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Survivors' Assistance in Conflict: Challenges From Eastern DRC

Because of the ongoing conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), providing aid and rehabilitation assistance to survivors of mine-related injuries is difficult. Beyond essential rehabilitation services, the United Nations Mine Action Service's victim assistance efforts in DRC aim to provide economic skills to promote self-reliance and enable survivors to provide for their families.

by Douglas Felix Kilama [United Nations Mine Action Service]

In post-conflict contexts, mine action priorities alternate between humanitarian assistance, stabilization, reconstruction and development. In Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the renewed conflict in the country's eastern region interrupted victim assistance efforts, halting and even reversing economic-reintegration projects. As a long-term objective, economic reintegration aims to provide alternative sources of income to enable survivors to become self-reliant; related efforts may include providing access to land and other production resources, microfinancing, public employment and vocational training. Such programs require a degree of developmental stability in order to succeed, and eastern DRC currently lacks stability.

However, reintegration programming addresses survivors' immediate needs, including immediate medical care after mine or explosive remnants of war (ERW) accidents, provision of non-food relief items to survivors and their families, and introductory vocational training on topics including animal and crop husbandry, catering, hair dressing, small-scale business management and tailoring. The benefits of UNMAS' economic-reintegration programs in DRC were examined over the last 12 months, focusing on the conflict-affected eastern region. As a

result of the programs, survivors became self-reliant, able to meet their economic needs and afford basic necessities such as food, school fees and clothing for their families.

Challenges

Eastern DRC presents distinct challenges for survivors and assistance providers. Poor physical infrastructure and ongoing conflict reduce access to services and hinder organizations from accessing remote areas where the majority of vulnerable survivors live. For instance, as a result of the recent conflict, survivors who moved into communities in the Rutshuru and Masisi territories of North Kivu lost their sources of livelihood and were forced to start new lives as internally displaced persons (IDP). Their income-generating activities ceased to enable financial independence, and they had to learn to live on relief items provided by humanitarian agencies.

Documented by the Information Management System for Mine Action, the majority of mine/ERW victims reside in eastern DRC (44 percent), totaling 2,514 survivors (606 female and 1,908 male).^{1,2} Factors that explain such a large disproportion of male to female survivor rates include various social and gender roles in the DRC. Men are more involved in work that requires significant movement like farming, fishing,

~ SUCCESS STORIES ~

Gedeon Ngoy, a 41-year-old father of five, was a beneficiary of UNMAS' economic reinsertion program in 2012. He can now pay school fees for each of his five children and bought a plot of land in Kisangani, DRC, to build a permanent residence and establish a farm for his family.

Stefan Piame, 65 years-old, testified that the small-scale business management training and the reinsertion kits were vital for his family: "I started up a business that enables me to earn on average US\$45 a day, feed my family of 10 and pay school tuition for my five children."

Gedeon and Stefan were successful because they started small businesses in kiosks with the reinsertion kits. They were also given kits with high-demand items in their communities, such as salt packets, bars and tablets of washing and bathing soap, gallons of cooking oil, bags of sugar, biscuits, lotion packets, and other basic items to start up retail businesses. They subsequently restocked the items using the profits earned from their businesses.

hunting and transporting goods to markets. These activities expose them to more landmine and ERW threats than women who typically work at home.

Relatedly, a “macho culture” exists where men look to prove themselves in the face of danger. They are the first to check potentially hazardous areas to ascertain if a place is safe or not, thereby increasing their exposure to potential threats. Finally, ex-combatants are more prone to complacent behavior when handling and manipulating dangerous objects as they believe they are capable of handling these weapons due to seeing and using them in combat.

Survivors require a disproportionately high amount of financial and medical resources for rehabilitation, and yet the majority are from rural areas without advanced medical infrastructure and with limited resources. While studies show that 25 percent of the world’s landmine survivors receive appropriate care, only 9 percent are estimated to receive assistance in eastern DRC.^{3,4}

UNMAS’ Programs

Since 2009, the United Nations Mine Action Service in DRC (UNMAS-DRC) has provided vital assistance to survivors with its partners—including organizations focusing on disabled people and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGO).⁵

The Japanese and Australian governments fund the majority of UNMAS’ victim-assistance programs in DRC. An estimated US\$550,000 was used to assist 272 mine/ERW survivors (85 female and 187 male) and 12 other persons with disabilities in the past two years in DRC. The grants supported physical rehabilitation and economic reinsertion (including mine risk education), a national landmine-contamination survey and ERW/mine clearance. Heri Kuetu and Shirika La Umoja rehabilitation centers also received support to provide medical care and physical rehabilitation, and provided a range of mobility aids, including prostheses and other assistive devices, to the selected survivors.

Selected beneficiaries were trained in income-generating activities and were provided with reinsertion kits comprised of in-kind, start-up capital to enable small trade in marketable



Itongwa Wilonja tries his newly acquired bike at Shirika La Umoja rehabilitation center in Goma, DRC (June 2013).

Photo courtesy of Syahava Kambale Sylvain/Shirika La Umoja.

items in their areas. The training period varied between one and three months, depending on the Income Generating Activities (IGA) chosen by the survivors. The basic training in small-scale business management took about five days, while other vocations like tailoring took at least three months. Each UNMAS-DRC partner organization used subgrants to hire trainers to provide the training in the relevant operational areas. Trainers had experience in microfinance, livelihood and socioeconomic sectors.

In 2013 UNMAS granted US\$150,000 to help national organizations assist 207 survivors (63 females and 144 males). The average cost of assistance per survivor is around \$1,500, a necessary investment toward ensuring change in the lives of survivors and their families. The investment is comparatively high because UNMAS-DRC aims to make beneficiaries financially independent. The survivors are involved in all steps of the project to promote ownership and sustainability. Priority is given to feasible and sustainable projects. In addition to



A survivor chats with visitors at her kiosk in eastern DRC.
Photo courtesy of Micheline Yaisimba.

vocational skills, training also focuses on product packaging and marketing, as well as financial planning.

Obtaining sufficient funding to implement quality programming for all survivors is a key challenge. Within the scope of worldwide humanitarian mine action, landmine survivor assistance receives only 5 percent of all funding in the sector, and it receives even less in DRC. Since its founding in 2009, the UNMAS-DRC survivor assistance section received approximately 3 percent of the total program funding.⁶

Prospects

Organizations providing survivor assistance in DRC include the International Committee of the Red Cross, Handicap International (HI), Christian Blind Mission, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action as well as organizations focusing on the disabled and several local NGOs coordinated by UNMAS-DRC.

Interventions are prioritized based on needs, taking into account gender and age when selecting beneficiaries for survivor assistance. Organizations are encouraged to involve survivors in planning, implementing and monitoring project activities.

Some NGOs recruited survivors to implement project activities, and they attest that these survivors were very instrumental to the success of the projects. Micheline Yaisimba, project coordinator of *Afrique Pour la Lutte Antimines* (Africa for Mine Action or AFRILAM), attributes this success to “survivors being able to identify with the project and also owning it,”⁷ as illustrated through the work of one of its employees, Rigobert Wakengela, a 38-year-old landmine survivor who plays a vital role in the organization’s project implementation. He is a social worker who engages in mobilization and counseling of disabled persons as well as conducts risk-education sessions in affected communities.

To ensure quality standards, UNMAS and the *Centre Congolais de Lutte Antimines* (Congolese Mine Action Center or CCLAM) developed the 2012 National Standards for Victim Assistance.⁸ By the end of 2014, all survivor assistance organizations will be accredited using the 2012 Victim Assistance National Standards in DRC, which emphasizes assistance based on the *Guiding Principles for Victim Assistance*, compiled by the Working Group on Victim Assistance of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.⁹



Furaha Dico lost both legs in a mine accident in Bunia in 2007. Furaha chose to be trained in tailoring by *Premiere Alerte* (UNMAS-DRC partner organization).
Photo courtesy of Philippe Ebimba/UNMAS-DRC.

In an effort to accomplish their obligations, UNMAS and CCLAM developed the Transition Plan 2012–2014 and Strategic Plan 2012–2016, which are the benchmarks for mine action activities. Section 6.4.4 of the strategic plan explicitly illustrates survivor assistance.¹⁰

In terms of advocacy, UNMAS, HI, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action, Christian Blind Mission, Congolese Campaign to Ban Landmines and other national NGOs working with disabled persons formed a working group advocating for the ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of*

Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the adoption of a law for its implementation in DRC.^{11,12} Consequently, DRC's parliament adopted a law on CRPD ratification 29 May 2013.

The U.N. underlines the importance of integrating the needs of landmine and ERW survivors in national policies and programs that address the needs of all disabled people. UNMAS also emphasizes activities that promote and comply with relevant international humanitarian and human rights standards.¹³ In DRC, due to the challenges posed by the country's size and poor logistical

situation, UNMAS-DRC aims to demonstrate that an effective approach, involving sufficient funding and close supervision, can achieve concrete and long-lasting results, even in the complicated context of eastern DRC.

Additional challenges remain such as dwindling funding in the mine action sector, gaps in DRC's national capacity to address victim assistance and disability-related issues, as well as poor physical and service infrastructure. The National Mine Action Strategic Plan 2012–2016 makes national capacity building, along with transition and resource mobilization, priority strategies to address these challenges. ©

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