

A photograph of a man in a white tank top and black and white striped shorts, laughing heartily while climbing a staircase. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The man is positioned on the left side of the frame, leaning back and looking upwards. The staircase railing is visible in the background.

Helping People Move On

COPE

Introduction from the Director of the National Rehabilitation Centre, Dr Thongchanh Thepsomphou

COPE has worked with the National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) for over 13 years to provide high quality rehabilitation services throughout Lao PDR. The partnership has enabled the development of comprehensive rehabilitation services, including the provision of thousands of prostheses and orthoses free to people with mobility impairments, many of whom which have been injured by unexploded ordinance or cluster munitions.

The Government of Lao PDR is fully committed to implementing the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. It is through collaborations like that between NRC and COPE that the obligations for victims of cluster munitions and the rights of all people with disabilities are met.

Dr Thongchang poses next to a sculpture made by Anousone VongAphay, a local artist. It is made form 500kg of UXO, including cluster munitions, in memory of those who were injured, lost lives or loved ones through the country by the UXO.

COPE stands for the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise. COPE is a local Lao not-for-profit organization that works with the government-run National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) in an innovative partnership developing rehabilitation services across Lao PDR. This includes the production and provision of artificial limbs (prostheses), supportive devices (orthoses), as well as physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

COPE aims to support the work of the NRC in a number of ways:

- Cover the costs of devices, surgery and treatment so that it is free for those that cannot afford to pay. COPE also provides transport costs and a daily allowance for patients and their carers.
- Increase awareness in communities in Lao PDR of the services available for people with physical disabilities, so people like Englivanh do not have to wait years to find out about COPE and the NRC.
- Conduct training and support skills development, upgrading clinical skills in P&O (prosthetics and orthotics), physiotherapy and occupational therapy in the national rehabilitation program.

Helping People Move On

In Lao PDR limited access to medical care and on-going rehabilitation support restricts peoples' capacity to come to terms with and overcome the challenges their disability places in front of them. COPE and NRC provide rehabilitation services to people with a range of physical disabilities, including those suffering from the effects of polio, leprosy, injuries from work-related or traffic accidents, or from unexploded bombs, including a high number of people injured from cluster munition incidents.



Monty

Monty comes from Sam Neua in north-eastern Lao PDR. Due to leprosy he lost his leg and most of his fingers. However he has not given up. He has learnt to manage well with a prosthetic leg and although has significant problems with his hands, uses a tricycle to travel longer distances. He is also working hard to become a teacher and recently graduated with a high school certificate at age 35.

People can be affected by leprosy in different ways and there is still a lot of misunderstanding and stigma around this disease. Leprosy – or Hansen’s disease - is caused by a bacteria. Poverty and poor nutrition increase the risk of being able to contract the disease. Prompt treatment can mean no long-term damage. If left untreated, sensation can be permanently disrupted so that cuts and sores can develop into limb threatening infections.

Monty and Mae Tao are good examples of what can be achieved through support, patience and determination.



Mae Tao

Despite having virtually no fingers left due to leprosy, Mae Tao manages to produce cross-stitch items for sale. This provides a vital income for her family. She also has lost both legs to the disease. COPE has provided her with two prosthetic legs enabling her to walk again.

Englivanh

Several years ago Englivanh was working deep in the forest when a tree fell on the back of his knee causing a deep wound. While his village, in a remote northwestern province of Lao PDR, is only 13 kilometers from a district hospital the road connecting his village to medical services located in the district centre was impassable due to recent heavy rains. Englivanh was treated with traditional medicines in his village, but the wound became infected. When he finally made it to the hospital a week later the infection was so severe his leg had to be amputated.



In 2009, Englivanh heard about COPE and the services he could receive for free. He made the 29-hour bus journey to Vientiane to see if he could be fitted with a prosthetic. Like all patients, Englivanh trained with his new leg before the outer shell was applied and was taught how to use the new limb. For Englivanh, his confidence grew with every step he took, calling his new leg "a tool for life".

Surviving the Bombs

Injury from UXO is the most common reason people require a prosthetic in Lao PDR. Thirty-five percent of the COPE and NRC patients who receive prostheses are those injured by UXO.



Bang

At the age of 16, Bang was injured by an exploding bomb that was left from a war which ended long before he was born. He was working in his family's rice field near their village removing tree stumps from the ground. As he shifted a stump it unearthed an unexploded bomb, causing it to explode. Bang received serious injuries. His father and a friend rushed him to the district hospital and then the provincial hospital: neither had blood or oxygen to treat him. When he was finally brought to a hospital in Vientiane his leg was so badly injured it could not be saved.

In June 2010, four years after the accident, Bang received his first prosthetic leg through COPE and the NRC. He was excited to learn to walk with the prosthetic. "I can now begin to walk freely and start living my life again", explained Bang.



UXO in Lao PDR

Lao PDR is the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world. From 1964-1973 during the Second Indochina War, the US Air Force dropped a planeload of bombs every eight minutes for nine years.

Quantity of ordnance dropped over Lao PDR during this period:
2 million tons

Number of missions flown by USAF in delivering this ordnance:
In excess of 584,000

Number of cluster submunitions (bombies) dropped:
In excess of 260 million

Estimated failure rate for the submunitions:
30%

Estimates number of unexploded bombies contaminating Lao PDR today:
At least 78 million

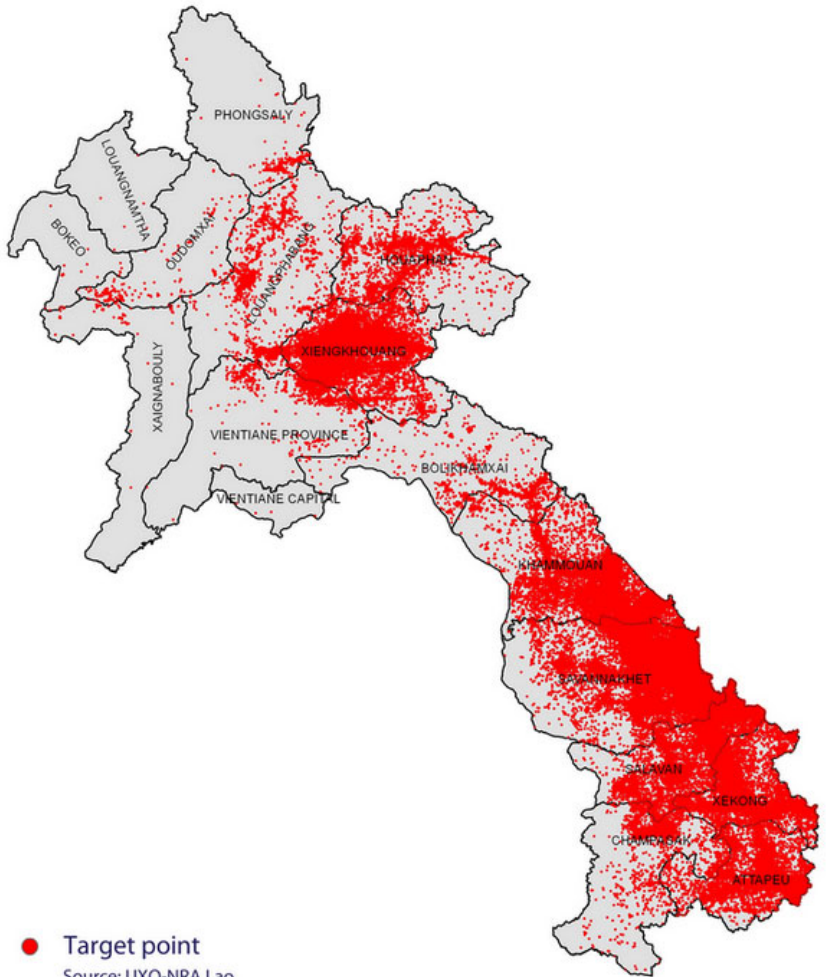
Number of people killed and injured annually in Lao PDR:
300



A BLU26 submunition

UXO Contamination

US Air Force Bombing Data Map Lao PDR



Clinic Days

A photograph of a clinic setting. A patient in a light blue short-sleeved shirt and dark shorts is standing on a white platform, possibly a scale or a step, while being examined by a medical professional in a white coat. Another medical professional in a white coat is visible in the background, looking at a computer monitor. The scene is brightly lit, likely from a window. The overall image has a blue tint.

COPE works with the government-run rehabilitation centres throughout the country: the NRC in Vientiane and four provincial centres in Luang Prabung, Xiengkhoung, Chammpasak and Savannakhet.

In all centres, the clinic is held every Tuesday and Thursday. The clinic is open and free for all, new and previous patients alike. Each person is assessed by a team of medical professionals that includes local surgeons, physiotherapists, and prosthetist/orthotists. Important decisions about future treatments are made here with the whole team involved. A plan is developed for each individual patient and COPE will cover the cost of the treatment if the family is unable to pay.

COPE Connect

Santar inspired the design of COPE Connect, our outreach program launched in 2009, highlighting the need to promote more widely the free services offered by COPE.

People are often unable to travel to one of the clinics for assessment. This is due to a number of reasons, including lack of transport or disability-accessible vehicles, poor road conditions or no road system, or unable to pay the cost of travel. There is also limited knowledge throughout the country about the services available to people. In response, we have developed an outreach component to the COPE program that takes assessments to communities all over the country.



COPE Connect staff work with local authorities to improve referral networks and educate people about how COPE can provide and pay for rehabilitation services for people with disabilities. We are now running assessments in a growing number of districts. In the first 18 months, we have provided a free outreach assessment to 748 people in 14 different locations around the country. More than half of the people reached through COPE Connect have been provided with comprehensive rehabilitation services. All had never accessed such services before.

COPE Connect is a vital part of COPE and is working to ensure that all of the people who need our services can access them.

Santar

Santar is a 13 year old boy whose treatment is a great example of teamwork and the need for locally based services.

Santar was housebound for over two years following a traffic accident in a remote part of northern Lao PDR. Surgery that saved his life left him with one leg missing and the other badly healed resulting in him unable to walk or even stand. When COPE staff heard about him from another village while on a field trip, they made the journey to see Santar. They found him depressed and withdrawn inside his family's house.



Santar agreed to make the twenty-four hour bus journey to Vientiane for treatment to the NRC. Local surgeons corrected his left foot. Then the local clinical staff fitted a prosthetic for his right leg and an orthosis to his left. Regular physiotherapy and a realization that returning to school was achievable sustained Santar through four months of treatment before returning home. Now living in Vientiane, Santar is at school studying English, enjoys cooking, swimming, computing and is currently top of his class! No longer the depressed boy we first met, he is now optimistic about his future.



Like all children with a prosthesis he will need regular replacement limbs and therapy as he grows. COPE believes that supporting existing services, focusing on local skill development, and long term planning will ensure people have access to a quality rehabilitation service they deserve for as long as they need it.



Santar

Re-shaping Lives

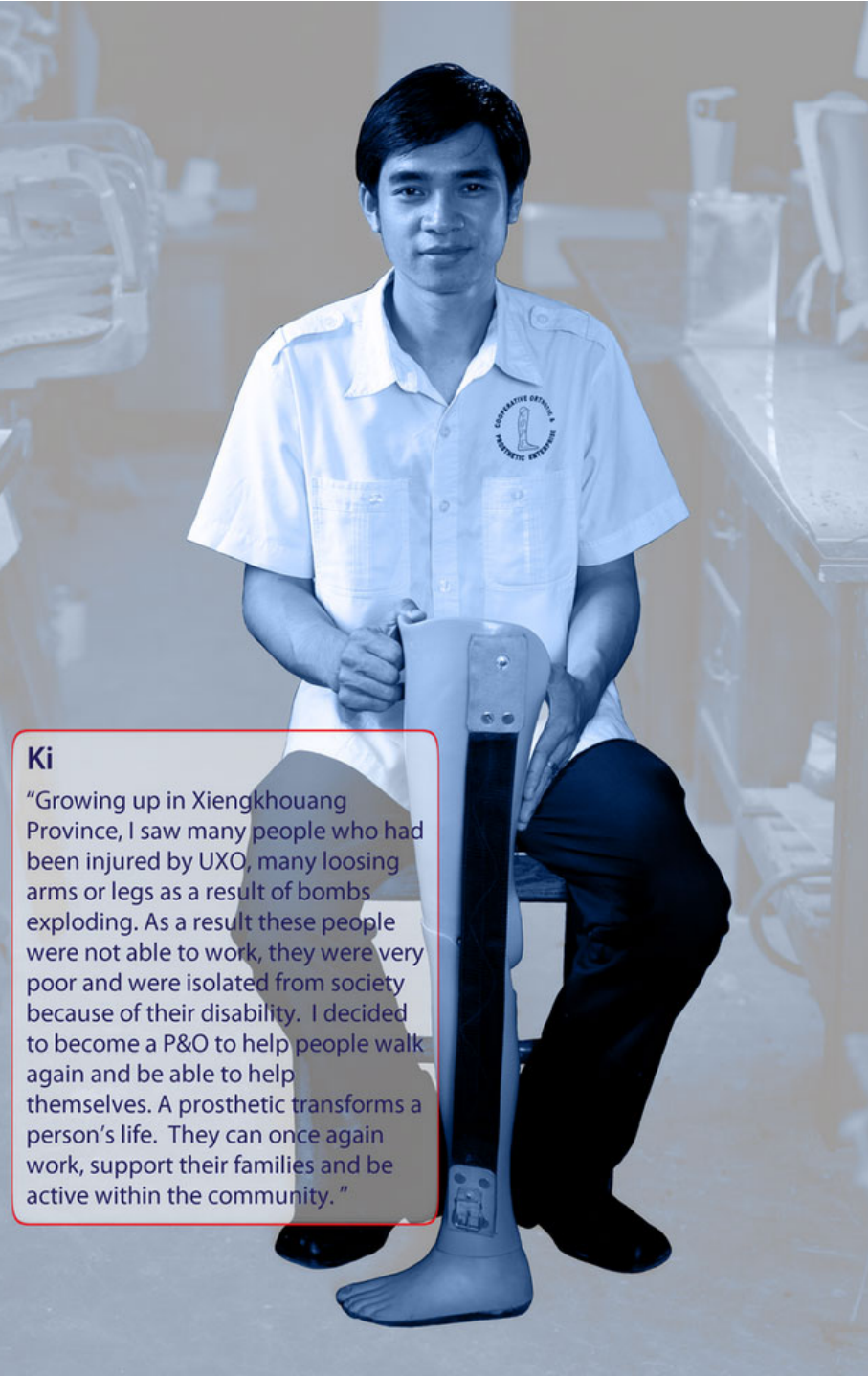
COPE believes that training local people to a high standard is the best way to build sustainable services. Eleven local staff have been trained to international standards at the Cambodian School of Prosthetic and Orthotics. They are now working at the five centers across the country that COPE supports, with two more staff currently in training at the VIETCOT school in Hanoi. Plans for the future include developing institutional capacity in Lao PDR to be able to meet the country's own needs for rehabilitation professionals.



Two of the original eleven have gone on to receive a higher level of recognition awarded by La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. This award is a Category 1 Prosthetic and Orthotics and is recognized by the International Society for P&O. Ki is one of these two people. He graduated in September 2007 and currently works at the NRC as the P&O Coordinator.

COPE also runs courses to train bench technicians, some of whom are people with disabilities themselves. Short courses on specific topics help to continue to improve services and are important to keep up with technological advancements in the field of P&O.





Ki

"Growing up in Xiengkhouang Province, I saw many people who had been injured by UXO, many losing arms or legs as a result of bombs exploding. As a result these people were not able to work, they were very poor and were isolated from society because of their disability. I decided to become a P&O to help people walk again and be able to help themselves. A prosthetic transforms a person's life. They can once again work, support their families and be active within the community."

Building Skills

COPE is committed to generating locally led, high quality services that serve individuals and communities, and employ and develop people with disabilities wherever possible.



Khamany

Khamany was employed on the construction of the Visitor Center. A member of our team noted that he suffered from an impairment and suggested that he attend the clinic for free assessment. The diagnosis was polio, which had left his left leg weak so that he was unable to stand for long periods of time.

Khamany was fitted with a leg brace and entered a new stage of his life. His practical skills enabled him to train to become a bench technician at the NRC in the P&O workshop. He is now also a member of the wheelchair basketball team.



Khamany

"Before this training I felt like I couldn't do anything and that my disability was my fault. Now I can help others and I feel useful."



Paediatric Support

Occupational Therapy, or OT, is a relatively unknown profession in Lao PDR. There is no local graduate training program available in-country. OT helps people of all ages who have physical, mental or social problems as a result of accident, illness or ageing, to do the things they want to do. These could be daily activities that many of us take for granted, from grocery shopping or brushing your teeth, to more complex activities such as caring for children, being able to work, or maintaining a social life.



The NRC and COPE believe OT is an important component of a rehabilitation program for patients. In 2010, an OT training program was initiated by COPE to develop the OT knowledge and skills of five physiotherapists that work in the NRC. Once the current team of trainees have developed a strong foundation of OT knowledge and skills, they will begin to share their new skills with staff at the Provincial Rehabilitation Centres.

Achieving Milestones

This young boy has cerebral palsy. As a result his muscles may become stiff or he may have shaky uncontrolled movement. The impact of cerebral palsy is life long and COPE/NRC are working with him and his family so he can enjoy the most from his life. The role of rehabilitation is important to help him achieve developmental milestones, such as learning to sit, crawl, walk, use his hands to play and complete basic activities of daily living. Working together the whole NRC team can help him and his parents by provision of orthotics, a wheelchair, and therapy so he can reach his fullest potential.





Club foot patient

It is estimated that up to 2000 children under five years old in Lao PDR have club foot and would benefit from the treatment COPE/NRC can provide. Early identification and treatment is vital to ensure the best result and that children can partake in normal activities, such as school with their peers.

In high income countries this treatment is normally begun at a week old. This same technique has been used in Lao PDR on children up to 13 years old. The method used is called the Ponseit technique. Local staff have been trained in the technique at all five rehabilitation centres. The treatment involves a series of casts to gradually correct the foot and in some cases a simple surgery followed by the use of a special bar and boots at night for a few weeks. The bar and boots are also made by COPE/NRC.

The local teams are experts at finding a way. For some adults with club foot who have not been able to access treatment, years of walking abnormally mean that surgery is not an option. Custom-fit shoes are made in the workshop to fit an adult with club foot.

"For the first few months after the accident, I could not do anything for myself. I was sad and frustrated. The therapy can be hard, but the more I do the exercises the easier they are. I can walk by myself again and am starting to be able to use my arms and hands. This is good as I hope one day to begin my career working for a telecommunications company."



Phap

Less than two years ago, Phap had just graduated from university and was looking forward to working for one of the telecommunication companies in Lao PDR. A road accident changed his life forever. Phap sustained a brain hemorrhage from the accident that resulted in the paralysis of his whole right side as well as causing short-term memory loss. Once released from hospital, Phap began treatment at the NRC. Coming five days per week to the NRC, Phap is undergoing physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

Training of Trainers

COPE also supports the skill development of physiotherapists working at the NRC and at the four Provincial Rehabilitation Centres. We currently provide training to a small group of physiotherapists, upgrading their existing knowledge and skills. The ultimate goal of the training course is for each participant to subsequently become a trainer of other physiotherapists in their specialist areas.

Fundraising

Through COPE, funding donated to assist UXO survivors and people with disabilities is targeted towards their needs and will be available for a long time. COPE also ensures the services are provided through local infrastructure, making the advances sustainable.

COPE operates with the support of key international donors, as well as individuals who donate to and fundraise for the program around the world. The current international organizations and governments that provide financial assistance to COPE are the Australian Government (AusAID), Association for Aid and Relief Japan, Chistoffel - Blindenmission, Deseret International Charities, ICRC Special Fund for Disabled, French Fund for Social Development and POWER International.



Many of the visitors to the COPE Visitor Centre offer a donation to the program or fundraise for us in their spare time. Every individual donation that is made to COPE goes directly into providing the services for those who cannot afford to access them. Any contribution to COPE is vital. Santar's initial treatment and care cost just 450 US dollars, the materials for Englivanh's new leg cost just 75 US dollars, and the total cost of care for the provision of below-knee prosthetic leg is just 200 US dollars.

Funding is needed for improving facilities, continuing training, covering patient costs and materials and clinical supplies, and for the administration of COPE.

For more information on how you can support the work of COPE, contact us on cope@laopdr.com.

NRC



NATIONAL REHABILITATION CENTRE



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