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Victim Assistance Policy Planning: Decentralization as a Key?

While victim assistance is becoming an increasingly familiar topic for signatories of the Mine Ban Treaty, the problem remains of how best to implement such programs. The author suggests that it is time for a switch from "top down" to "bottom up" implementation.

by **Dr. Philippe Chabasse**,
Co-director, Handicap International

Introduction

Three years after the entry into force of the Mine Ban Treaty, a major difficulty remains concerning implementation, evaluation and consequently funding of mine victim assistance programs. The following paper presents a regional initiative that encourages national actors to determine what they consider as priorities and locally applicable criteria for victim assistance policies and projects.

Numerous conceptual advances have been made through the intersessional process, which is leading to an international consensus on an inclusive definition of mine victims as well as agreement on the main components of victim assistance covering emergency aid, hospital care, physical rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration.

The proposed activities must be integrated into national policies of public health and social assistance. They must be adapted to local environmental, social and physical factors and offer the most appropriate services to the people. They must respect existing institutional and sectoral frameworks, and ensure the permanence of commitments through the implementation of partnerships. They will rely as much as possible on appropriate techniques and technologies and on available resources at the national and regional level.

However ideal, these concepts come from the top down and are generated by international expertise. The time may

have come when, from policy planning through implementation, "bottom up" processes must be encouraged.

A Southeast Asia Regional Initiative

In mid-2001, Handicap International (HI) began an initiative to strengthen the capacity to develop policy planning and effective implementation of projects in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam by identifying, supporting and linking actors at national and regional levels.

From July to October 2001, national workshops on victim assistance have brought together governments, ministries, provincial actors, non-governmental organization (NGO) and international organization (IO) representatives, and associations of disabled persons. These national workshops prepared a regional conference held in November 2001 in Bangkok, Thailand.

The regional conference concluded with agreement on the necessity of the following:

- Establishing a living regional network highlighting "best practices," maintaining contacts, collecting information, and producing and updating a directory of service providers from governments, NGOs and IOs.
- Helping national actors work in a collaborative manner and developing a prioritized portfolio of programs for each country.
- Presenting the results of this ongoing process to future intersessional meetings in order to enlist further technical and financial support for victim assistance in the region.

Reinforcement of National Coordination

In Cambodia, such a coordination mechanism among all actors in victim assistance already exists through the Disability Action Council (DAC) and will soon be reinforced. In Laos, the National Council for Disabled Persons (NCDP) is instrumental in bringing all national actors together regularly. In Vietnam, the process is currently underway through the Ministry of Health and concerned NGOs and IOs.

It is worth noting that representatives from Laos and Vietnam, two non-signatory states, participated in the last intersessional meetings in Geneva.

On the eve of the Fourth Meeting of States Parties, one can assess positive results from the intersessional process as it has enabled the international community to develop a shared common understanding of the framework of victim assistance strategies. As far as implementation is concerned, however, the driving force no longer lies in Geneva or New York, but rather in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Hanoi or Bangkok.

Donor countries are not the ones to best determine national policies. Appropriation of national priorities and projects by a wide range of national actors remains the key for effective implementation and sustainability. ■

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