally very positive about the presence of UXO clearance teams in the communities, citing that their work helped to make them feel safer. In some cases, there were also opportunities in terms of employment. However, in a few villages concerns were raised about the environmental impacts of UXO clearance teams and respect for local beliefs and taboos.

## 5.2 UXO/Mine Risk Education

UXO clearance operators applied various approaches in delivering UXO/MRE messages to the local communities. Over 70% of the respondents reported they received UXO/MRE messages in the last five years.

The most common way of delivering UXO/MRE messages in the Lao context is through village meetings. Teams may also visit households to provide messages, and children receive risk education via the school curriculum. Digital risk education has not yet been employed in Lao PDR, with the exception of some material on Facebook and YouTube, but with an increasing number of young people online, this may be an approach to employ in the future.

Local communities were satisfied with UXO/MRE delivery in their communities, finding the activities informative, entertaining and rewarding.

## 5.3 Victim Assistance

Victim assistance is the least prioritized and funded subsector within the Lao UXO sector. The long-term commitment required and the lack of systematic data collection concerning the position of victims make it a challenging area to address. As a result, a significant number of victims have little or no support. The majority of victim assistance has focused on medical and rehabilitation support, with limited social and economic support, although this is addressed through some NGO projects. As poor communities, the contribution of the local communities to support victims is very limited. Nevertheless, the local communities still maintain strong social bond and relationship where UXO victims can rely on this network for meeting their basic needs.

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## Appendix I: List of Key Informant Interviews

No	Name	Sex	Appointment/Role	Organization
<b>Vientiane</b>				
1	Chomyeang Phengthongsavath	M	Former Director General	NRA
2	Vilaivan Thongmanivong	M	Head of Public Relation	UXO Lao
3	Rebecca Derry	F	Director	World Education
4	William Hunter	M	Programme Manager	HALO Trust
5	Yvon	M	Technical Advisor	Humanity & Inclusion
<b>Huaphan Province</b>				
6	Vongsackda Keochomsy	M	PRA Staff	Huaphan PRA
7	Phonechan Khampanya	M	Director	UXO Lao Huaphan
8	Khampheng Dinthavong	M	Team Leader/Clearance	UXO Lao Huaphan
9	Vanxay Phengviphane	M	Team Leader/EORE	UXO Lao Huaphan
10	Vilaysak Vithaya	M	Manager	Humanity & Inclusion
11	Vilaysouk Xaysana	M	Team Leader/Clearance	Humanity & Inclusion
12	Pina Sibounhueang	M	Team Leader/EORE	Humanity & Inclusion
13	Khemphet Pheangpanya	M	District Coordinator	Huameung District
14	Lienphone Mounkhamphay	F	District Coordinator	Viengxay District
15	Kham-Oud	M	Village Chief	Nakeng
16	Khianthong	M	UXO Survivor	Nakeng
17	Chanh	F	UXO Survivor	Nakeng
18	Cheuxong	M	Village Chief	Khangkham
19	Kuavang	M	Deputy Village Chief	Khangkham
20	Chor Yia	F	UXO Survivor	Khangkham
21	Lon Phimmavong	M	Village Chief	Ban Phao
22	Thong Bounmixay	M	Deputy Village Chief	Ban Phao
23	Viengkham Xaisomphone	M	Village Chief	Meuang-nga
24	Savai Xaysongkham	M	UXO Victim	Meuang-nga
25	Thongmy Bounmixay	M	Village Chief	Nameuang
26	Bounmai Sisombath	M	UXO Survivor	Nameuang
27	Bounloy Bounpheang	M	UXO Survivor	Nameuang
28	Thongbeun Lavongsa	M	Village Chief	Xiengseu
29	Vanthong Thongmany	M	UXO Survivor	Xiengseu
30	Kabone Phetthavong	M	UXO Survivor	Xiengseu
<b>Savannakhet Province</b>				
31	Sakounxyp Senamouny	M	PRA Staff	Savannakhet PRA
32	Thongsay Sisavath	F	District Coordinator	Meuang Nong
33	Boualom Khomthavong	M	District Coordinator	Sepone District
34	Sivay Ketsavanh	F	Team Leader/Clearance	HALO Trust
35	Vilayvanh Nouanpaseth	F	Team Leader/EORE	HALO Trust
36	Bouakham Xaysonglum	M	Village Chief	Dongnasan
37	Sa-ngop	M	UXO Survivor	Dongnasan
38	Khamtay Xongxayavong	M	Village Chief	Ban Xuang
39	Khambeua	M	UXO Survivor	Ban Xuang
40	Khamsene	M	UXO Survivor	Ban Xuang
41	Loua	M	UXO Survivor	Ban Xuang
42	Ken	M	UXO Survivor	Ban Xuang
43	Homphheang Soselanong	M	Village Chief	Nongvilay
44	Khamma Nongboudtalath	M	UXO Survivor	Nongvilay
45	Hom Xayaboud	M	Village Chief	Phonxay
46	Thepphavong Inthavong	M	Deputy Village Chief	Phonxay
47	Sivongphet Monmany	M	Village Chief	Nabo
48	Sisomphou Phoumysid	M	UXO Survivor	Nabo
49	Ta-oi Thepphavong	M	Village Chief	Phonhai
50	Phetsamone Chaisone	F	Deputy Village Chief	Phonhai
51	Kor	M	UXO Survivor	Phonhai



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