

A helping hand for those who can't COPE

A cascade of khaki-green baubles hangs from the ceiling, suspended on transparent plastic.

At first I'm confused as to what it is I'm looking at but, on closer inspection, it becomes clearer. Above is a split-open bomb-casing, and this is its payload of cluster bomblets, or 'bombies', whistling downwards towards the ground.



A cluster bomb sculpture and a mock-up of a rural house are two of the main exhibits.

It's the signature exhibit that greets you as you enter the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) visitor centre, which opened in February of this year. The significance is that unexploded ordnance (UXO) - bombs or bomblets that failed to detonate when they were dropped during the Indochina War - is the main reason that people in Laos need prosthetic limbs.

Laos is the most heavily bombed country per capita anywhere in the world. The Indochina War ended in 1975 but millions of pieces of UXO still litter the country and new casualties from UXO-related accidents continue to occur. In rural communities it is tempting for families to hunt for and attempt to disarm UXO in order to sell the metal for scrap.

"There was an accident in January when one 'bombie' killed four children and injured five others," says COPE Project Coordinator Jo Pereira. "And that's just one. There were maybe 80 million left on the ground after the war - the numbers are just mind-boggling."

There are other exhibits besides the cluster-bomb piece, and you are greeted by the newest installation as you arrive at the centre - a 400 kilo mother and child sculpture, made almost entirely of UXO.

Excellent photography is another major component of the visitor centre and highlights how deeply UXO has become embedded in the lives of rural Lao people. Acid bombs are seen to adorn the shelves of a home as ornaments. Other remnants have found new uses as rice cookers, oil lamps, ladders, belt buckles and plant beds. They even form part of the artificial legs that those affected have crafted for themselves to try and fashion some kind of normality in their lives.

The largest exhibit is the re-creation of a typical village house, which dominates the centre of the exhibition space.

"What we wanted to do was set up the kind of house that a scrap collector might live in just to see how some of these items are used in people's daily lives," says Jo.

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She says that in the same way that people go into the forest to collect bamboo and wood to make their homes, the other resources they find around them also get incorporated.

The fact the house is on stilts is a poignant reminder that ladders and disabilities don't really mix.

The really striking part of the exhibition, however, is the human element; the centre is littered with the remnants of personal tragedies, such as the tearful parents who recount their son's death from UXO in one of numerous video exhibits.

Whilst UXO is the most common reason for needing a prosthetic limb, it's not the only one. As the narrative on the walls in both English and Lao explains, road traffic accidents are second and leprosy is third.

It's not all despair though. The wall of photos telling the stories of polio, clubfoot and other tragedies also tells of repair, renewal and rehabilitation. We see the patients with their new limbs, growing in confidence as they learn how to use them. Jo explains that the main aim of the centre is to showcase the work of the rehabilitation staff.

One man spent four years eating 'like a dog', as he describes it, after losing two arms and an eye to a UXO accident. With the help of COPE he now has prosthetic arms and is able to cook for his family.

COPE deals with victim assistance rather than clearance and education. They work with the adjoining National Rehabilitation Centre to provide artificial limbs, limb support devices and mobility aids.

A prosthetic leg imported from a developed country such as New Zealand costs upwards of US\$2,000. But here they make them on site using the same technology for a fraction of the cost - about US\$50 - and they certainly appear to be of comparable quality.

These are not off-the-peg items, either. In order to create a prosthesis that fits comfortably, each one has to be made to measure from scratch. The step-by-step process from plaster-cast to finished prosthesis is outlined in an exhibit.

The items may be relatively cheap but they still don't pay for themselves, and this is where COPE comes in.

"The vast majority of people in Laos with disabilities wouldn't be able to afford to pay for something like this," says Jo.

She explains the government pays for the buildings and salaries, and that COPE supports with staff training and puts up the money for patients who can't afford treatment. They currently serve around 1,500 patients a year.

The visitor's centre is on Khou Vieng Road , 500 metres east of the morning market. It's open from 9am-4pm Monday to Friday and entrance is free. There is a small attached cafe, and a shop where you can purchase items in support of COPE or make donations.

Jo is keen to stress that people who donate are directly helping patients access the centre's services.

"Because we are a local organisation – we're only in Laos – and we have a grant for things like our salaries and

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for the training, 100 percent of your donation actually goes to what you want it to go towards. You're not paying for a head office in the UK or anything like that.”

The visitor centre's main audience is both people living locally and tourists.

“If you're travelling in Laos , it's one of the things I think you should really be aware of - the UXO issue,” Jo said.

She adds that one of the aims of the centre is to make people more aware of what cluster bombs are and how they still affect people's lives 40 years on.

“I think it's really important. Isn't that what travelling's all about?”

By NEIL BENNION
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