Victim Assistance: A Way Forward Emerges

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The pillar of victim assistance, after lagging behind other components of mine action in funding and focused international attention, takes the initiative to shape its future and address lingering challenges.

by Suzanne L. Fiederlein, MAC

Introduction

In the years since the Mine Ban Convention (MBC) went into force, the pillar of victim assistance has traveled a winding path. The plight of landmine victims was the hook that drew the world’s attention to the problem with landmines. It was the decimating effects of landmines on the bodies of innocent civilians that, when brought to our attention, led us to want to do something to eliminate this scourge, but the drama of landmine removal is what has sustained our attention to the issue.

Who can forget the pictures of Princess Diana in Bosnia, where the visited the area and observed landmine victims accompanied by two landmine survivors, co-founders of the Landmine Survivors Network, Ken Ruether and Jerry White? Or perhaps you remember better the pictures of the Princes dressed in deminers’ personal protective equipment as they visited with HALO Trust in Angola.

The disparate power of these two images indicators the challenge faced by the field of mine victim assistance: while the death and injuries caused by landmines are what riddling the world of the devices is ultimately all about, it is the process of mine clearance that has received the lion’s share of attention from donors and mine action program planners.

Getting mines out of the ground presents future victims, but the thousands of survivors and their families and communities—the “other” victims of landmines—need assistance now to heal and to resume productive, meaningful lives.

How to get landmine victims the services they need in the context of the larger mine action picture continues to confound victim assistance practitioners, although success on a number of initiatives can be attributed to the persistence of the many people and organizations involved in this pillar of mine action.

Victim Assistance’s “Place” in Mine Action

The place of victim assistance in mine action has been debated since at least 1999. That year, the Standing Committee on Experts on Victim Assistance, Socio-Economic Reintegration and Mine Awareness (SCVA) met for the first time since being established by the delegates at the First Meeting of States Parties in Maputo. A number of issues arose at that Standing Committee meeting that have guided its work ever since. The committee has succeeded in addressing some of these issues, but not all problems yet.

But it is interesting to note that the prominence of this concern for the “place” of victim assistance in mine action even at that first meeting.

Participants noted that the activities of victim assistance are more related to the field of health care than to “operational mine action,” which includes clearance and mine awareness. The debate has continued ever since, with the SCVA eventually transferring responsibility for mine awareness to what is now called the Standing Committee on Mine Clearance, Mine Awareness and Mine Action Technologies (MCMAT), because it believed mine awareness fit more properly there than under victim assistance.

This long-standing debate should come to a head at a meeting by the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), The Role of Mine Action and Victim Assistance, released in September 2002, is analyzed and discussed. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) asked the GICHD to conduct the study to help the debate over victim assistance’s proper relationship to mine action.

The GICHD study provides detailed accounts of four case studies of victim assistance programming in the context of mine action operations in some very different settings: Cambodia, Eritrea/Ethiopia, Kosovo and Nicaragua. Based on analysis of the findings of those cases and deliberations among members of a Users’ Focus Group and a Steering Group, this study presents six findings and poses six recommendations in response.

The study asserts that “mine action should not completely turn its back on victim assistance” but should take on a coordination role and, in “exceptional circumstances,” it “should be prepared to take an active role in the provision of services.” Overall, the study should generate much needed discussion and set the stage for UNMAS to launch its policy on victim assistance, which is currently preparing.

In anticipation of the release of this report, UNMAS staff have been drafting a victim assistance policy paper that would provide guidance to all the UN-affiliated mine action centers (MACs) as to their responsibility in support of victim assistance. While discussion of the content of that policy paper will have to wait since it is not due to be released until early 2003, indications are that UNMAS has not forsaken victim assistance, believing it remains an important pillar of mine action and that MACs have a role to play in support of victim assistance.

Achievements Within the SCVA Framework

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Mine Action Centre (IMAC) have worked with governments in mine-affected countries during the last decade to develop programs and facilities to provide medical and rehabilitative care for landmine survivors. Numerous successful programs have eased the physical conditions of survivors and helped victims resume productive lives. Much more remains to be done, and NGOs have redoubled their efforts to provide the needed services and to find more effective ways to operate, especially through enhanced information sharing and better coordination.

The SCVA also can point to some important successes that have meant progress for the field of mine victim assistance. The Working Group on Victim Assistance of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICG-VAC), has worked with the SCVA to compile information on programs around the world whose beneficiaries include but are not necessarily limited to landmine victims.

The first edition of this Portfolio of Victim Assistance Programs was published in September 2000 and has been updated annually. It fulfills in part the oft-expressed need for more information about victims and programs available to provide services to them. An additional tool developed to collect information on victim assistance programs is the Form J that was designed in response to the call of the SCVA to know more about what the states party to the MBC are doing to meet their obligation to assist landmine victims, as stipulated in Article 13 of the Convention. So far, relatively few states have filed the Form J, which remains voluntary since it is not part of the formal process of the MBC. Article 7 reporting requirements, but a steady increase in its use is evident.

The SCVA strongly encourages states to file the form so that more can be learned about victim assistance funding and programming.

The SCVA also oversaw the compilation of existing guidelines on victim assistance that NGOs and other service providers can consult when planning programs for landmine victims. Several organizations have invested considerable effort in developing guidelines that address topics ranging from providing medical and rehabilitative care to collecting injury data and incorporating assistance to victims into a broader development-oriented framework.

Because the field of mine victim assistance had done so much work along these lines, the decision was made to postpone indefinitely the development of formal International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) for victim assistance. Detailed guidelines and standards were issued in 2001 for the field of mine clearance, and the guidelines for the guidelines for the IMAS issued in 1999 are in the process of being revised and released as part of the IMAS package. But at a February 2001
UNMAS meeting in Geneva, a tentative decision was made that because the field of victim assistance already had developed guidelines, "there was no real need to develop IHAM for this area." While this decision speaks to the initiative of the people and organizations involved in victim assistance, it also has resulted in a more diffused approach to carrying out their activities. Instead of one definitive and integrated set of guidelines, victim assistance practitioners have a list of different guidelines to draw upon. The ICRC’s "Guidelines for the Care and Rehabilitation of Survivors" has been widely accepted and used by victim assistance practitioners, but the guidance it provides is of a general nature. Its content constitutes guiding principles, not specific, detailed guidelines, let alone what could be considered standards.5

New Initiatives to Address Lingering Issues

Despite the progress made via the SCVA framework to aid states parties in they assist landmine victims, three issues before the Standing Committee at that first meeting in 1999 remain stubborn on its agenda in 2002. These issues have proved to be difficult to address and remain obstacles to overcome in the near term. They also are issues that will be affected by the ongoing debate over the place of victim assistance in mine action. In 2002, all three also have benefited from new initiatives that, when taken together, clear a forward path for victim assistance. These issues are:

1) How to collect and share needed data on victims.
2) How to gain sufficient attention from donors.
3) How to coordinate victim assistance activities more effectively.

Collection and Exchange of Data

The victim assistance community continues to lament the absence of sufficient data on mine and UXO victims, despite the many efforts of the ICRC, World Health Organization (WHO) and various NGOs like Handicap International (HI) and Physicians for Human Rights to develop casualty victim assistance systems. In some cases, data exists but is not being adequately shared; in other cases, it is still not being collected in a consistent and useful way. In few cases, such as in Cambodia, data on victims is collected and utilized in an effective way to support the operations of various programs and services to survivors and other victims. The expanded use of the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) is a positive development. IMSMA has registered countries collecting victim data and generating reports based on the data. However, the issue continues to arise at SCVA meetings and in other mine victim assistance venues. Sherie Bailey, in a report to the SCVA meeting in May 2002, reported that the GIC’s other initiatives have been ongoing since 1999 in implementing data collection systems to record information on landmine casualties, but that gaps remain and data collection often is not comprehensive.

In response to the dearth of adequate statistics on landmine victims, the question also arises as to whether the victim assistance work is being effectively coordinated and the reports on victim assistance. The UNMA and UNMAC have spearheaded efforts to improve the quality of information on landmine victims and the challenge is complicated by the differing views about what services are needed and exactly to whom they should be directed. The states parties need to determine for whom is on survivors—that is, persons who received injuries in mine accidents—or on victims more broadly—survivors along with their families and other members of communities affected by the presence of landmines. While the all-embracing definition of mine victim developed by the WGA-ICBL is widely accepted, it uses presents real challenges for programs that aim to limit the focus to the victims most affected. The “GIC’s Role of Mine Action in Victim Assistance” is a good job of examining (pp. 11-13).

Regardless of this lack of clarity and its responsibility for the funding communiqués, victim assistance programs seem to receive a smaller percentage of the funds being directed to mine action than the clearance and mine awareness pillar. The Landmine Monitor and HI have conducted a review of previous issues of funding flows to victim assistance as well as the difficulties of victim assistance activities. The Landmine Monitor also asserts that victim assistance programs collectively receive a fraction of the funds that go to clearance. Sherie Bailey of the Landmine Monitor also asserts that the funding levels for victim assistance declined from the year 2000-2001. However, in her report to the SCVA, Bailey indicates that in reality, it is difficult to measure funding levels because of inadequate reporting. Despite the continued urging of the SCVA, a majority of states party still have not filed Form Js which are used to report on victim assistance programs and funding. In its Landmine Victim Assistance World Report 2001, HI examines some of the reasons for the "opacity" in information on victim assistance funding. Among the factors at play are that mine victim assistance often is integrated into broader "mine action" or "aid for war victims" initiatives so that funds actually allocated to mine victim assistance cannot be disaggregated. HI also notes that assistance can be provided by decentralized sources like hospitals and universities and can be provided as "in-kind" aid that is sometimes not reported. Such factors make it difficult to know precisely how much is going into victim assistance programs. However, the situation remains that some total funds for victim assistance, the general perceptions are that victim assistance receives less support from donors, a situation that prompted the call for a special meeting of the Board of Advisors of the International Fund for Demining and Victim Assistance in July 2002. The special meeting was organized as a workshop to examine the state of victim assistance programs in the countries of southeast Europe and to develop strategies for improving regional funding and coordination of victim assistance activities.

The goal was to identify the shortfalls in programming and to link needed funds to organizations and institutions that can provide the services required. The regional focus of the workshop was similar to the HI-organized Southeast Asia Regional Conference on Mine Victim Assistance entitled "Moving Forward Together" held in November 2001 in Thailand. The regional conference facilitated the exchange of information among victim assistance providers in the region and examined strategies for enhanced national planning for victim assistance. Both regional gatherings allowed victim assistance providers to exchange ideas, highlight their successes and develop strategies for better planning and coordi
The Role of Mine Action in Victim Assistance

Of the five pillars of mine action, victim assistance seems to receive the least attention. At the request of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) has recently completed a research project with a view to offering guidance on the future role of mine action in mine and UXO victim assistance.

**Study on The Role of Mine Action in Victim Assistance**

The response to the global landmine and UXO problems, generally termed mine action, is defined as including five core components: mine clearance, mine awareness and risk reduction education, victim assistance, advocacy in support of a total ban on anti-personnel landmines, and stockpile destruction. Yet, of the five components, the mine action community has not given the same level of attention to victim assistance as it has to the others. Though clearly part of the existing definition of mine action, few mine action organisations have much involvement in victim assistance in issues and that is equally true of the coordinating entities, such as the UN or UN Mine action Centres. At the same time, practitioners of mine clearance, survey and awareness have often been unclear as to victime assistance's operational role within mine action.

Indeed, victim assistance has sometimes sat uneasily within the framework of operational mine action. Mine action centres and mine action programmes have often been unclear as to what their operational role should be in this field and in many cases—especially in southern and northern Iraq being notable exceptions—mine action has played little operational role in direct service provision. Although a number of humanitarian organisations involved in providing assistance to those injured by landmines and UXO also carry out humanitarian demining and mine awareness, the skills and knowledge required are typically very different.

**Endnotes**

1. "The term 'operational mine action' was not yet in vogue, but the distinction was made between the activities associated with victim assistance and those involved in landmine clearance and mine awareness, which were viewed as 'specifically relevant to mine action programs.' See Dennis Baldo, "Gathering in Geneva: A Rich Exchange of Experiences,' Journal of Mine Action 3:3, Fall 1999, p. 63.

2. As of the 1st session of the 3rd International Workshop Programme of the Mine Ban Convention (January 2002), the SCV's full name became the Standing Committee on Victim Assistance and Socio-Economic Reintegration. The GICHD serves as the secretariat for the standing committee meetings; see http://www.gichd.ch/sb/l_meetings/index.htm.

3. "The GICHD and UNMAS presented plans for this study at the May 2001 meeting of the SCVA. For the text of the reports made by these two organisations, see the GICHD website at http://www.gichd.ch/index.php?lin=en/S_yasuit_html/speaker.srh.htm.


12. "About the Portfolio."


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