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Landmine Victim Assistance Progress, Challenges and Best Practices

While progress has been made in several areas of mine action, victim assistance is facing a number of new challenges. This article presents these challenges and three areas of best practice: addressing complex needs, developing capacity and leadership, and broadening interest in the issue.

by Michael Lundquist
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For more than a decade, there has been considerable progress in all aspects of mine action. While it is understandable that progress is not always linear, there are many positive signs in mine removal, mine-risk education and victim/survivor assistance that would leave players involved in any of these areas feeling optimistic about what has been accomplished. There was further international rejection of anti-personnel mines evidenced by increased support of the Ottawa Convention¹ in 2005.

The 2006 *Landmine Monitor*² reported a reduction in the number of mine-affected countries and the destruction of millions of stockpiled anti-personnel mines. MRE activities were reported in 60 countries. Many victim-assistance programs that previously focused solely on providing artificial limbs to survivors have expanded their services to offer an array of assistance, including vocational programs, microcredit loans, programs for barrier reduction and a range of economic “demonstration projects” that exemplify best practices. In his August 2005 article, “Victory in Our Time: The Future of Mine Action,” Richard Kidd, former Director of the State Department’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, wrote, “The most pressing impacts of landmines can be eliminated within the next few years, and funds [can be] redirected to other areas and other causes where they will do more to save lives and promote reconstruction.”³

New Challenges

While progress in all aspects of mine action is evident, there remain many unmet needs and new challenges impacting future mine-action initiatives. Balanced optimism about mine action could easily be tipped toward concern over the still-significant need, resulting from continued limited public and private resources and anticipated future decreases in international funding specifically for landmine victims. While international funding is decreasing, the number of mine survivors throughout the world continues to grow. It is estimated that there are as many as 500,000 mine survivors in the world today, with 5,751 new casualties in 2006.²

In 2006, several nongovernmental organizations were forced to significantly reduce services or, in some cases, close their doors. This trend is disturbing, not only because it means that basic needs for prosthetic services go unmet, but also because it means programs that have invested considerable time and resources into prosthetic training and organizational development are forced to abandon their efforts, leaving no possibility for continued operation under local leadership. It takes years to develop even small prosthetic programs. Basic-level prosthetic technicians need significant classroom and on-the-job training. Many prosthetic technicians in developing countries are themselves landmine survivors. If a program closes, opportunities for employment in other prosthetic programs are highly limited—there simply are none. This

void leaves people—possibly landmine survivors themselves—who have trained for years and dedicated themselves to helping landmine survivors, unemployed and destitute.

Another reality of survivor assistance is that rehabilitation extends over a person’s lifetime. This aspect of survivor assistance can be a challenge to garnering donor support, especially in the private sector. Few corporations or foundations want to support an initiative that has no definitive end in sight. They may also be drawn from traditional areas of support to newer, flashier initiatives. A word of caution to donors: It is not prudent to fund new victim-assistance programs without also providing continued support to programs that have developed and been in place for years. These existing programs often set new standards for best practices on a shoestring budget and should not be abandoned simply because of waning donor interest or the desire to create something new and innovative.

Areas of Best Practice

Among the broad areas of best practice within the realm of victim assistance, three of the most relevant are addressing complex needs, developing capacity and leadership, and broadening interest in the issue. Let’s look at each of these.

Addressing complex needs. Funding prosthetic/orthotic programs in developing countries is just one of the many challenges facing the future of victim assistance. Providing an artificial limb is only the first step toward the goal of enabling reintegration into community life. Survivors often identify the need for employment or fear of loss of spouse, particularly for women, as a more pressing concern than procuring an artificial limb. Even when survivors are able to regain mobility and secure employment, they are then placed under the rubric of “disabled” and are subject to the cultural and social stigmas accompanying this label. Once identified as “disabled,” landmine survivors are inevitably cast into a variety of negative roles that can be as devastating as stepping on a landmine or suffering limb loss. They are often seen as objects of pity and charity, a burden or menace to others, or viewed as “sick” and unemployable. In some cultures, loss of limb is even perceived as punishment for previous sins.

Many survivor-assistance programs are fully cognizant of these complex challenges facing landmine survivors, and in response recognize the need to address not only a wide range of complex medical needs, but also the social and economic barriers that impede landmine survivors’ reintegration efforts. Some rehabilitation programs have, or partner with other NGOs that have, design and implementation strategies that include vocational training, formal and informal landmine survivor advocacy, and leadership development. Many well-entrenched victim-assistance programs that have gone beyond merely providing a mobility device can point to countless examples of survivor assistance

LANDMINE VICTIMS HELPED BY POLUS CENTER PROGRAMS



Oswaldo Andica

Oswaldo Andica of Manizales, Colombia, lost his hand in an unexploded ordnance accident and uses a prosthetic device. Currently the Director of Case Management Services for landmine victims in the Caldas region of Colombia and an active member of Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network), he is a powerful advocate for others because of the training he received to build his capacity for this role, but also his potential to contribute at all levels. This part of the program, based at the Colombian Coffee Federation in Manizales, is the result of collaboration between the Coffeelands Landmine Victims' Trust (see article on page 17), the U.S. Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement and the Colombian Coffee Federation.



Kenia Castro

Kenia Castro received below-the-knee prosthetics for both her legs from the Walking Unidos prosthetic clinic in Leon, Nicaragua. She was referred to Walking Unidos by the Disability Leadership Center (partially funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Leahy War Victims Fund). The Polus Center also sponsored her to study in an English-as-a-second-language program. ESL was a requirement for her to apply to a position as a professor at the University of Leon, one of the most prestigious universities in Central America. Through this holistic, multifaceted approach to landmine victim assistance, Castro has realized her goal of becoming a professor and now serves as a role model to her students.



Félix Pedro Castillo

The Coffeelands Landmine Victims' Trust is an example of one initiative seeking to broaden interest in the issue of landmine action and to help people help themselves. Thanks to the Coffeelands Landmine Victims' Trust, Félix Pedro Castillo, a landmine survivor from Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, is again walking down the mountain to his coffee farm after receiving an artificial leg from in-country partner Walking Unidos. Castillo also received a US\$1,500 loan from the Coffeelands Trust to replace all his coffee trees and is now determined to produce the finest organic coffee in Nicaragua.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANTIAGO CASTELLON, THE POLUS CENTER

that can be regarded as best practice toward helping landmine survivors return to their communities and lead meaningful and productive lives.

Developing capacity and leadership. As mine action evolves, new ideas about all of its elements—including clearance, victim assistance, MRE and policy at all levels—continue to emerge, a fact that is true from grassroots to the national and international levels. Many of these ideas are the result of looking at particular problems differently and reframing them. MRE uses innovative media to disseminate information. Tools and technologies are introduced for more effective mine removal. There are new ideas

about how and where mine removal takes place. Public-policy debate redefines objectives, thus rearranging existing priorities or setting out new ones.

The area of victim assistance has also evolved. Prosthetic technicians are always trying new techniques and products. Victim-assistance program design now looks at rehabilitation more holistically, and notions about capacity development and sustainability at the national level continue to change. Some of these new and innovative ideas will be short-lived and fade over time; however, many are not only proving helpful, but are becoming ingrained in the existing paradigm and are moving mine action forward.

Attention to mine removal and MRE at the national level has resulted in significant progress. Emphasis on strategic planning has helped people gain focus and use resources in the most sensible manner possible. There is also much to be gained in these areas through capacity development at the local level, and it is even more imperative that capacity development take place at the local level with regard to victim assistance. While there are many advocates for victims, in truth the only people who can fully understand the complexity of victim assistance are the survivors themselves. Organizations like Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network) and other victim-assistance initiatives understand

that a landmine accident often becomes life-defining: The survivor is not only a victim but also “disabled.”

As has been discussed, having acquired this label, the survivor’s identity is redefined by the dominant culture. The inherent paradox is that even those who are advocates for landmine survivors must live within the dominant culture, which often discriminates against people with disabilities. In other words, no matter how sensitive one is to disabled people, it is virtually impossible not to discriminate. This potential bias is also why it is not good to place the fate of mine survivors in the hands of a medical community that focuses on the “impairment” or treats people with disabilities as “sick.”

Without experiencing “disability” oneself, it is unlikely that one can even begin to know the extent to which a culture values “able bodied” people and devalues “disabled” people. Anyone unsure of this phenomenon need only look at magazines or television and compare the number of perfectly sculpted bodies to those of people who have disabilities. The upshot of this disparity is that victim assistance capacity development at the national level must include people with disabilities in a very significant way—beyond mere token representation. For people to assume these national roles, however, they must have developed leadership skills at the local level; therefore, mine-action policymakers should develop their strategic plans with specific objectives directed toward the inclusion of mine survivors at all levels of mine-action programs. This push for inclusiveness should not be confused with a simple response of suddenly putting people with disabilities into positions beyond their current abilities, but rather should involve building up those abilities over time.

Broadening interest in victim assistance. It is unlikely that “fewer mines, more victims” will translate into donor funds being reallocated to support victim assistance. Continued progress in the area of survivor/victim assistance

is clearly dependent upon broadening interest in the issue—or, more aptly, broadening interest in knowing who survivors are and what they experience in their daily lives. Even after more than a decade of victim-assistance efforts, it is not clear who should, or at least who would, willingly move to the forefront to help survivors. In current practice, the issue is usually taken up by outside NGOs with the hopes of transferring responsibility to the national health ministries or even the local medical community.

Even the most rudimentary rehabilitation prosthetic projects, however, have not been able to become self-sustaining, frequently finding themselves in debt or relying on unpredictable donor support. Confusion and debate as to who should assume responsibility for survivor assistance frequently results in humanitarian NGOs accepting the challenge by default. Once outside donors “come to the rescue” of developing countries with a myriad of pressing problems from HIV/AIDS to a lack of potable water and the usual array of economic, health and political challenges, there is little chance that these donors will move landmine-survivor assistance to the top of the list.

One concept in response to the problem of diminishing support for mine action is that of “mainstreaming.” As Sara Sekkenes, Senior Program Advisor and Team Leader for Mine Action and Small Arms in the United Nations Development Programme’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, points out, “Ultimately, mine action is a very resource-demanding, complex activity and has until now remained quite donor-dependent, which we’re trying to build down by lessening the dependency of foreign support to mine action.”⁴ The hope that national interest will lessen donor dependency is probably overly optimistic; however, the idea of “mainstreaming” may have a great deal of merit if the mine-action community can frame the problem differently—something that is especially true for stimulating



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interest in survivor/victim assistance. The effectiveness of attempting to expand or even maintain interest in mine-victim assistance by underscoring states’ culpability regarding landmine usage or emphasizing a moral imperative is dubious. Perhaps a more effective approach is to emphasize “helping people to help themselves,” and supporting this idea with examples of best practice depicting how mine survivors have developed small businesses, reached out to other victims through MRE or moved into valued roles within their communities. These and other similar stories are likely to attract more interest in survivor/victim assistance than showing mutilated bodies of mine survivors. ♦

See Endnotes, page 110

News Brief

LSN No More: Organization Changes Name, Augments Mission

The organization formerly known as Landmine Survivors Network announced recently that it would henceforth be known as Survivor Corps, a change the group said would reflect an expanded mission. SC will serve not only those injured by landmines, but also all those injured by war and violence. SC has launched a new Web site to coincide with the new name: www.survivorcorps.org.