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Victim Assistance in Central America: IGOs, NGOs and Governments Team Up

The OAS, PAHO and UNICEF step in to bolster the activities of NGOs and governments to meet the needs of landmine survivors for rehabilitation and socioeconomic integration.

Introduction

As with other mine-affected regions, Central America must respond to the human consequence of landmines: the survivors. After years of dominance by clearance operations, victim assistance and economic reintegration are now beginning to receive heightened attention in the region. Both the OAS and PAHO (the Pan-American Health Organization) have launched victim assistance programs in Central America, teaming up with government ministries, and local and international NGOs to expand and improve services for survivors.

All of the Central American countries are grappling with the challenges of socioeconomic reintegration, while the capability to meet the needs for rehabilitation is being enhanced through training programs organized by the OAS, PAHO and UNICEF and involving international NGOs such as:
- The International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics (ISPO),
- Center for International Rehabilitation (CIR),
- Physicians Against Land Mines (PALM),
- Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF), and
- The World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF).

Various international NGOs also assist with the direct provision of prostheses and orthotics, although most of the patient services are carried out by local NGOs and government agencies.

El Salvador

El Salvador, the first country in the region to be cleared of landmines, has some well-established rehabilitation and reintegration programs. The German organization MEDICO International, along with Medical Aid for El Salvador, helped establish the Organization for the Promotion of Disabled Persons of El Salvador (PODES) in 1992. The VAVF stepped in to provide PODES with funding and technical assistance. PODES continues to operate the largest rehabilitation program in El Salvador with a current caseload of over 900 patients and a staff of 23 employed in its workshops and administrative offices (see VAVF website: http://www.vavf.org/humanitarial/default.shtml ).

PODES is one of several NGOs in El Salvador devoted to victim assistance. The World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF) in recent years teamed up with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide technical assistance to seven different Salvadoran organizations involved in providing a range of rehabilitation and reintegration services. The project served to bolster the peace process and has benefited ex-Salvadoran military and ex-FMLN combatants as well as civilians. For WRF website: http://www.worldrehabfund.org/programs/latname.xm l).

Victim Assistance in Central America

By Suzanne L. Fiederlein, MAIC

Victim Assistance Seminar

In June 2001, the OAS helped organize a three-day seminar in Managua on victim assistance. The first two days were devoted to training seminars conducted by the Center for International Rehabilitation (CIR). The seminars included hands-on instruction as well as an orientation to a new CIR-developed Internet course. The third day was devoted to information sharing among personnel involved in providing assistance to landmine victims. The participant list illustrates the large and varied role that local NGOs play in providing victim assistance in the region. However, some Nicaraguan NGOs have criticized the National Demining Commission for not effectively including them in the planning process and for not adequately addressing the needs for mine awareness education and victim assistance programs. 8

Economic Reintegration

Another new initiative of the OAS in Nicaragua is to launch a pilot program in association with the National OAS Unit (a branch of the Ministry of National Defense) in Estelí, essentially the only region in the country where landmines have been cleared. This pilot project includes creating a community-based victim assistance network. The OAS is also working with other organizations in the region to improve services for landmine victims.
cal job training that fits the Nicaraguan context, with an emphasis on vocational skills.

Other Programs in Central America

Net Corps Americas

Although the OAS is emphasizing vocational training in its Nicaraguan program, information technology and the Internet are becoming increasingly prominent in the efforts to provide assistance to persons with disabilities in the Americas. The Trust for the Americas, through its Net Corps Americas (NCA) program, helps support several projects for people with disabilities in Central America. The projects all involve sending high-tech volunteers to work with disability organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Training includes the use of assistive technology as well as computer skills that facilitate entry into the job market. The NCA also helped develop a Virtual Disabilities Resource Center (VDRC) that serves people with disabilities and their organizations by providing access to diverse Internet-based resources.

In El Salvador, the NCA established a special national program in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor and with funding from the US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Affairs. The program works with organizations for people with disabilities and the private sector to provide training and job placement assistance to help promote the integration of the disabled into the private workforce.

UNICEF

Another major international actor in the field of victim assistance is as well as mine awareness education is UNICEF. Since 1992, UNICEF has been active in promoting mine awareness programs in Central America, beginning with El Salvador but expanding its efforts to include Nicaragua and Guatemala. In Guatemala, UNICEF teamed up with DISIPALM and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance in 1998 to launch a training program for medical personnel in the areas of prosthetics and orthotics and to engage in some community-based rehabilitation programs.

In 2001, UNICEF changed course somewhat by initiating the participation of ASCATED (Asociación de Capacitación y Asistencia Técnica en Educación y Discapacidad), a Guatemalan NGO with many years of experience working with disabled people, in a project to assist child victims of landmines and UXO. The first step has been to identify the victims, according to Dr. Fidel Arevalo, who heads the project. Dr. Arevalo's team has developed a survey form and is currently gathering the survey data. They will use the survey results to plan the assistance program.

PAHO's Role in Victim Assistance

In 1999, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), as a specialized agency of the OAS and the regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), responded to invitations from governments of Canada and Mexico to devise a program addressing the needs of landmine survivors in Central America. The Tripartite Initiative to Support Landmine Survivors in Central America has been designed to strengthen the capacity of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua to provide services to landmine survivors. The OAS and PAHO carefully coordinate their victim assistance programs so that they complement one another in order to more effectively respond to the needs of victims. The Tripartite Initiative administered by PAHO focuses on capacity building while the OAS provides direct services to landmine survivors. PAHO, through its International Reference Center for International Development through the War Victims Fund (USADF/WVF) entered into a co-partnership with the Tripartite Initiative to support of particular components of the program.

The four general objectives of the initiative are:

1) Gather data to define the magnitude of landmine-related incidents, and establish a target population;
2) Strengthen the capacity of health services and existing programs to encompass an integral approach towards rehabilitation, especially for those affected by armed conflict;
3) Increase public awareness about the continuing dangers of landmines and other unexploded ordnances;
4) Strengthen and improve social and economic integration and reintegration programs for persons with disabilities.

According to María Teresa Gago of PAHO, as the Initiative has unfolded since 1999, it now encompasses four main activities: strengthening of socio-economic reintegration programs; expansion of community-based rehabilitation strategies into the primary health care network; extension and strengthening of prosthetic and orthotic services; and development of a health and disability information system.

The section also addresses the enhancement of the overall capacity of national health systems to respond more effectively to landmine victims as well as to other people with disabilities.

The latter response is ideal from a developmental perspective, but due to the high priority given to the most mine-affected countries, such an approach often sacrifices timeliness to efforts at comprehensiveness. For landmine survivors who are aware of Article 6 and have been repeatedly "surveyed" about their injuries, the failure to receive adequate, prompt assistance can be frustrating and disheartening.

Ambassador Talbott and Pan-American Health Organization officials Daniel López-Acevedo and María Teresa Gago all agree that the task is to make assistance to landmine victims a top priority and to have it serve as a catalytic process to extend health services to all those in need in the Americas.

References

2. See the Four Year Consolidated Plan for the Tripartite Initiative for a comprehensive list of the various programs receiving support. The Plan can be found in the Government of the United Mexican States, Government and the Pan-American Health Organization Supporting Landmine Survivors in Central America: A Tripartite Initiative, (no date given).
5. See Interview with Ambassador Markel Villegas Talbott, Senior Advisor, Mine Action Program of the OAS, at OAS offices in Washington, DC, 12 June 2001, in the Four Year Consolidated Plan for the Tripartite Initiative for a comprehensive list of the various programs receiving support. The Plan can be found in the Government of the United Mexican States, Government and the Pan-American Health Organization Supporting Landmine Survivors in Central America: A Tripartite Initiative, (no date given).
7. For more information on the various programs receiving support, see the Four Year Consolidated Plan for the Tripartite Initiative for a comprehensive list of the various programs receiving support. The Plan can be found in the Government of the United Mexican States, Government and the Pan-American Health Organization Supporting Landmine Survivors in Central America: A Tripartite Initiative, (no date given).
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