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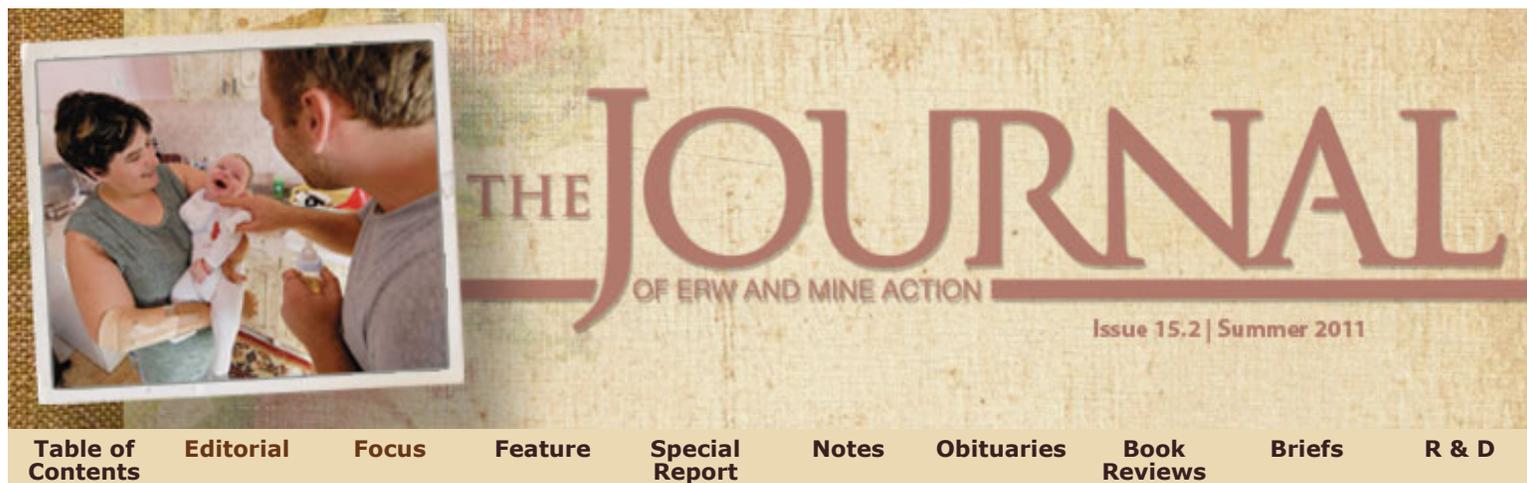
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## Victim Assistance in Peru

by Theresa E. Kane, Ph.D. [ The Polus Center for Social & Economic Development ]

*Landmines still plague parts of Peru as a result of the 1980–92 internal conflict with the Shining Path (in Spanish, Sendero Luminoso),<sup>1</sup> guerrillas and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.<sup>2</sup> This article examines the work of the Polus Center in its victim-assistance efforts which strive to provide landmine survivors with the tools they need to reintegrate into society and earn a viable income.*

Established in 1979, the Polus Center for Social & Economic Development, Inc. is a Massachusetts-based nongovernmental organization that designs and implements programs that provide social, economic and rehabilitation services for people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups throughout the world. In 1997, the Polus Center began its international work by coordinating humanitarian efforts in Central America aimed at addressing the long-term needs of people with disabilities, particularly those individuals who lost limbs due to war, landmines and diseases. In recent years the Polus Center has been active in landmine victim assistance, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and social and economic reintegration for survivors and their families. Thanks to the support of the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), Polus is currently involved in victim assistance in Colombia, Honduras, Jordan, Northern Nicaragua and Peru.

Despite the strides Peru has made in the last decade in mine action, much work remains in the victim-assistance field. The Polus Center began working in Peru in July 2009 with the support of a grant from PM/WRA. The objectives were to survey landmine victims in various mine-affected communities throughout the country, to train *Contraminas*<sup>3</sup> staff and landmine advocates in designing community-based rehabilitation services, to award micro-grants for best-practice economic demonstration projects, and to develop the national capacity for victim assistance.

### Victim Assistance

The Polus Center believes that best practice in victim assistance requires a person-centered and holistic approach that begins with each landmine victim's unique situation. Landmine survivors and their families face social and economic hardships resulting from physical injuries, emotional trauma and deeply entrenched negative perceptions about persons with disabilities. The day-to-day challenges that each landmine victim faces are unique and complex. A holistic approach to victim assistance addresses what each person really needs. It is not enough to have an artificial limb if the person is unable to find work, or has to live without a sense of belonging or a valued role in the community. Regaining mobility is one step toward acceptance and increased quality of life, but it is not the ultimate goal.

Taking a holistic approach begins with asking the question "Who are the people?" It means getting to know them as human beings, not just *victims*, to include hearing their stories, meeting their families and exploring their talents, skills, abilities and potential. Visiting landmine victims in their homes helps us to understand their current situation, and to learn about their hopes, dreams and aspirations. This knowledge provides the foundation for the development of effective victim-assistance programs. Small interview teams that include Polus Center staff and volunteers, as well

as staff from *Contraminas* and other Peruvian nongovernmental organizations, traveled throughout Peru, including remote areas in the Andes Mountains, to meet landmine victims, hear their stories, understand how they live, and help them identify ways to improve their quality of life. We learned about many landmine victims during these interviews. A few of them are profiled below.



Provided with a modern sewing machine and a supply of fabric and threads, Virginia de la Cruz Meza produces articles for sale in Huancavelica, Peru.

*Photo courtesy of Carola Hunter Ledesma.*

### Virginia de la Cruz Meza

Virginia de la Cruz Meza did not know what to make of the small group of strangers arriving at her door to talk to her about her experiences as a landmine victim. No one had asked her about it since it happened 12 years earlier. Now a 26-year-old wife and mother of two young children, Meza had long ago learned to live with the pain in her legs and foot, and her quiet voice and skeptical eyes communicated a level of despair that only someone who had shared her experiences could understand. We interviewed her sitting on some rocks outside of her home. Her young daughter played in the background as she slowly opened up and shared her story.

Meza was only able to complete primary school before devoting her life to working for her family in the rugged rural terrain atop the Andes Mountains. "That's what girls did," she explained in her native Quechua language. Only boys went beyond the third grade. On the day of her injury, the sheep she was tending wandered into the area near the heavily mined electrical towers. When she

followed them, she stepped on a landmine. Meza's legs and feet were severely injured and she lay for hours unable to move. A neighbor finally heard her screams and brought her home, but her family chose unconventional means such as pouring animal urine on her wounds to try to fend off any infections. The pain was still evident in her face as she described the several days that she lay in her bed assuming she would die. Another neighbor finally convinced the family to make the long trek to the hospital, which had been avoided because of the cost of medical care and the distance to the hospital. That was Meza's last formal healthcare visit, years before we met her in 2010.

Meza's injuries severely hampered her mobility in the rugged terrain, so she spent most of her time inside her home while her husband worked the small piece of land inherited from his family. Living in an area of extreme poverty and limited economic possibilities, Meza seemed depressed and isolated. After spending enough time with her to develop some trust and rapport, Meza mentioned her skills in sewing and her dreams of making clothes. She had a cousin living in Junín who did similar work and another who worked in the local marketplace, but she only had an antique sewing machine and no money to buy cloth or thread. The first spark in her eyes came when she expressed a desire to use her skills to make clothing to sell. She was sure her family members could help market the products.

Less than a week later, personnel in the Lima office of *Contraminas*, who had flown many miles to Huancavelica to interview victims in their homes, were surprised to get a visit to their office from Meza's husband. Crying as he expressed his gratitude that someone wanted to help his family, he identified the type of machine and materials that Meza and he had chosen so that she could begin making clothing.

Provided with a modern sewing machine, a supply of fabric and threads, and help with creating an enclosed workspace in her home, Meza began producing clothing articles for sale and now happily brings in income to help support her family. She can work in her home and care for her children, and she also often sees family and community members who come to buy her clothing. Meza has shown a remarkable change in her self-esteem, and she and her husband say their future is much brighter since she began making and selling apparel. The Polus Center soon plans to open a World Gifts Café that will help Meza and other landmine victims market and sell their goods in the U.S.

### Nerio Chuco de la Cruz

Nerio Chuco de la Cruz is a landmine survivor from Pazos in the department of Junín. As a youth, Cruz had a landmine accident in Huancayo that caused total vision loss and serious facial disfigurement. For many years he lived alone in a rundown house in Chilca without basic services or plumbing. The house was windowless and lacking ventilation, which led to chronic bronchitis. Cruz spent 24 hours a day alone in his house, without visitors except for a blind friend who



With a mini-grant, Nerio Chuco de la Cruz was able to expand his business, move to a new home and reconnect with family members.

*Photo courtesy of Stephen Petegorsky.*

taught him how to use a sewing machine. Using the old machine, he would sew pants that others would take to sell in the mountains.

Despite his isolation, Cruz had the dream of expanding his small business by making sweaters to sell at the market, but he lacked the economic resources to buy the necessary knitting machine. His ambition was realistic, however, and with the help of the Polus Center and *Contraminas*, he bought the equipment with which he now makes sweaters. Cruz established a small workshop in his house, and his increased income allowed him to hire an assistant and purchase ancillary equipment for processing wool. Cruz has since moved to Huancavelica, giving him not only better and healthier living conditions but putting him closer to his family. His mental outlook and self-esteem have greatly improved, and with increased contact and shared activities with his family and others, his social isolation has decreased.

Interestingly, Nerio Chuco de la Cruz is a cousin of Virginia de la Cruz Meza. One interview team had traveled to Huancavelica and

the other to Junín. Later in the week, when comparing stories, the two teams finally realized they had interviewed cousins with injuries from separate landmine accidents when they were children and had not seen each other in years. Now that Cruz lives in Huancavelica, he and Meza reconnected and visit often, and a mutual family member helps them sell their goods in the marketplace.

## Beyond Physical Rehabilitation

Landmine victims' needs go far beyond physical rehabilitation and healthcare. Many find themselves isolated and excluded from community life, either because physically they are unable to leave their homes or they feel disengaged and separated from society. Many landmine survivors are left with a permanent disability, and persons with disabilities are often isolated, stigmatized and least likely to have access to employment, health, education and resources. These resources include access to municipal buildings, training centers and businesses, as travel in Peru can be extremely difficult for someone with a disability due to the varied terrain and the distance between cities. The Polus Center offers training in social integration for in-country service providers in an effort to address the barriers that prevent landmine victims from participating fully in their community, while breaking down social barriers and deeply held stereotypes about people with disabilities.

There is seldom one solution to help a landmine victim get back on track. The holistic approach takes into account a full spectrum of issues including economic vulnerability and social isolation. Cruz's new sewing machines provided increased income, but he still lived alone in a dark and unhealthy environment.

Moving back to a community where he could connect with his family and live in a better home enhanced his life in ways that no machine ever could. Similarly, Meza now not only contributes to her family's economic well-being, but she has friends and family visiting, a meaningful job, and a positive way to focus her talents and energy. Her children live in an environment full of hope and positive role models rather than feeling their mother's despair and depression.

## Community-based Services

Traveling great distances to receive help places a heavy burden on survivors and their families. The prospect of leaving family members for an extended period of time and incurring travel expenses often discourages people from seeking even the most basic services. Rehabilitation and healthcare services have traditionally been concentrated in Lima, the capital of Peru, yet many landmine victims live in distant rural communities. Victim-assistance efforts must provide access to healthcare, education and vocational opportunities in urban and remote areas.

A key challenge in Peru is developing rehabilitation and healthcare services for people living throughout the country so that they do not need to go to Lima to receive assistance. The Polus Center works with a team of health-care experts to identify strategies to provide healthcare to the country's most remote areas and works with local hospitals in remote areas to build the capacity to provide community-based physical therapy, prosthetic and eye-care services. The National Institute of Rehabilitation (in Spanish, *Instituto Nacional de Rehabilitación*) is the only facility providing prosthetic and orthotic devices for all persons with disabilities and victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance in

Peru. The Polus Center recently supported the INR by providing training and materials to raise the level of appropriate prosthetic and orthotic education through the use of modern techniques and organizational training. INR and the Polus Center have also begun discussions about creating a mobile prosthetic and orthotic laboratory that would provide services to victims in remote areas such as Huancayo and Huancavelica.

## Implementation Strategies

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Addressing the complex needs of landmine victims requires focus on developing local leadership, bringing services to remote areas and helping people help themselves. A person-centered, holistic approach to community-based victim assistance provides comprehensive quality services that are sustainable and congruent with what people really need. Landmine victims are trained to take on leadership positions and continue outreach to other victims. More than 100 victims have received small-business assistance like that which was provided for Meza and Cruz. Most importantly, people with similar experiences as Meza and Cruz are being given the opportunity to become reintegrated into their community, to support their families and to feel positive about their future. ↗

## Biography

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**Theresa E. Kane, Ph.D.**, joined the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development, Inc. as Chief Operating Officer in 2005, having served on the Polus Center Board of Directors since 1998. Theresa was previously the Executive Director of the Academy of Professional Skills Development, a consulting firm specializing in capacity building and leadership development for non-profit organizations and worldwide corporations.

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## Endnotes

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1. *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), a Peruvian rebel group founded by Abimael Guzmán in 1970 that carried out attacks against the government in the 1980s and early 1990s (the group continues to operate to a lesser extent today). Shining Path follows a communist utopian ideology and was inspired by Mao's Cultural Revolution in China. It is known as one of the most violent rebel groups in the Western hemisphere.
2. Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (in Spanish, *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru* [MRTA]), a leftist Peruvian rebel group that carried out operations in the 1980s and 1990s. The group was named in honor of TÁ°pac Amaru II, an 18th century Peruvian indigenous leader who led attacks against the Spanish conquistadors. The rebels' goal was to establish a completely socialist state free of imperialism (particularly American and Japanese influence). In 1996, group members stormed the Japanese ambassador's home in the capital, Lima, and took hundreds of hostages to use as leverage against the government in negotiating the release of jailed group members.
3. *Contraminas*, the Peruvian Mine Action Center, was created in 2002 as an interagency commission charged with developing and implementing comprehensive solutions to the problems arising from Peru's presence of anti-personnel landmines and with supervising compliance with the objectives of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and their Destruction* (also known at the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC). *Contraminas* is housed within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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