

Case study: schoolbells in the jungle

A bell sounds and children's excited voices echo through the dense scrub and along the mountain path. This part of Lao PDR, Nong Het district in Xieng Khouang province, is characterised by rolling green mountains and breathtaking views. It is also sadly one of the most UXO contaminated areas of the country. Recently MAG, funded by DFID, and working in partnership with the Laos and Danish Red Cross cleared school grounds in five isolated villages to the far eastern side of the district, near the Vietnamese border. Schools were built in three of the villages following the clearance of the remnants of conflict and metal contamination. In the other two, areas were cleared for school gardens and playgrounds. Often these villages are so isolated that MAG technicians had to walk for up to two hours through the jungle to get there.

"Before MAG came, we had to warn the children about UXO before lessons began. Now we are very happy. The children are free and safe to play at break time and some of the classes have started growing crops and vegetation within the school grounds as part of their lessons." So says Douang Chay, teacher at the school in Khaeng Let. There are three teachers at the school teaching seventy four children aged six to fourteen years in general subjects including mathematics, Laos language and history.

Chou Phoua Lo is the village head in Kham Pong where MAG cleared 2,000 sq/m of land so that a school with three classrooms could be built to accommodate children of primary school age from the village and surrounding area. He says: "Before, there was no school and lots of illiteracy in the village. Now the children have the chance to learn and study to make their lives better." Thong, a 20 year old teacher at the school adds. "We're all so pleased that MAG have been here. Everybody feels safer and are confident to let their children play."

Construction of the school in Bouakser began in May following the conclusion of MAG's clearance in the village. "The school will make a big difference to the lives of the children in the village," comments the village head, Mr Douang. "We're very pleased with MAG's work here, they clear UXO very well." He adds with a smile.

"During the war, bombs were dropped on the village, because there was a military position of the Laos army nearby. The villagers were so scared that they went to live up in the caves nearby," says Bounse, the village head in Houay Dua, who was ten years old at the time. He goes on to describe how, following the war, the whole village was moved half a kilometre up the mountain. It is on the site of the old village where the school was eventually constructed in 2001. The presence of UXO surrounding the school was an ongoing problem until MAG was called in to clear the area. The school was closed while MAG worked there, reopening again in September 2005 when the clearance was complete.

By far the largest school in the area is at Houay Lom. It has five classrooms and some 290 children, with a dormitory where children who come from further afield stay during the week - children come from five other settlements as well as the village, some travelling by foot or on bike for over two hours. Further construction is planned for a teachers dormitory to also be added in the near future. "UXO was hindering development in the village, so we were very happy when MAG came. Now the children can play safely and learn," says Chua Ka, the village head.

The overriding sentiment from all these villages is similar – the sense of safety is important, as is the opportunity for development. In each, the impact of MAG's work means that the youngest members of the community have a real chance of a better future.